



Future Drought Fund's Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative: Mid-Term Report

Prepared by Nous Group for:
Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal
Australian Rural Leadership Foundation
The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

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The Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal and the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation receive funding from the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund to deliver the Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative.

Nous Group, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal and the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation continue to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country across Australia. We pay our respect to Elders past and present and to the continuation of the custodial, cultural, and educational practices of Australia's First Nations People.

This artwork was developed by Marcus Lee Design to reflect Nous Group's Reconciliation Action Plan.



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Definition of acronyms and key terms

Definitions to key acronyms that will be referenced in the evaluation are detailed below in Table 1.

Table 1 | Acronyms in the evaluation

Acronym	Definition
ARLF	Australian Rural Leadership Foundation
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
CCC	Creative Community Concepts
CIP	Community Impact Program
COR	Collaborative Outcomes Reporting
CPLO	Community Partner Lead Organisation
CQLA	Central Queensland Landscape Alliance
DAFF	Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
DCCA	Dawson Catchment Coordinating Association
EOI	Expression of interest
EP	Expertise Pool
FDF	Future Drought Fund
FRRR	Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal
HR	Human resources
HRCPD	Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought
HRCPDI	Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative
KEQ	Key evaluation questions
LGA	Local Government Area
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MSF	Mallee Sustainable Farming Inc
NFP	Not-for-profit
NLN	National Learning Network
NMP	National Mentoring Program

Acronym	Definition
NREC	Ngarrindjeri Ruwe Empowered Communities
NRM	Natural resource management
PO	Project outcomes
RDRP	Regional Drought Resilience Plan
SIH	Social Impact Hub
SNE	Southern New England
SNG	Small Network Grants
WoTL	Women Together Learning

Definitions to key terms that will be referenced in the evaluation are detailed below in Table 2.

Table 2 | Key terms in the evaluation

Term	Definition
Agriculture-dependent communities	Remote, rural and regional communities with a high economic dependency on agriculture and related industries. ¹
Drought	Drought can incorporate meteorological, agricultural and socio-economic measures. Meteorological measures of drought refer to periods of low rainfall. Agricultural measures refer to crop failure from lack of soil moisture. Socio-economic measures refer to adverse economic and social outcomes, such as reductions in farm incomes or mental health impacts. ² Note: Drought can be complex to define, with many varied uses of the term. The definition provided is indicative, recognising that there are varied definitions.
Drought resilience	The ability to adapt, reorganise or transform in response to changing temperature, increasing variability and scarcity of rainfall, and changed seasonality of rainfall, for improved economic, environmental, and social wellbeing. ³ Note: Drought can be complex to define, with many varied definitions of the term. This definition is not conclusive. The evaluation team will work with each region to understand their experience and definition and adapt our communication accordingly.
Drought preparedness	Established policies and specified plans and activities taken before drought to prepare people and enhance institutional and coping capacities, to forecast or warn of approaching dangers, and to ensure coordinated and effective response in a drought situation (contingency planning). ⁴

¹ Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. *Future Drought Fund Program Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan: More Resilient Communities Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan*. 2022. P 9.

² N Hughes W Soh, C Boulton and K Lawson, Defining drought from the perspective of Australian farmers, *Climate Risk Management*, 35, Canberra Australian Capital Territory, 2022. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212096322000274?ref=cra_js_challenge&fr=RR-1.

³ Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment. *Drought Resilience Funding Plan 2020-2024*. 2020. Available at: <https://haveyoursay.awe.gov.au/48071/widgets/284939/documents/144176>

⁴ Knutson CL, *Managing water stress, drought and climate change in the twenty-first century*. Chapter in Meastu J ed., *Water Trading and Global Water Scarcity: International Experiences*, 2013, p.28.

Term	Definition
Innovative activities	Generating, diffusing and applying knowledge to do new things or do existing things in new ways. ⁵
Networks	An interconnected and open-ended circle of people linked by a shared interest, occupation, etc. ⁶
Public good	A public good is one whose benefits are nonexcludable and nondepletable. ⁷ In terms of the FDF, public goods are benefits generated by the FDF funding which must be able to be accessed and/or shared by many (public benefits), rather than be captured solely by individual businesses or industries for private commercial gain (private benefits). ⁸
Social capital	Features of social organisation such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. ⁹
Social resilience	Social resilience is the adaptive and learning capacity of individuals, groups and institutions to self-organise in a way that maintains system function in the face of change or in response to a disturbance. ¹⁰
Strategic drought resilience	Drought resilience that is achieved through a considered and collaborative process (with involved parties/stakeholders), which includes a plan to achieve a particular outcome. ¹¹
Transformational change	A structural change that alters the interplay of institutional, cultural, technological, economic and ecological dimensions of a given system. It will unlock new development paths, including social practices and worldviews. ¹²
Transformative activities	Activities that result in sustained change at a system level. ¹³

⁵ Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. *Future Drought Fund Program Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan: More Resilient Communities Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan*. 2022. P 9.

⁶ Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. *Future Drought Fund Program Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan: More Resilient Communities Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan*. 2022. P 9.

⁷ L Robison, The Cheap Side of Social Capital, Institute for Social Capital, 2023. Available at: <https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/the-cheap-side-of-social-capital/>.

⁸ Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment. *Drought Resilience Funding Plan 2020-2024*. 2020. Available at: <https://haveyoursay.awe.gov.au/48071/widgets/284939/documents/144176>

⁹ Putnam, R. *Bowling alone: America's declining social capital*. Journal of Democracy, Volume 6, 1995, Issue 1, pp. 65-78, doi:10.1353/jod.1995.0002.

¹⁰ Maclean, K, Cuthill, M, Ross, H. *Six attributes of social resilience*. Journal of Environmental Planning and Management, Volume 57, 2014 - Issue 1. Available at: <https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/Planning/communitybenefitsadvisorycommittee/additionalresources/sixattributesofsocialresilience.pdf>

¹¹ Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. *Future Drought Fund Program Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan: More Resilient Communities Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan*. 2022. P 9.

¹² Mersmann, F. and others. *Shifting Paradigms: Unpacking Transformation for Climate Action. A Guidebook for Climate Finance & Development Practitioners*. 2014. Available at: https://epub.wupperinst.org/frontdoor/deliver/index/docid/5518/file/5518_Shifting_Paradigms.pdf

¹³ Ziervogel, G. *Building transformative capacity for adaptation planning and implementation that works for the urban poor: Insights from South Africa*, Volume 48, 2019, Issue 5, pp. 494-506. Available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13280-018-1141-9>

1 Executive Summary

The Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative – a \$29.65 million Australian Government Future Drought Fund (FDF) initiative - is showing early progress towards strengthening the ability of agriculture-dependent communities to prepare for the impacts of drought. At the mid-point for implementation, each of the five elements that make up the HRCPD Initiative – the Community Impact Program (CIP), Small Network Grants (SNG), the Mentoring Program, the National Learning Network (also known as Drought Ready) and the Expertise Pool - have shown progress towards achieving their intended outcomes. Importantly, the HRCPD Initiative is reaching dispersed and diverse participants in over 250 locations across Australia. These communities will benefit from strengthened social resilience to drought. The appropriateness of the HRCPD Initiative’s design, flexible implementation and a strong commitment to continuous learning and quality program delivery from the two joint delivery leads - The Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal (FRRR) and the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF) - have supported success so far. These are the overriding conclusions of the mid-term assessment of the HRCPD Initiative impact evaluation.

FRRR and ARLF engaged Nous Group (Nous) to conduct the HRCPD Initiative impact evaluation. The evaluation aims to understand the impact of the HRCPD Initiative, and its five elements, on community resilience to drought. The evaluation approach is based on the HRCPD Initiative Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Plan. The mid-term assessment has included a systematic analysis of program reporting, program data, participant surveys, eight regional deep dives, interviews with participants and delivery leads of the five elements, a literature review and qualitative baseline assessments of participating regions across Australia.

The HRCPD Initiative addresses a clear need to strengthen social resilience to drought in regional communities

The HRCPD Initiative was established to build community capacity and resilience to the impacts of climate change and drought, and to enhance the public good in agriculture-dependent communities. The focus on building local community capacity and resilience to drought is important. The more capacity and resilience there is in a community, the more likely that community will successfully respond to the many impacts that drought can have on regional landscapes, communities and economies. However, levels of social resilience vary across communities due to a range of interrelated factors. Stakeholders from across Australia consistently reported that the local networks in their region are fatigued and capacity constrained. Repeat disasters and other climate impacts, the prolonged impacts and disruption of COVID-19, the challenges of remoteness and demographic change were highlighted as factors that put strain on the resilience of communities.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to building social resilience to drought. Building social resilience to drought therefore takes many forms. Across the five elements the HRCPD Initiative design provides communities the flexibility to implement or access diverse activities. This includes hosting events to strengthen social connection and counter isolation, delivering training that upskills the community so they can thrive before, during and after drought, building community infrastructure that enables communities to meet and interact, investing in local leadership, delivering mentoring programs or expanding the base of volunteers in a community or region. These activities strengthen the protective factors that insulate a community from the worst impacts of drought. The evaluation heard from countless stakeholders how critical it is to invest in social resilience before drought arrives. One community member noted “by preparing our community prior to a drought event happening, we are able to practice strength and resilience...which will act as a preventative measure”. Furthermore, stakeholders consistently shared that

funding intending to strengthen drought resilience on a local level is hard to come by and mostly reactive. Often it arrives too late.

Emerging outcomes signal positive signs that the HRCPD Initiative will contribute to strengthening the social resilience of individuals, organisations and communities

Across all elements the evaluation saw tangible examples of emerging outcomes despite different stages of implementation. The evaluation heard about how regions have used CIP grant funding strategically to support hard-to-fund social resilience projects. Stakeholders shared that a strength of the CIP grants and leadership activities was its focus on a diverse range of community stakeholders beyond farmers. The evaluation saw evidence at the mid-point of implementation from both CIP grant projects and leadership activities that together they are likely to:

- strengthen community connectedness and local networks
- strengthen the capability, capacity and inclusion of individuals or organisations
- provide access to new resources, infrastructure or place-based practices.

The early signs from the SNG element show similar promise. The SNG is on track to complement and extend the impact of CIP grants. Importantly, SNG Round 1 has reached remote and smaller communities that do not often have access to funding for social resilience projects. Critical to the SNG and CIP is a sense that outcomes will be amplified as communities have been empowered to choose the projects that best enhance the resilience of their community. The diversity of projects across both elements is a lead indicator that the HRCPD Initiative has successfully enabled place-based responses.

Complementing the CIP and SNG is the Expertise Pool, which provides organisations with access to expertise through the Social Impact Hub (SIH). Since its launch, the Expertise Pool has successfully gathered over 121 experts. The pool of experts includes a growing number of regional-based experts with skillsets to support community organisations. CIP and SNG organisations are yet to engage an expert via the Expertise Pool, mostly due to the delayed roll-out of the platform and initial perceptions that the pool of experts was overly metropolitan based. Efforts to onboard additional regionally based experts is addressing this challenge. Further, the SIH concierge service is available to organisations at no cost. The concierge service has facilitated connections to relevant expertise or services and provided one-off strategic advice to organisations. The success of the platform will depend on a more compelling value proposition and more active promotion to engage prospective users.

The Mentoring Program is a standalone program that brings together diverse and experienced mentors with mentees who have a connection to agricultural-dependent communities. Round 1 mentor and mentee feedback demonstrate that the mentoring program has made strong progress towards its intended short-term outcomes. Mentors and mentees share how the mentoring program has successfully expanded and diversified their networks. Mentors reported that the Mentoring Program has enhanced their leadership capacity and capability. Although specific outcomes related to drought preparedness knowledge and experience was a secondary benefit, time will tell how mentees use their enhanced networks and capability to strengthen resilience in their communities.

The final element, the Drought Ready National Learning Network, is starting to act as the connective tissue between the other four elements. Drought Ready has experienced recent exponential growth – now with over 600 members - as more HRCPD Initiative participants have joined the platform. The platform also includes members who are committed to supporting drought preparedness in regional and rural communities through other FDF funded programs. Drought Ready plays this connective role across elements through three main mechanisms:

- Supporting FRRR, ARLF and members to share information on events and opportunities, including HRCPD Initiative activities like the CIP leadership activities or CIP grants projects.

- Enabling the establishment of national connections between HRCPD Initiative participants, which were seen as particularly valuable for those in remote and isolated areas.
- Providing access to shared resources and knowledge, which members confirmed are strengthening their understanding of drought management and leadership.

Setting up the network for long-term sustainability will be an important focus moving forward for ARLF.

Implementation of the HRCPD Initiative is on track with some notable delivery challenges

FRRR and ARLF have put in significant effort to support each element of the HRCPD Initiative get off the ground. Key highlights across the first 16 months of delivery, up to April 2024, include:

- Coordinating CIP co-design activities across 35 regions and distributing nearly \$10 million dollars to 161 projects.
- Designing and delivering the initial tranche of leadership activities to 228 people across 13 communities and scheduling a further 90 activities across 87 communities.
- Designing and delivering the first and second round of the SNG, although the second round was announced after the evaluation data collection period.
- Establishing the Expertise Pool with over 121 available experts, which include 40 regional-based experts.
- Delivering Round 1 of the National Mentoring Program to over 66 participants with a further 144 participants due to complete Round 2 in July 2024.
- Designing and implementing the Drought Ready network with momentum growing as membership grows beyond the current 600 members.

The HRCPD Initiative's flexible implementation and the support that FRRR and ARLF have provided participants has been critical to delivery so far. The evaluation heard from many stakeholders who had positive feedback for the job FRRR and ARLF have done to get this work off the ground. Participants highlighted some of the ways in which FRRR and ARLF have adapted their approach to support positive outcomes. This has included FRRR leaning into a coordination role for one region, ARLF adapting the design of their leadership activities for First Nations communities, well designed program guidelines that promote local agency and a responsive approach to participant feedback that is reflected in the way both FRRR and ARLF have iteratively improved program design.

Implementation has not been without its challenges. Although well received, most stakeholders interviewed for the CIP program highlighted consistent challenges with the co-design process. The most notable challenge was ambitious timeframes that restrained a truly participatory process. Further, the coordination and timing of elements and the misalignment between ambitious program timelines and community capacity has affected the reach and impact of HRCPD Initiative to date. As elements have matured, there has been an increase in coordination activity between FRRR and ARLF. The evaluation heard from stakeholders across all elements that the delivery of the HRCPD Initiative reflected a commitment to self-reflection, learning, flexibility and improvement that bodes well for the final 12 months of delivery.

Summary of the key evaluation findings

A high-level summary of the findings for the HRCPD Initiative as a whole and each element is presented in Table 3 below. The headings for each finding provide a link to the relevant section of the report that provides further detail.

Table 3 | Summary of key evaluation findings

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<p>EVALUATING THE HRCPD INITIATIVE AS A WHOLE</p>
<p>The HRCPD Initiative addresses the need to strengthen social resilience to drought. Social resilience plays a critical role to support communities prepare for and respond to drought. The HRCPD Initiative has increased government investment in building community capacity, recognising the significant variations in resilience across communities. Traditional government investments in building community resilience to disaster has been reactive; the FDF prioritises proactive, region-specific preparedness, aligning with a 'triple bottom line' approach. The HRCPD Initiative expands on previous funding to bolster community capacity, networking, and infrastructure. The final evaluation report will assess how appropriate the HRCPD Initiative's combination of elements is for building social resilience.</p>
<p>The HRCPD Initiative is showing early success towards strengthening social resilience. An aggregate assessment of the HRCPD Initiative elements shows progress towards the targeted short-term outcomes. However, the HRCPD Initiative has not yet fully realised potential collective benefits and place-based impacts. The Initiative leverages existing regional strategies to enhance its impact, yet faces four main risks: sustaining long-term benefits, community capacity constraints, engagement in drought preparedness, and regional project delivery capabilities. Effective management of these risks is critical to ensure the longevity and success of the initiative's outcomes. The final stage of evaluation will determine how these factors have influenced the overall impact.</p>
<p>The HRCPD Initiative is on track, despite some challenges. FRRR and ARLF have delivered the five elements in line with the agreed implementation plan, to varying levels of completion. While some elements like the Mentoring Program are complete, others are in initial stages, such as the National Learning Network. The Initiative is making progress in reaching diverse regions, with support from FRRR and ARLF proving essential. The Initiative has engaged various demographic groups, including young people and First Nations communities, but has faced hurdles aligning program delivery timelines with community capacity. The final evaluation report will continue to assess these factors, particularly how they affect the achievement of outcomes.</p>
<p>Lessons from implementation can inform improvements to the Initiative design and delivery. The evaluation has identified four main lessons and supporting recommendations to refine the Initiative's approach. These include considering opportunities to strategically align elements and activity, strengthen communication with regional stakeholders, reflect on opportunities for continuous improvement, and sustain flexibility to meet community needs.</p>
<p>EVALUATING THE COMMUNITY IMPACT GRANTS PROGRAM </p>
<p>The CIP grants are making progress towards their intended outcomes. The CIP grants have funded a diverse set of projects that together will collectively contribute to all seven short-term outcomes, based on the 64 of the total 161 CIP organisations projects that completed the mid-project check-in. Furthermore, regions have used CIP grants strategically to support hard-to-fund social resilience projects, designed to engage a range of community stakeholders.</p>
<p>CIP grants delivered near \$10m to 161 projects across Australia. The grants distributed \$9.8 million in four tranches to 161 projects across 30 regions in 6 states. This allowed for the flexible delivery of the grants. Notably, 33 per cent of CIP projects involve First Nations people while 16 per cent focused on young people aged 18-35 years.</p>
<p>CIP grants are on track to create positive outcomes for communities and organisations. Regions have used CIP grants strategically to support hard-to-fund social resilience projects. This includes projects that without CIP grants organisations would have delayed, reduced in scope, or not have proceeded with at all. CIP projects intend to contribute to all seven short-term outcomes, with many projects identifying multiple outcomes and engaging a range of stakeholders. The co-design process strengthened networks and local collaboration, with many organisations partnering or collaborating for future projects and grants. However, increased natural disasters and ongoing staff turnover may impact the achievement of intended CIP outcomes. Stakeholders reported that managing regional capacity and high turnover will be increasingly important to sustain project outcomes beyond the funding period.</p>

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The CIP grants design is appropriate, and delivery has adapted in response to changing community needs. The CIP was designed to be flexible and locally led, which enabled organisations to focus on drought and broader climate impacts more relevant to their region. This was most effective for organisations which had experience with other FDF components. Communities welcomed the opportunity for codesign, but their experience was highly variable. The facilitator, CPLO, and regional context played an important role in codesign effectiveness. The timeframes, proportionate reductions, engagement of First Nations and Young people, and effort required were all consistent challenges across regions. To address these challenges, FRRR has applied a relationship-led and flexible approach and CPLOs are playing an important coordination role. Regions reported a need for further CPLO role clarity, support with delivery challenges, and clarity on reporting requirements. FRRR is responsive to these requests and considering how to adapt the ongoing delivery of the Initiative.

There are three recommendations to strengthen the CIP grants: ensure CPLO role clarity, continue to provide flexible program design and reflect co-design lesson learnt. To ensure role clarity, FRRR can consider which communication mechanisms are most effective and establish a dedicated CPLO network or platform. To provide flexible program design FRRR can reinforce practices that are already working well and remain adaptive to regional community needs and participant feedback. To reflect lessons learnt, the agreed program design should consider an appropriate amount of time for co-design, how to remove or avoid proportionate reductions before the program commences and continue to offer staged program delivery.

EVALUATING THE COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP ACTIVITIES

The CIP leadership activities are making progress towards their intended outcomes. The leadership activities are making progress towards achieving their intended outcomes, noting that ARLF is only through the initial delivery of the activities. Nous has observed developing evidence of achievement against three of the seven intended outcomes, with limited evidence for the remaining four outcomes. Nous expects more evidence to emerge as a greater number of communities complete the leadership activities.

ARLF has delivered the CIP leadership activities to 14 communities across Australia. This was at the time of data collection (April 2024). ARLF has delivered three out of five leadership activity options to 228 participants across five states. The activities have reached a diverse demographic, with 11 per cent of participants in the 18 to 35 age bracket and 4 per cent identifying as First Nations. The Changemaker Series was the most common activity type, with 12 out of 14 sessions. ARLF has scheduled 90 more sessions across 87 locations, with plans to deliver tailored activities for First Nations communities.

The CIP leadership activities are contributing to leadership, wellbeing and community outcomes. Leadership activities are strengthening individual leadership capability. Most participants noted increased confidence, skill development and openness to new ideas as key outcomes. Participants also experienced improved social connections and expanded their networks with over 80 per cent of participants noting that they expanded their networks and strengthened existing networks. Outcomes related to drought preparedness are a secondary benefit for participants. While most participants reported an increase in their understanding or participation in community resilience, less than half reported development of outcomes specific to drought preparedness. Participants intend to realise the benefits of the leadership activities beyond the immediate program by using their enhanced skills and capabilities to address community challenges and by continuing to develop their new capabilities.

The flexible design and delivery of the CIP leadership activities is mostly fit for purpose. The design of the leadership activities is appropriate for community needs. This is due to the focus on broader community resilience and the flexible design of sessions. Both factors have promoted wider community participation. Program delivery has been mostly effective. The efficiencies and cost-saving of delivery mostly one type of activity has enabled ARLF to expand the program's reach. Engagement in the activities has varied between regions however, survey responses indicate that most participants were highly satisfied with the activities.

There are four opportunities to strengthen the CIP leadership activities. To boost diverse engagement with the leadership activities, ARLF can continue to leverage local insights from CPLOs and consider utilising established community groups for targeted recruitment efforts. To leverage the insights and lessons learnt for future programs, ARLF can consider establishing a system to capture insights and prioritise future funding based on evidence. To support participants in realising benefits beyond the program, ARLF can consider developing supplementary

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material, promoting ongoing development and providing targeted follow-up sessions. For future initiative designs, ARLF can consider building on the tailored Changemaker sessions to consolidate leadership options and provide tailored activities that reflect specific regional needs.

EVALUATING THE SMALL NETWORK GRANTS

The SNG is well positioned to deliver its intended outcomes. The SNG design and early delivery provides promising signs that it can deliver on its intended outcomes. Nous has identified that SNG is developing evidence of achievement against five of the seven outcomes, with the other two outcomes emerging and building momentum.

Round 1 of the SNG delivered \$718k across 28 projects. Round 1 grants include two streams that have reached 26 project delivery locations. Stream 1 delivered funding to priority LGAs in agriculture-dependent locations. Stream 2 delivered funding to four of the five CIP regions that were not able or ready to participate in CIP grants. Round 1 grants have delivered funding to mostly rural and regional locations, with over 93 per cent of successful applicants based in communities fewer than 10,000.

The SNG shows promising signs that it will positively contribute to social resilience. Round 1 projects intend to contribute to all seven short-term evaluation outcomes. Most projects deliver a local event that will facilitate social connection (57 per cent). All projects expect to contribute to multiple outcomes. SNG projects are on track to complement and extend the impact of CIP grants, with over half of Round 1 funding supporting regions that were not able to participate in CIP grants. SNG projects aim to contribute to sustainable outcomes beyond the grant period, either through ongoing impact from the development of resources or new infrastructure or by catalysing additional financial and in-kind contributions.

The design and initial delivery of the SNG element has been effective. The SNG element is appropriately designed to support smaller community organisations deliver impactful projects. It has provided a valued funding opportunity for community organisations, which typically have fewer available funding options available due to their limited capacity and the complexity of other grant opportunities. A fit-for-purpose application process and FRRR support has enabled a smooth experience for Round 1 SNG applicants. This may have diversified the organisations engaged in the program, with ten of the 28 grants (36 per cent) awarded to organisations that FRRR had never funded before.

Recommendations for SNG will be determined in the next reporting period. Due to the early stage of the SNG at the point of this mid-term evaluation, most delivery partners had yet to commence delivery. Therefore, the final Evaluation Report will include recommendations following further data collection and engagement with stakeholders.

EVALUATING THE EXPERTISE POOL

The Expertise Pool is beginning to deliver its intended outcomes. The MEL Plan expected that the Expertise Pool would contribute to two of the seven outcomes identified for the HRCPD Initiative. At this point of implementation, the Evaluation has observed both intended outcomes to a limited extent.

The Expertise Pool hosts over 100 experts but has had limited uptake. The expertise pool has expanded beyond its target of 100 experts and counting but there has been limited uptake from organisations. As of April 2024, eight CIP organisations had completed an expression of interest in the Expertise Pool.

The concierge service provides value to NFP organisations. The concierge service can deliver value connecting NFP organisations to the expertise they need and through direct support to NFP organisations. It is likely that community organisations will continue to benefit from access to the concierge service for direct support.

The Expertise Pool design is mostly appropriate with implementation building momentum. Community organisations in rural and regional communities often face capacity or capability constraints and are eager to access expert support. The Expertise Pool has experts with skills relevant to the needs of NFP organisations. There is value to having a national platform of experts, if it provides the right service tailored to regional needs. Delayed implementation contributed to low awareness of the platform and limited the available funds for organisations to engage paid experts. Furthermore, initial perceptions that the Expertise Pool has only metro-based experts and a

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preference for regionally based experts limited engagement. Therefore, demonstrating the value of the Expertise Pool, its concierge service and the growing presence of regional experts on the platform will be important to increase engagement.

There are three opportunities to improve the program: better communicate that regional experts are available in the pool, highlight how the EP can provide value, and promote the platform earlier. To communicate the services of regional experts, FRRR and SIH should clearly identify on the website which experts are regional and allow users to filter based on location. To promote the value of the Pool, FRRR and SIH can share case studies and explore opportunities for pro bono support and/or funding for organisations to access expertise services. To increase engagement for future programs, FRRR and SIH can promote the platform earlier and support organisations to identify funding for accessing services.

EVALUATING THE NATIONAL MENTORING PROGRAM

The mentoring program has made strong progress towards its intended outcomes. The overarching assessment is that the program has made strong progress towards achieving its intended short-term outcomes. The Evaluation has observed five out of six outcomes to a full or developing extent and one outcome to a limited extent. The Evaluation has made this assessment primarily based on Round 1 of the program, with Round 2 underway during the evaluation data collection period.

ARLF is delivering the mentoring program to 210 participants across two rounds. This includes 66 participants in Round 1 and 144 participants in Round 2. Round 2 is a larger more diverse cohort. Participants from across round one and round two represent all states and territories. Across both rounds 66 per cent of participants were female (77 per cent in round one and 61 per cent in round two). The average age of mentors across both rounds was 54 with only 3 per cent aged between 18 to 35. Meanwhile, the average age for mentees was 37 across both rounds with 28 per cent aged between 18 to 35. Engagement with First Nations participants is low across both rounds with three per cent of participants identifying as First Nations in Round one and two per cent in Round two.

The mentoring program is creating positive outcomes for participants. Participants have diversified and strengthened their networks while also building strong connections with their mentor or mentee. All round one participants reported creating new networks outside their community. The program has also strengthened participant leadership capacity and capability notably, it has enabled them to be more confident and self-aware. Outcomes relating to drought preparedness were a secondary benefit for participants. On average only 23 per cent of round one participants reported that the mentoring program enabled them to increase their experience, knowledge, understanding, awareness, confidence or skills, techniques and practices as it related to different aspects of drought preparedness. Participants noted, in interviews and surveys, that they intend to realise benefits beyond the mentoring program by sustaining their new connections and applying their new skills.

The design and delivery of the mentoring program was effective. The program was appropriately designed to meet the program objectives. ARLF implemented design updates to the mentoring program to reflect Stage 1 participant feedback. Stage 2 participants provided positive feedback on these updates. The delivery of both rounds has been efficient. Participants reflected positively on the effectiveness of the matching process and the numerous support mechanisms.

There are three opportunities to improve the program. ARLF can consider adapting future programs to reflect participant feedback based on the success of the feedback informed design of the current program. Similarly, ARLF can continue the strengths of the current program, such as the flexible program structure, communities of practice sessions and the cross sectoral and regional matching. ARLF could capitalise on the distinctive national and cross-sectoral approach of the National Mentoring program by sharing its learnings with other similar initiatives.

EVALUATING THE NATIONAL LEARNING NETWORK

Drought Ready is progressing towards its intended outcomes. The achievement of outcomes is still emerging as the network has only been operating for ten months. The Evaluation has observed developing evidence of the achievement towards two out of the six intended outcomes. The remaining four outcomes have been observed to a limited extent at this stage.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

The Drought Ready platform hosts a growing number of members from all states and territories. Drought Ready was launched in August 2023 and is in its early stages of delivery. As of March 2024, there were 392 members on the platform representing 148 LGAs across all states and territories. The number of members has continued to grow with 600 members on the platform as of June 2024.

Outcomes for platform members are emerging. Drought Ready is supporting individuals to build new connections across geographical, sectoral and demographic boundaries. Sixty per cent of surveyed members reported more robust community networks as an outcome of their involvement on the platform. The platform is also successfully enabling ARLF, FRRR and members to share information and knowledge related to community and drought resilience. There is emerging evidence that the information and resources shared across the Drought Ready network is strengthening the knowledge and capabilities of members.

The design of Drought Ready aligns with regional community needs. The platform was effectively co-designed to meet community needs and in alignment with best practice Impact Networks. The momentum of other HRCPD Initiative elements has supported member recruitment. On average, 43 new members have joined the network each month since its launch. ARLF's facilitation and curation of the platform has supported member engagement, notably due to the regular posting and broad range of topics. The sustainability of the platform will require continued adaptation to meet evolving member preferences. Continued adaptation and decentralisation of platform will also be vital to the sustainability and ongoing impact of Drought Ready beyond the program funding.

There are two opportunities to improve Drought Ready. To ensure the network maintains its momentum and engagement levels beyond the program, ARLF can define the moderator role beyond the funding cycle and decentralise connections on the network. To strengthen member engagement ARLF can continue to encourage personalised content on the network and consider creating a central library for files and resources.

A suite of appendices supports this report. The appendices are in a separate document. A description of each appendix is below:

- Appendix A - Regional impact case studies
- Appendix B - Summary of the evaluation approach, including the HRCPD Initiative program logic, assumptions of the program logic, key evaluation questions, evaluation principles, ethics for the evaluation
- Appendix C - Summary of data collection activities
- Appendix D - Literature review into the role of social resilience in drought preparedness and resilience
- Appendix E - Glossary of terms

2 Background and context of the HRCPD Initiative evaluation

FRRR and ARLF engaged Nous to conduct a participatory evaluation of the HRCPD Initiative. The evaluation aims to understand the impact of the HRCPD Initiative, and its five elements, on community resilience to drought. The evaluation approach is based on an agreed MEL Plan and will occur from February 2023 to September 2025. The primary focus of the evaluation is to examine the impact of the HRCPD Initiative on regional communities, and the outcomes achieved by the funded activities. A secondary focus of the evaluation is on the appropriateness, efficiency and effectiveness of the HRCPD Initiative. The focus of the mid-term evaluation is on the secondary evaluation focus. The Evaluation leveraged program level data, regional deep dives, interviews, surveys and outcome panels to produce the mid-term evaluation findings. In-person and virtual engagement with delivery organisations, program participants, FRRR and ARLF stakeholders, outcome panel members and other stakeholders informed the key examples and case studies identified in this report. The Evaluation faced constraints with the varied implementation progress of elements, partial data availability and, in some cases, the limited capacity of HRCPD Initiative participants to participate in the evaluation.

2.1 The HRCPD Initiative is a \$29.65 million investment in building community and social resilience to drought

The Australia Government established the FDF under the Future Drought Fund Act 2019. The FDF aims to provide secure, continuous funding for programs, grants and arrangements that support Australian farmers and associated communities to prepare for, and become more resilient to, the impacts of future droughts. Programs in the FDF focus on four interconnected investment themes: Better Climate Information, Better Planning, Better Practices and Better Prepared Communities.

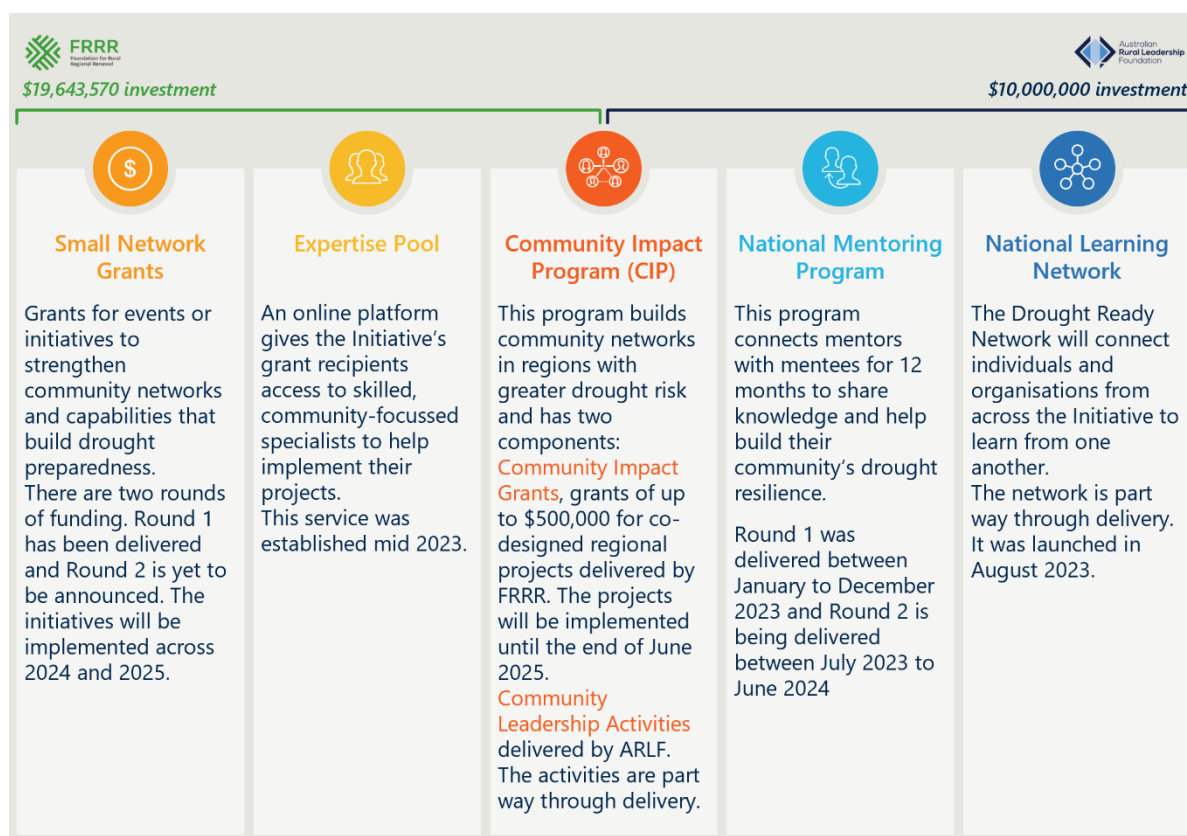
The HRCPD Initiative is a program under the Better Prepared Communities investment theme of the FDF. The HRCPD Initiative aims to build social resilience and community capacity to prepare for and respond to the impacts of climate change and drought, and to enhance the public good in agriculture-dependent communities. The HRCPD Initiative extends and integrates the Networks to Build Drought Resilience Program and the Drought Resilience Leaders Program, delivered in 2021-2022. FRRR and ARLF are delivering The HRCPD Initiative.

The HRCPD Initiative consists of five elements:

- The CIP, which includes CIP grants and community leadership activities.
- The SNG, which is a small grants program that could extend the reach of the HRCPD Initiative to communities that do not receive CIP grants.
- The Expertise Pool, which provides access to expert services for CIP and SNG grantees.
- The National Mentoring Program, which is a national mentoring and leadership program.
- The National Learning Network (known as Drought Ready), which is an impact network for individuals and organisations working to build social resilience to drought.

Figure 1 overleaf includes a summary of the five elements.

Figure 1 | Five elements of the HRCPD Initiative



2.2 Nous is evaluating the HRCPD Initiative and its five elements

FRRR and ARLF engaged Nous to undertake a participatory impact evaluation of the HRCPD Initiative. The evaluation aims to understand the impact of the HRCPD Initiative, and its five elements on community resilience to drought. Nous will deliver the evaluation in three stages from February 2023 to September 2025. Five Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs), shown below in Table 4, guide the Evaluation.

Table 4 | Key Evaluation Questions

Evaluation domain	Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs)
APPROPRIATENESS	How appropriate is the design of the HRCPD Initiative to address the identified problem or opportunity, and the needs of rural and regional communities?
STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT	How well aligned is the design of the HRCPD Initiative with the objectives of the FDF and other Australian government and state and territory government drought initiatives?
EFFICIENCY	To what extent is the HRCPD Initiative being administered and delivered efficiently and to the expected quality?
EFFECTIVENESS	To what extent is the HRCPD Initiative and its individual elements delivering the outputs and achieving the outcomes (short-term, intermediate, intended and unintended)?
IMPACT	To what extent has the initiative contributed towards the FDF long-term outcomes (4+ years) and the vision, strategic priorities and objectives of the FDF?

The evaluation has two areas of focus:

- Formative – guided by KEQs on appropriateness, strategic alignment and efficiency to assess aspects of the HRCPD Initiative’s delivery.
- Summative – guided by KEQs on effectiveness and impact to assess the extent to which the HRCPD Initiative is progressing towards and achieving its intended objectives, outcomes and long-term goals.

This report outlines the Mid-term Evaluation findings. The report focuses on the formative focus of the evaluation. The Final Evaluation Report will explore the summative focus.

2.3 The evaluation is using a fit-for-purpose, robust approach






Nous co-designed the evaluation approach with FRRR, ARLF, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) HRCPD Initiative Program team and the DAFF FDF Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) team.

The key features of the Evaluation are described in turn below.

A program theory and key evaluation questions (KEQ) guide the evaluation. The HRCPD Initiative program theory and logic links the intended outputs for each HRCPD Initiative element to the short-term, intermediate and long-term outcomes. The key evaluation questions are specified across five evaluation domains including appropriateness, strategic alignment, efficiency, effectiveness and impact.

Seven short-term outcomes provide a consistent basis to measure outcomes over a two-year timeframe. These outcomes were reviewed and updated based on community feedback through evaluation working sessions with CPOs and delivery partners. Each element of the HRCPD Initiative contributes to a set of these short-term outcomes, as outlined in Table 5 below. Each outcome has a set of indicators to measure progress towards achieving them, drawing on a range of qualitative and quantitative data sources in the evaluation.

Table 5 | Short-term (0-2 years) project outcomes (PO) of the HRCPD Initiative by element

	 Community Impact Program	 Small Network Grants	 Expertise Pool	 National Mentoring Program	 National Learning Network
PO1. Improved communication, social connection and collaboration within and between communities to support drought preparedness	●	●		●	●
PO2. Improved access to and use of services, resources, infrastructure and facilities by communities that support drought preparedness	●	●	●		●
PO3. A greater diversity of community members and organisations contribute to drought preparedness activities	●	●		●	●

PO4. Increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies by communities, volunteers and not-for-profit organisations to prepare for and adapt to drought	
PO5. Increased implementation and improved effectiveness of place-based practices by communities to build and enhance resilience to drought	
PO6. Strengthened individual leadership capacity and capability to support community and drought resilience	
PO7. Community-based networks that strengthen drought resilience are expanded, diversified or created	

The achievement of the outcomes was assessed against a consistent scale. The evaluation adopted a consistent scale to assess the extent to which each of the HRCPD Initiative elements had achieved their intended short-term outcomes. The scale included five levels, from 'Nothing has happened' to the outcome has been 'Exceeded'. The assessment of the extent to which each outcome has been achieved was informed by all outcome indicators and the extensive data analysis conducted through the evaluation. A description of the outcome ratings and supporting description is provided below.

Table 6 | Outcome rating and descriptions

RATING	DESCRIPTION
Nothing happened	No evidence that this outcome has yet to emerge; possible signs that there are barriers or opposition to this outcome emerging
Limited	Outcome has started to emerge in a limited way; it has been observed in some of the relevant cases or to a limited extent across a wide range of cases
Developing	Outcome is showing some signs of maturity; it is emerging across a wide range of relevant cases; and is becoming embedded/ sustained
Fully realised	Outcome is at the final target level; it is happening regularly/ consistently and well, across all relevant cases.
Exceeded	Outcome has reached a level beyond expectations; it has reached a wider group than we intended or is at a very high level of quality/ maturity

A participatory evaluation approach that focuses on building the evaluation capability of regional communities. The participatory approach has three key components:

- **Regional Working Sessions with CIP regions to collaboratively design the evaluation approach and build evaluation capability.** Nous completed 28 working sessions with 82 CIP organisations. Nous used participant feedback from the working sessions to adjust the evaluation short-term outcomes

and inform the planning of evaluation activities. Another purpose of these sessions was to build evaluation capability and knowledge of the organisations. Nous shared program logic templates, a bank of evaluation indicators and data collection tools and guidance to support CIP organisations evaluate the impact of their projects.

- **Collaborative Outcomes Reporting (COR) to ensure the evaluation findings are reflective of both the technical and lived experience of program participants.** This included facilitating outcome panels with CIP, expertise pool, mentoring program and learning network participants, First Nations participants and participants defined as young people (aged between 18 to 35) or delivery partners implementing youth focused projects. Nous conducted six outcome panels to validate and refine the evaluation findings prior to the Mid-term report.
- **Transparent reporting to engender active research mindsets.** The evaluation will iteratively share information and emerging findings during the evaluation with stakeholders. This will help to ensure that current and future program participants benefit from, and can iteratively apply, the findings related to effective drought resilience. This includes the mid-term report and a summary video of the key evaluation findings.

The Evaluation used a mixed method approach to data collection and analysis. Nous collected evaluation data and drew on program data collected by FRRR and ARLF to conduct a robust assessment of the HRCPD Initiative. The key data sources that informed the preparation of this report include:

- **Program reports and surveys:** Nous reviewed program data and surveys collected by ARLF and FRRR as part of the delivery of the elements. This included grant applications and progress reports, participant application data, platform data, survey data and multimedia from participants.
- **Interviews and surveys:** Nous conducted semi-structured interviews with experts, program leads, delivery partners and participants. Nous also designed and implemented the surveys of CIP co-design process for CPLOs, facilitators and participants.
- **Observations:** Nous conducted virtual and in-person observations of element activities including CIP co-design sessions, CIP Leadership Activity sessions, activities and events organised by the National Learning Network and the National Mentoring Program.
- **Regional deep dives:** Nous conducted deep dives of eight¹⁴ CIP regions to understand the experience of these regions' response and preparation for drought, and to explore the place-based impacts of the HRCPD Initiative funding. This included interviews with stakeholders and observations of the delivery of activities and programs. The eight deep dive regions included:
 1. North and Northwest Tasmania
 2. Fitzroy Capricornia Queensland
 3. North West Queensland
 4. Murraylands and Riverlands South Australia
 5. Mallee Victoria
 6. Northern Tablelands New South Wales
 7. Wheatbelt Central East Western Australia.
 8. Northern Tablelands Northern Territory

¹⁴ Northern Tablelands Northern Territory did not receive CIP funding. Nous completed virtual engagement with SNG recipients only. Nous could not access participants of the other HRCPD Initiative elements who reside in the Northern Territory.

- **Baseline and contribution analysis:** Nous developed narrative baseline assessments for all CIP regions. Nous will use the baseline assessments and data collected across the evaluation to make evidence-based assessments on the level of contribution the HRCPD Initiative has made to the documented impacts.

Figure 2 provides an overview of all data collection conducted as part of the mid-program evaluation.

Figure 2 | Data collection activities



Further detail on the evaluation approach is included in the report appendix, as a separate document.

2.4 Key constraints of the evaluation should be noted

The delayed implementation of elements, availability of data, and regional capacity to engage in the evaluation were key limitations of the evaluation. These are explained further below and should be noted when reviewing the mid-term findings.





The staged rollout of the elements has contributed to varied levels of implementation at the time of conducting the mid-term evaluation. Some elements within the HRCPD Initiative have been active for a short period of time, such as the Small Network Grants. Other elements were nearing completion, such as the National Mentoring Program. This has meant that data relating to the outcomes experienced by participants varies across the elements. The evaluation findings relating to outcomes are therefore mostly emerging or developing.

Response rates and participant engagement in routine program data collection has been low. For example, the National Mentoring Program completion survey and the National Learning Network survey received less than 12 responses each. This low engagement level underlines a challenge in drawing robust conclusions from the data. The availability of regional stakeholders to engage in the evaluation data collection activities has also been challenging. Two out of the seven CPLOs invited to contribute to the deep dives noted hesitancy to participate due to the potential for additional burden on the CIP delivery organisations. They, however, did agree to participate. The Evaluation has therefore leveraged existing program data points to minimise the burden on regional participants who are capacity constrained. This has included adding additional questions aligned to the evaluation lines of enquiry to progress and acquittal reports for the CIP grants and to the routine participant surveys administered by ARLF.

The varied levels of implementation across the elements have resulted in partial and incomplete data. Mixed data availability across the elements has contributed to a lack of data that can be used to inform the achievement of outcomes in the mid-term evaluation. For example, at the time of data collection, the

CIP leadership activities had mostly delivered one type of activity. This has meant that evaluation findings related to the outcomes are biased to one activity in the program. The data limitations specific to each element are outlined in Table 7 below.

Table 7 | Overview of the data limitations in the mid-term report

Element	Mid-term program data constraints
 <p>CIP grants</p>	<p>Grantees had not yet submitted progress reports at the time of writing the mid-term report. The evaluation was therefore reliant on grantee check in survey data (n=77), co-design survey responses (n=43), project application data and regional roadmaps, and insights from regional deep dives.</p>
 <p>CIP Leadership Activities</p>	<p>Two of the leadership activity options had not been delivered at the time of writing the mid-term report. Additionally, only one session had been delivered for two activity types. The evaluation was therefore reliant on participant interviews (n= 12), participant application forms and completion surveys for three activities (n = 162).</p>
 <p>SNG</p>	<p>Round 2 had not formally been announced and Round 1 grantees had not begun delivering their projects at the time of writing the mid-term report. The evaluation was therefore reliant on SNG application data, grantee interviews (n = 9) and program documentation.</p>
 <p>Expertise Pool</p>	<p>No CIP-funded organisations had formally engaged an expert from the Expertise Pool service at the time of writing the mid-term report. The evaluation was therefore reliant on expert and organisation EOIs, data on the experts available on the Pool, and interviews with stakeholders (including ten community organisations, three experts on the Pool, and the element leads).</p>
 <p>National Mentoring Program</p>	<p>Round two was in progress at the time of writing the mid-term report. Additionally, the Round one completion survey had only received eleven participant responses. The evaluation was therefore reliant on participant interviews (n = 8), application data and progress surveys (n = 30).</p>
 <p>National Learning Network</p>	<p>At the time of writing the mid-term report, the Drought Ready participant survey had only received ten responses. The evaluation was reliant on participant interviews (n = 3), working group decisions, platform insights data, event registration data and network member data.</p>

3 Evaluating the HRCPD Initiative as a whole

The HRCPD Initiative is a \$26.95 million Future Drought Fund investment in building social and community resilience to drought. The HRCPD Initiative consists of five elements, all of which are part way through implementation.

This Section describes the evaluation findings relating to the HRCPD Initiative overall. The evaluation found that:

- The HRCPD Initiative addresses the need to strengthen social resilience to drought (Section 3.1).
 - The HRCPD Initiative is showing early success at strengthening social resilience (Section 3.2).
 - The implementation of the HRCPD Initiative is on track (Section 3.3).
 - Lessons learnt from implementation can inform improvements to the HRCPD Initiative design and delivery (Section 3.4).
-

3.1 The HRCPD Initiative addresses the need to strengthen social resilience to drought

Social resilience is a key component of a region's ability to prepare for and respond to drought. An investment in building the social resilience of agriculturally dependent communities is required to mitigate the impact and enhance community responses during prolonged adversity. A challenge, however, is that communities have varying levels of social resilience to respond to drought and other climatic events. Further, investment in social resilience has traditionally been reactive and fragmented. The HRCPD Initiative has scaled the Australian Government investment in building social resilience in response to these challenges. These points are explored further below.

3.1.1 Communities have varying levels of social resilience to respond to drought and other climatic events

Future droughts are inevitable in Australia. Investing in community preparedness to respond to drought is critical. Social resilience is one of several forms of resilience that enable communities to respond to and prepare for drought and other climate events. The definition of social resilience is contested as it is a complex and multi-faceted concept.¹⁵ The evaluation has adopted the definition that social resilience is the adaptive and learning capacity of individuals, groups and institutions to self-organise in a way that maintains system function in the face of change or in response to a disturbance.¹⁶

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to building resilience to drought. Drought affects regional landscapes, communities and economies in different ways. Reliance on rainfall makes agriculturally dependent communities particularly susceptible to impacts of droughts. Regions and communities across Australia adopt localised responses that respond to the specific impact of drought and other climate events on their community. Drought also uniquely impacts First Nations people. Extended dry conditions

¹⁵ Saja AMA, Teo M, Goonetilleke A, and Ziyath AM, *A Critical Review of Social Resilience Properties and Pathways in Disaster Management*. International Journal of Disaster Risk Science, Volume 12, 2021. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13753-021-00378-y>

¹⁶ Maclean, K, Cuthill, M, Ross, H. *Six attributes of social resilience*. Journal of Environmental Planning and Management, Volume 57, 2014 - Issue 1. Available at: <https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/Planning/communitybenefitsadvisorycommittee/additionalresources/sixattributesofsocialresilience.pdf>

and biodiversity loss disrupts connections to Country and culture, inducing loss and creating pressures that impact the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations people.¹⁷

Levels of social resilience varies across communities due to a range of interrelated factors. These include the strength of existing community networks, accessibility of support services, geographic context and demographic profile. Recent and successive natural disasters and the recent COVID-19 pandemic have also impacted the level of social resilience observed within regional communities. Recent analysis shows that communities closer to capital cities and regional centres typically have a higher degree of estimated resilience than more remote communities.¹⁸ Building social resilience therefore requires a flexible and place-based response that reflects unique regional strengths and adapts to local capacity challenges.

3.1.2 Investment in social resilience has traditionally been reactive and fragmented

Historically, drought and other disaster preparedness investment in Australia has been reactive, focusing on response and recovery rather than proactive risk mitigation and resilience building. The Productivity Commission estimated that Australian Government mitigation spending was only 3 per cent of what the Australian Government spent on post-disaster recovery.¹⁹ Allocation of funding and resources to post-disaster has led to cyclical patterns of repair and rebuild instead of long-term strategic planning.

There has been a shift towards increased emphasis on pre-emptive measures, recognising the importance of investing in preparedness to mitigate the impacts of disasters and improve community resilience. The FDF represents a strategic pivot in Australia's approach to drought preparedness. It embodies a forward-thinking commitment to proactive and preparedness measures, emphasising long-term resilience over immediate relief.

The FDF's definition of drought resilience refers to economic, environmental and social resilience. This 'triple bottom line' approach to resilience takes a holistic view of the challenges to building drought resilience. This approach ensures that strategies are balanced, supporting not only economic outcomes but also environmental sustainability and social wellbeing. The FDF reinforces that strong, resilient regional communities require sound environmental practices, economic diversity, and robust social networks to effectively prepare for and recover from drought.

3.1.3 The HRCPD Initiative has scaled the FDF's investment in social resilience

The FDF demonstrates Government's recognition in the importance of investing in regional community capacity and social resilience. The FDF already invested \$11.2 million through Stage 1 of the *Drought Resilience Leaders and Networks to Build Drought Resilience* programs. This included a leadership development program, two grant rounds, and a mentoring program. The HRCPD Initiative builds from Stage 1. The HRCPD Initiative is a \$29.65 million investment across five elements, each providing different approaches to support community and social resilience. The intended contribution of each element towards building community resilience is summarised below:

- The CIP provides a package of support to 35 agriculturally dependent regions. The program includes grants delivered by locally relevant community organisations, tailored to strengthen community networks, capabilities and facilities that support drought preparedness. The second component of the

¹⁷ Rigby, C. W., Rosen, A., Berry, H. L., & Hart, C. R. If the land's sick, we're sick: The impact of prolonged drought on the social and emotional well-being of Aboriginal communities in rural New South Wales. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 19(5), 249-254. 2011

¹⁸ Marinucci, N., Walsh, N., and Yung, A. Exploring community resilience in Australia. Treasury Round Up. Australian Government. March 2024.

¹⁹ Productivity Commission, Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements: Inquiry Report, December 2014, pp 8 – 11.

program is the Leadership Activities which include a suite of activities to support community members to develop the leadership skills required to contribute to local drought resilience.

- The Small Network Grants provide one-off events or initiatives to strengthen community networks and capabilities to build drought preparedness. The SNG prioritises locations outside the delivery area of CIP grants to extend the reach and benefits of the HRCP Initiative to new regions.
- The Expertise Pool is a platform where community organisations can access specialist expertise to activate drought resilience initiative with their grant funds where available.
- The National Mentoring Program brings together mentees from agriculturally dependent communities with experienced mentors.
- The National Learning Network aims to connect individuals and organisations who are committed to drought resilience so that they can continue to learn from and support each other.

The evaluation is yet to assess the extent to which the design and curation of elements funded within the HRCPD Initiative is the most effective for building social resilience. This assessment will be conducted in the final evaluation reporting period.

3.2 The HRCPD Initiative is showing early success at strengthening social resilience

The HRCPD Initiative is showing progress towards the seven-short term outcomes. While the cumulative impacts of the HRCPD Initiative are still emerging, there is growing evidence to suggest that regions where multiple elements have been delivered may experience collective benefits. There are four emerging and ongoing risks to the HRCPD Initiative realising its intended outcomes.

3.2.1 The HRCPD Initiative is showing progress towards the seven short-term outcomes

The overarching assessment is that the HRCPD Initiative is making progress towards achieving its intended outcomes. All short-term outcomes were assessed as 'developing'. It is important to note that the evaluation's mid-term assessment has been made part way through the delivery of the five elements. The assessment of short-term outcomes will evolve in the final reporting stage. The assessment of the HRCPD Initiative overall draws on the individual assessments of the five elements. The element assessments are provided in each relevant section of the report. Further detail on the evidence of impact that underpins each assessment is also provided in the element specific sections. The initial assessment of progress towards intended outcomes is shown below in Table 8.

Table 8 | Summary of assessment against short-term outcomes and indicators

OUTCOME	ASSESSMENT	RATIONALE
Communication, social connection and collaboration.	 Developing	All elements that were intended to contribute to this outcome are showing developing evidence of improving communication, increasing social connection or promoting collaboration between regional community members.
Services, resources, infrastructure and facilities.	 Developing	CIP grants, SNG and Drought Ready are showing developing evidence of improving access to and the use of services or resources that support drought preparedness. Notably, only grant projects within the CIP and SNG are contributing to an improvement in access to infrastructure and facilities. CIP leadership activities and the Expertise Pool are demonstrating limited evidence of achieving this outcome.
Diversity of community members and organisations.	 Developing	The HRCPD Initiative has been effective in reaching diverse participants. CIP leadership activities, the mentoring program and Drought Ready are all showing limited evidence of supporting more diverse community involvement in drought preparedness activities. CIP grants and SNG are showing developing evidence against this outcome. CIP and SNG projects are focused on delivering outcomes for First Nations communities and young people. CIP projects also have a focus on rural women and CALD communities. The progression of this outcome will be a key area of focus in the final evaluation report.
Awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies.	 Developing	CIP grants, SNG and the mentoring program are showing developing evidence of increasing awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies. Whereas, CIP leadership activities, Expertise Pool and Drought Ready are demonstrating limited evidence of achieving this outcome. Across these elements, only few reported an increase in awareness or understanding of strategies.
Place-based practices.	 Developing	CIP grants and SNG are showing developing evidence of increasing implementation or improving effectiveness of place-based. There is limited evidence of achievement towards this outcome from the CIP leadership activities and the and mentoring program.
Leadership capacity and capability.	 Developing	The mentoring program and, both CIP grants and leadership activities are showing developing or fully realised evidence of enhancing leadership capability and capacity. These elements are contributing to leadership skill development or enhanced self-confidence in regional community members. SNG and Drought Ready are showing limited evidence of this outcome.
Community-based networks.	 Developing	CIP grants and leadership activities, SNG and the mentoring program are showing developing or fully realised evidence of increasing and diversifying the networks of regional community members. The place-based nature of CIP and SNG is supporting networks within communities while, the national scope of NMP is facilitating networks across communities. Drought Ready is still showing limited evidence of this outcome at this stage.

3.2.2 The collective impacts of the HRCPD Initiative are still emerging

A key objective of the evaluation is to understand whether the suite of programs within the HRCPD Initiative contribute to additional, collective benefits. This includes understanding additional place-based impact (i.e., where multiple programs are delivered in one region) or cumulative impact (i.e., when a participant, either organisation or individual, has engaged in multiple programs). Literature identifies there is significant value in regional grant programs making deliberate attempts to deliver cumulative and flow on effects within a region.²⁰ Given the delivery of the HRCPD Initiative is still underway, the evaluation has

²⁰ This is discussed in [Assessing Local Capacity for Federal Grant-Getting \(2008\)](#) and more recent examples of how cumulative benefits occur for regional grant programs can be seen in the [SCCF Outcomes and Economic Evaluation Final Report \(2022\)](#)

not yet assessed the extent to which the HRCPD Initiative elements have delivered collective and place-based impacts. However, the evaluation has identified the factors that are likely to contribute to the extent to which regions and participants experience collective benefits. Each of these is outlined further below:

- **HRCPD Initiative activity that builds off previous FDF funding** – Grant recipient organisations for CIP and SNG grants are using multiple FDF funding sources to sustain project outcomes. There were 23 CIP Grant recipient organisations and three SNG Grant recipient organisations that received funding in Stage 1 of the program. There was one organisation that received Stage 1 funding and grants through both the CIP and SNG. Thirteen of the organisations that also received funding in Stage 1 are using their HRCPD Initiative funding to continue or evolve their Stage 1 projects. At least three of these stakeholders interviewed as part of the evaluation highlighted that the cumulative support allowed them to sustain and enhance project outcomes.
- **HRCPD Initiative activity that aligns to and builds off existing strategies** - The place-based nature of the CIP and SNG projects has enabled regions to identify the most impactful projects for their region. All eight deep dive regions have been deliberate in aligning their SNG and CIP projects with existing regional strategies, such as their Regional Drought Resilience Plan (RDRP) when available (see Section 4.4.1). When done well, a series of connected projects, including some smaller, are expected to support additional aggregate benefits for a region.
- **The concentration of activity because of the geography of a region.** Population density, the geographic dispersion of communities and the resultant spread of CIP and SNG projects will impact how specific regions experience aggregate benefits of the funding. For example, a region with more geographically dispersed projects is likely to experience less significant collective benefits than a region with concentrated activity. Online networks, such as the Drought Ready network, may promote collective benefits in geographically dispersed regions if they successfully promote sharing. The SNG and CIP grants is on track to support place-based impacts.
- **Opportunities for skills and capability reinforcement through multiple points of contact** – Participants re-engaging in the various aspects of the HRCPD Initiative and those who have previously engaged through Stage 1 have an opportunity to consolidate, deepen and refine their skills. With each opportunity, participants can share lessons learned, contribute to a richer collective knowledge base and catalyse peer learning. Further participation is likely to also support individuals to strengthen existing connections and enhance collaborative networks.

The final stage of the evaluation will observe how these factors have played out across regions and influenced the realisation of collective impacts.

3.2.3 There are four risks to realising the intended HRCPD Initiative outcomes

Noting the HRCPD Initiative is part way through delivery, the evaluation has identified four common risks to realising intended outcomes across elements: planning to sustain long-term outcomes, community capacity constraints, maintaining focus on drought preparedness, and regional project delivery capability and capacity. The observed impact of these risks is outlined below.

- **Planning to sustain long-term benefits:** Delivery organisations and participants of the HRCPD Initiative have varied capacity to sustain drought preparedness outcomes beyond the program delivery period. Ongoing impact was built into some CIP and SNG projects through the development of resources, new infrastructure or specific capabilities. Other organisations noted that they will mostly rely on accessing additional support and resources to sustain project outcomes (e.g., to continue to fund specific roles or to deliver follow-on events or activities). Participants of the mentoring program

and CIP Leadership Activities have requested further support to realise the long-term benefits of their participation in the HRCPD Initiative.

- **Community capacity constraints:** Volunteers and community leaders in many regional communities are fatigued and over-utilised. This is due to recent and successive natural disasters, the ongoing impacts of the COVID19 pandemic and a reliance on a small number of community members to sustain volunteer and community organisations. There is a risk that community capacity constraints may contribute to a lack of engagement in HRCPD Initiative elements. HRCPD Initiative delivery must continue to respond to varied community capacity and adapt as appropriate.
- **Maintaining focus on drought preparedness:** Recent wet periods have made engagement in drought preparedness difficult. Many regions are still recovering from recent natural disasters, such as floods or fires. This was most notable in Northern Queensland and in some areas of Victoria. Most regions reported experiencing recent successive 'wetter seasons' and so maintaining a focus on drought preparedness was a challenge.
- **Regional project delivery capability and capacity:** The evaluation observed turnover of key staff at many of the funded CIP organisations. Stakeholders shared that staff turnover has reduced project delivery capacity. This may also impact SNG organisations. Staff turnover has contributed to some communication challenges with FRRR and ARLF as key point people are no longer available within a region. There are several organisations for which projects are now being delivered by different individuals to those who participated in the co-design process. Ongoing attention and support from FRRR and ARLF engagement staff is required to ensure that continued knowledge loss does not impact project delivery.

3.3 Implementation of the HRCPD Initiative is on track despite delays

The HRCPD Initiative is part way through delivery. The activities delivered to date have reached geographically dispersed and diverse participants. The HRCPD Initiative's flexible implementation and the support provided by FRRR and ARLF has been critical to delivery so far. The coordination of elements and the misalignment between ambitious program timelines and community capacity have limited the reach and impact of the HRCPD Initiative to date. The evaluation has identified lessons from HRCPD Initiative implementation that can inform improvements to the HRCPD Initiative design and delivery. Each of these points is described further below.

3.3.1 The HRCPD Initiative is reaching dispersed and diverse participants in the program

Each of the five HRCPD Initiative elements are at varied stages of implementation. Some elements such as the Drought Ready platform and SNGs have been launched more recently, and others, such as the mentoring program, are already complete. The delayed launch of some elements was a deliberate decision to stage the rollout of the HRCPD Initiative programs to align with the capacity of communities. The scale and reach of the HRCPD Initiative cannot yet be determined until all elements have been fully implemented.

The HRCPD Initiative has reached a broad range of participants across all states and territories. This has varied by each element, outlined below:

- CIP grants are delivering 161 projects across 232 locations²¹, over six states.
- CIP Leadership Activities have been delivered to 228 participants across 14 locations, over five states.
- SNG Round 1 funded 28 projects in 26 locations, across all states and territories except the ACT. Round 2 had not yet been announced at the time of writing this evaluation.
- Mentoring supported 210 participants across two rounds of the program. Mentors and mentees span across all states and territories.
- The Drought Ready network contains over 600 members, as of June 2024. This includes representation across 148 LGAs and all states²².
- The Expertise Pool hosts over 100 experts, with 30 experts that are based outside of major cities. No funded HRCPD Initiative organisations have yet engaged an expert from the Expertise Pool, however organisations from across three regions have utilised the concierge service. Organisations from an additional eight regions have completed an expression of interest form to access services.

The HRCPD Initiative has been effective in reaching diverse participants. First Nations people have participated in all elements. To date, 23 of 35 of CIP regions (66 per cent) feature projects that involve engagement and participation of First Nations people and of these, nine are First Nations-led projects. Six Round 1 SNG projects include an explicit focus on outcomes for First Nations community members. First Nations participation in the elements led by ARLF is low, however the programs are only part way through delivery. ARLF has begun adapting program design and delivery to better engage First Nations participants (see Section 5.4.1). All elements also engage young people, including 30 grant projects specifically focused on delivering outcomes for young people. Young people have represented a low portion of participants in the ARLF activities, with three per cent of mentors and 11 per cent of Leadership Activity participants aged below 35 years.

Other demographic groups have also been represented across HRCPD Initiative activities. For example, six CIP and Round 1 SNG projects focus on supporting outcomes for CALD and refugee community members, 21 projects support regional women, and nine projects intend to deliver outcomes for children. Women are highly represented across all ARLF elements, with female participants making up 66 per cent of mentoring participants, 76 per cent of leadership activity participants and 70 per cent of learning network members.

3.3.2 Flexible implementation and targeted FRRR and ARLF support have been critical to program delivery so far

The flexibility of the HRCPD Initiative has been critical to support regions to identify and begin to realise benefits. The diverse geographic, climatic, and socio-economic landscapes and varying local needs and capabilities has required an adaptive approach to HRCPD Initiative delivery. For example, the phased delivery of the CIP grants through four tranches enabled regions that were not initially ready, to engage in the program at a later stage. Further, the design of the SNG streams allowed the Initiative to allocate funding across all intended regions. The multiple leadership options offered by ARLF is another example of flexible arrangements that allow organisations to tailor activities to reflect local need and capacity. This adaptability of the HRCPD Initiative has been important for addressing the unique contextual factors and community dynamics across regions.

ARLF and FRRR have played a critical role supporting the delivery of the HRCPD Initiative. Both organisations have demonstrated a deep commitment to and passion for supporting community social

²¹ Number of locations is based on the listed project delivery locations provided in project application forms.

²² Participant data for the Drought Ready platform was collected in March 2024 when there were 392 members. Therefore, the actual spread of the platform is expected to be larger as network membership has grown since then.

resilience. The evaluation has observed what explicit support by ARLF and FRRR has been most effective at supporting HRCPD Initiative delivery and impact:

- **Continuously improve to reflect participant preferences and regional needs.** For example, ARLF has adapted the Change Maker leadership sessions delivered to First Nations communities to include a First Nations facilitator and more culturally appropriate content. As highlighted above, FRRR have adapted delivery timelines across both CIP tranches and SNG rounds to provide flexibility to organisations with capacity limitations or to regions impacted by natural disasters.
- **Championing genuine partnership and collaboration with regional delivery leads.** For example, the consistent effort to prioritise local capacity building, such as through the provision of resources like FRRR's webinars, the coordination of the evaluation working sessions, and support to ensure the HRCPD Initiative's effects are locally driven and sustained.

3.3.3 Two factors have limited the reach and impact of the HRCPD Initiative

The coordination and timing of elements and the misalignment between ambitious program timelines and community capacity and expectations has affected the reach and impact of HRCPD Initiative to date. These factors are outlined further below.

- **The coordination and timing of elements can improve.** For example, the roll out of the Expertise Pool could have aligned with the co-design of CIP grants to enable communities to better coordinate grant funding applications with organisational need (see Section 7.5). The limited amount of integration across the HRCPD Initiative elements in the early stages of delivery was highlighted during the evaluation working sessions and outcome panels. In both forums there was a noticeable lack of shared understanding of the different elements that stakeholders could participate in. As elements have matured there has been an increase in coordination activity between FRRR and ARLF. For example, both the Drought Ready network and CIP webinars have become useful platforms for both FRRR and ARLF to coordinate communications to stakeholders. There is an opportunity for the HRCPD Initiative to continue to strengthen the coordination and integration of elements. For example, the ongoing delivery of the CIP leadership activities can continue to leverage the Drought Ready network as a platform to promote ongoing collaboration and knowledge sharing. Additionally, the CIP grant projects focused on leadership and training can look to build on ARLF's leadership activities delivered or planned for delivery in the region.
- **Ambitious program timelines often conflicted with the processes required for effective community engagement.** Regional participants reported difficulties adhering to prescribed timelines that did not sufficiently account for the intricacies of community-led initiatives. Many CIP organisations highlighted this issue in relation to the CIP co-design process (see Section 4.4.2). The HRCPD Initiative delivery timelines proved especially challenging for First Nations community members and those geographically isolated in remote areas. Stakeholders shared that they felt the CIP did not reach the full breadth of potential participants due to the tight timeframes for program design (see Section 4.4.2).

The evaluation will continue to monitor these factors and others that emerge along with their observed impacts in the final reporting period.

3.4 Lessons from implementation can inform improvements to the HRCPD Initiative design and delivery

The evaluation has identified four broad lessons from implementation so far. These lessons have informed a series of recommendations that can help strengthen the current HRCPD Initiative and future similar initiatives. Recommendations specific to each element are provided in the element chapters. This section provides lessons that apply to the HRCPD Initiative overall.

Each of the lessons learnt from implementation and their subsequent recommendations for improvement are highlighted below in Table 9.

Table 9 | Overview of lessons learnt from implementation and lessons for improvement

LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTATION
<p>Strategically align and integrate activities to support cumulative and sustainable impacts</p> <p>To achieve sustainable and cumulative outcomes, the HRCPD Initiative can continue to focus on refining the strategic alignment and integration of the various elements. FRRR and ARLF could consider building on the existing momentum of the HRCPD Initiative to maximise community engagement, and enhance its long-term, sustainable impact. Central to this approach are the following recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support participants to realise benefits beyond the leadership sessions (see Section 4.7.4)• Align the delivery of the elements to maximise engagement and impact. For example, aligning Expertise Pool promotion with grant project planning and funding allocations (see Section 6.4.1) or by leveraging the Drought Ready to promote ongoing collaboration and knowledge sharing of CIP leadership activity participants (see Section 5.3.4)• Prepare for the long-term sustainability of the Drought Ready platform (see Section 8.4.2)
<p>Reflect lessons learnt to continuously improve HRCPD Initiative delivery</p> <p>The HRCPD Initiative should continue to adapt element implementation and design to reflect participant feedback and the changing conditions of the regions. The coordination and timing of the Initiative elements and the ambitious program timelines impacted delivery to date. Specific recommendations to continuously improve the HRCPD Initiative delivery are provided below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflect lessons learnt from the CIP co-design process in future collaborative grant processes (see Section 4.4.2)• Capture insights from the delivery of the leadership activities to inform future investment (see Section 5.4.2)• Consider offering fewer leadership activities but tailored to local need (see Section 5.3.1)• Adapt future mentoring programs to reflect participant feedback (see Sections 8.3.1 and 8.4.2)• Share lessons learnt from the mentoring program with other mentoring programs (see Section 8.4)
<p>Effectively communicate with regional stakeholders to maximise their engagement</p> <p>FRRR and ARLF have reflected that effective communication with community organisations is critical to the HRCPD Initiative delivery. Regional stakeholders are often time poor and capacity constrained. The evaluation has observed several recommendations to strengthen communication with regional stakeholders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure role clarity for CPLOs to better deliver on their roles (see Section 4.4.3)• Better communicate the services of regional experts to align with local need (see Section 7.4.1)• Provide support to organisations to better understand the value of the Expertise Pool services (see Section 7.4.1)
<p>Continue to flexibly respond to community need and adapt to reflect local capacity</p>

LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTATION

Regional stakeholders have emphasised that the current flexibility of the HRCPD Initiative is a strength. The evaluation has identified three recommendations important for continuing to support the flexible implementation of the HRCPD Initiative:

- Continue to provide flexibility in the design and delivery of activities, aligned to regional community capacity (see Section 4.4.1)
- Continue to adapt the delivery of the leadership activities to reflect diverse needs (see Section 5.3.2)
- Strengthen Drought Ready member engagement through personalised and curated content (see Section 9.4.2)



4 Evaluating the Community Impact Grants

CIP grants aim to empower community members and not-for-profit organisations in remote, rural, and regional Australia to initiate local actions that enhance drought preparedness. FRRR has distributed near \$10m in grants in support of 161 projects across 30 regions in Australia. The grants are worth up to \$500,000 for participating regions. FRRR had originally planned to deliver the CIP grants in 35 regions however, five regions did not participate due to community readiness. These regions have been targeted as part of the SNG program.

The evaluation found that the CIP grants are making progress towards their intended outcomes, creating positive impacts for communities across Australia (Section 4.1).

This Section explores findings related to the CIP grants, namely that:

- CIP grants delivered \$10m to 161 projects across Australia (Section 4.2).
 - CIP grants are on track to create positive outcomes for communities and organisations (Section 4.3).
 - The CIP grants design and delivery has adapted in response to changing community needs (Section 4.4).
 - There are three recommendations to strengthen the CIP grants (Section 4.5).
-

4.1 CIP grants are making progress towards their intended outcomes

CIP grants intend to contribute to the seven short-term outcomes identified in the HRCPD Initiative MEL Plan. Noting that most CIP grant projects are part way through delivery, Nous has assessed progress towards achieving the short-term outcomes and indicators.

The overarching assessment is that the CIP grants are developing evidence of achieving all intended outcomes. The assessment is shown below in Table 10.

Table 10 | Summary of assessment against the intended CIP grants outcomes

OUTCOME	ASSESSMENT	RATIONALE
Communication, social connection and collaboration.	 Developing	Nearly all projects (94 per cent) that filled in a check-in survey (n=64) expected to achieve outcome 1 (see Section 4.3.1). Stakeholders from all 8 deep dive regions noted improved connection and collaboration across their region through the process of applying for and delivering their CIP projects (see Section 4.3.2). Delivery organisations anticipate these outcomes will be embedded and sustained within regions (see Section 4.3.1).
Services, resources, infrastructure and facilities.	 Developing	CIP projects of this type show signs that they will be effective in increasing connection, and creating lasting impact in their community (see Section 4.3.1). Projects expecting to achieve this outcome (31 per cent), reported improving access to services and infrastructure as well as emphasising the lasting impact of their funded project (see Section 4.3.1).
Diversity of community members and organisations.	 Developing	CIP projects are engaging target cohorts, such as First Nations and young people, and stakeholders expect this to strengthen as projects progress (see Section 4.3.1). Nearly a quarter of CIP projects (23 per cent) involve the engagement and participation of First Nations people and 16 per cent are directly focused on young people (see Section 4.3.1). CIP funding has also allowed community organisations that would not normally associate with drought preparedness to contribute to this goal (see Section 4.3.1).
Awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies.	 Developing	Six deep dive regions reported an increased awareness and understanding of drought strategies (see Section 4.3.1). Projects which expect to contribute to this outcome (47 per cent) reported increasing awareness and understanding in their local communities (see Section 4.3.1). 65 per cent of co-design survey respondents reported having a better understanding of drought resilience following the co-design process.
Place-based practices.	 Developing	The CIP was a good mechanism for the implementation of social projects identified in Regional Drought Resilience Plans (RDRPs), where they were available, specific, and narrowly-focused (see Section 4.4.1). Most regions with an established RDRP build on the outcomes identified in their RDRP, but RDRPs had varying benefits in how they aligned to regions' social resilience focus (see Section 4.3.4.1). Nearly a third (31 per cent) of organisations who completed the project check in survey expected to achieve this outcome (see Section 4.3.1)
Leadership capacity and capability.	 Developing	CIP grants are strengthening leadership, either directly through projects or by empowering community organisations through the grant itself (see Section 4.3.2). Deep dive stakeholders confirmed that CIP grants are strengthening leadership within organisations by funding projects and facilitating inter-region engagement (see Section 4.2.2). Over half (55 per cent) of projects expected to achieve this outcome and 43 per cent of participants felt empowered to lead individual initiatives following the co-design process (see Section 4.2.2).
Community-based networks.	 Developing	Networks are being expanded and diversified through CIP projects and between delivery partners and CPOs within and across regions (see Section 4.2.2). For example, delivery partners that would not traditionally associate with drought resilience have diversified their networks through the CIP (see Section 4.2.1). Over three quarters (77 per cent) of organisations who completed the project check in survey expected to achieve this outcome (see Section 4.2.1).

4.2 CIP grants has delivered near \$10m to 161 projects across Australia

The CIP grants has delivered funding to a wide range of agriculturally dependent communities across rural and regional Australia. The CIP awarded \$10,110,639 to 121 organisations to deliver 164 projects. As of April 2024, three projects delivered by two organisations had withdrawn their grants. The rest of this section focuses on the 161 active grants valued at \$9,829,129.

CIP grants have been awarded across 30 CIP regions²³ in 6 states. The grants were distributed in four tranches in response to community capacity and readiness to participate in the co-design process. The most common projects are events and training activities. A diverse range of organisations will deliver CIP projects. This includes Landcare, First Nations, natural resource management (NRM), regional development, women's and arts organisations to name a few. Notably, 33 per cent of these projects involve active engagement and participation of First Nations people while 16 per cent are focussed on young people aged 18-35 years. A description of the CIP grants program is shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 | CIP grants have delivered almost \$10m to 161 projects across 30 regions



Source: Nous analysis of CIP Grant applications and CIP Grant recipient data provided by FRRR

²³ Five CIP regions were unable to secure CIP grants due to varied reasons, including region readiness and capacity to participate in the HRCPD Initiative. Stream 2 of the SNG was designed to provide those regions a dedicated opportunity to apply for grant funding.

4.3 CIP grants are on track to create positive outcomes for communities and organisations

There is growing evidence that the CIP grants program is creating positive outcomes for communities through the delivery of the 161 funded projects. Further, the evaluation has heard evidence of positive outcomes for the funded organisations. FRRR and delivery organisations will need to address several risks to realise the full potential of the CIP grants program.

This Section provides detailed findings on the progress of the CIP towards its intended outcomes. Namely that:

- CIP projects are strategically designed to progress all seven short-term outcomes while targeting diverse community members (PO3)
- CIP organisations have strengthened their networks and realised unintended collaboration outcomes (PO1 & PO7)
- CIP grants will need to respond flexibly to future capacity constraints and enable strategies to sustain outcomes

4.3.1 CIP projects are strategically designed to progress all seven short-term outcomes while targeting diverse community members

This section provides further detail on how the CIP grants are making progress towards its intended outcomes. Specifically, this section outlines how:

- regions have used CIP grants strategically to support hard-to-fund social resilience projects
- CIP projects contribute to all seven short-term outcomes
- CIP grants engage a range of community stakeholders.

Regions have used CIP grants strategically to support hard-to-fund social resilience projects.

Delivery organisations reported that drought funding mostly focuses on farm resilience. They also noted that it is rare to access funding to support social resilience projects in preparation for future droughts. Several regions reported strategically using the CIP grants to deliver hard-to-fund projects or roles that deliver social resilience outcomes. More broadly across CIP grants:

- **Many projects would not have proceeded without CIP grants.** This was mostly because these types of initiatives did not fit the requirements of other common grant program, such as social initiatives in rural or remote towns or building local organisation capability through a secretariat role. The evaluation heard from 11 CIP delivery organisations that their projects would not have proceeded if not for the CIP. For example, Southern New England in NSW is delivering a series of social initiatives in their community, including a young famers dinner, Rural Women's Day event, and pillowcase making workshops for school-aged children. The project delivery lead was confident that if not for the CIP grants, this project, especially their events for young adults, would not have been delivered.
- **A small number of projects proceeded sooner than planned.** The evaluation heard from five CIP delivery organisations that were confident they could have accessed other funding eventually. However, they noted that without CIP grants their projects would have been delayed and it would be a challenge to access appropriate funding. For example, Mitakoodi in North-West Queensland is funding a community hub facility where local youth can gather to learn new skills and create content (for example TikTok videos). The project delivery lead reported that the CIP grant allowed Mitakoodi to deliver the project sooner than they would have with other funding, such as local council funding.

- **Organisations have expanded the scope and impact of existing initiatives.** Nine delivery organisations reported the CIP grants allowed them to enhance projects that they had previously delivered or that were in planning. Delivery organisations reported that they used their grants to expand delivery to more remote locations, offer more or diverse activities, or enhance existing drought preparedness activities through better resourcing. For example, Glen Innes Natural Resource Advisory Committee (GLENRAC) in NSW shared the CIP grants allowed them to enhance existing activities by providing additional catering or entertainment for events. The project delivery lead reported that this has increased participation, including attracting new members of the community to the events.

It is important to note that all CIP projects will report on the role CIP funding has played to support their projects when they complete their project completion report. The evaluation will update its assessment of how organisations have used their funding in the final evaluation report.

Figure 4 below provides a case study illustrating how the region Fitzroy Capricorn has strategically used CIP grants to support hard-to-fund activities.

CIP funding enabled Fitzroy Capricornia to strategically support hard-to-fund activities

OVERVIEW OF THE REGION



Fitzroy Capricornia is geographically dispersed but has effective collaboration and strong networks.

Fitzroy Capricornia is a large geographic region with mixed drought status. Most LGAs came out of full drought declaration between November 2022 and March 2023, but some areas within the region remain fully drought declared. The region has a Regional Drought Resilience Plan and has established strategic guides and checklists to invest in locally led strategies for social and community resilience. It has strong networks with Indigenous communities, NFP organisations, agencies, universities and regional councils, supported by a CPLO that actively works to foster and develop cross-region networks.

The CPLO of Fitzroy Capricornia used CIP grant funding to fund strategic initiatives.

Dawson Catchment Coordinating Association (DCCA), the CPLO for Fitzroy Capricornia, reported that they designed the projects in their region to prioritise hard-to-fund activities, such as a secretariat role to support organisational capability. They also reported delaying activities which could already access other funding sources, such as online training initiatives. DCCA appreciated the flexibility and locally-led nature of the CIP funding for the region, which allowed them to target and prioritise hard-to-fund initiatives. It appears this region has delivered the CIP exactly as it was intended, with a good mix of commercial and social projects linked to broader regional drought strategies such as the RDRP.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED

NFP house would not have proceeded without CIP funding.

NFP House delivers capacity building activities and training. NFP House reported that they wouldn't be able to deliver this project without CIP funding. The funding has allowed them to establish a local community network to improve access to, encourage greater utilisation of, or create new community infrastructure.

CQLA's project would have been smaller in scope without CIP funding.

CQLA delivers three workshops with guest speakers, supported by a secretariat role. The Central Queensland Landscape Alliance (CQLA) reported that their three workshops would likely have gone ahead without CIP funding, but they would have been significantly smaller in scope. The secretariat role has enabled them to deliver the project in a more systematic and structured way and built CQLA's organisational capability. The organisation noted there are few funding opportunities for the secretariat role from other government funding sources.

DCCA's project would have been delayed without CIP funding.

DCCA received funding to create a community room equipped with remote teleconferencing and videoconferencing capabilities as well as a facility for face-to-face activities. They reported that CIP enabled them to proceed with the project sooner than planned, and they are leveraging CIP funding to catalyse other funding. The new community room will serve as a hub for community gatherings, enabling community groups to train, meet, and function in a dedicated mutual space, thereby promoting both community and economic development. A photo of the room is provided below.



Community room created by DCCA.

Source: stakeholder interviews, Nous regional baseline assessments, and [DCCA Facebook page, 3 May 2024](#)

CIP projects contribute to all seven short-term outcomes

The CIP has funded a diverse set of projects that will collectively contribute to all seven short-term outcomes. Based on the 64 of the total 161 CIP projects that completed the mid-project check-in:

- Most projects will contribute to PO1 (94 per cent) and PO7 (77 per cent) as the primary outcome.
- Each short-term outcome has at least 20 projects that will contribute to the outcome.
- Almost half (45 per cent) of projects contribute to more than one outcome.

The final insights align with themes from the regional deep dives. Most stakeholders identified that their projects would contribute to multiple outcomes due to the interconnectedness of the outcomes. Figure 5 presents the intended project outcomes from the CIP project check-in survey.

Figure 5 | CIP projects which identified each project outcome in their check in survey



Source: Nous analysis using March/April 2024 CIP progress check in surveys provided by FRRR (n=64)

An analysis of the intended contribution of CIP projects towards the seven outcomes reveals that there are three tiers of outcomes based on how common they are:

- **Tier one – Strengthening community connectedness and networks.** As outlined above, the most common outcomes selected were P01 – communication, connection and collaboration - and P07 – community-based networks (see a full description of the outcomes in Section 2.3). This is not surprising since many stakeholders saw these two outcomes as reinforcing one another. As outlined in Section 4.3.1, grants supporting projects with a focus on community-based events and networks that strengthen communication, connection and collaboration are less common. Stakeholders also consistently emphasised that combating social isolation through events and networks was a key factor in promoting drought resilience. A further focus identified through the deep dive engagements was strengthening local networks, particularly those networks that engage young people. These factors may have led to a higher number of projects contributing to strengthening community connectedness and networks.
- **Tier two - Strengthening the capability, capacity and inclusion of individuals, or organisations.** The next most common group of outcomes included P06 leadership capacity and capability, P03 diversity of community members and organisations and P04 awareness and understanding of strategies. Projects that contribute to these outcomes reflect a strong focus on strengthening the ability of individuals and organisations to contribute to community resilience. Stakeholders shared that enhancing capability and inclusion provided a wide range of benefits to local communities. This included improving community resilience to all climate impacts not just drought. Common

characteristics of projects in this tier included a focus on educating and equipping community members with tools and resources to strengthen individual community resilience.

- **Tier three - Providing access to a new resources, infrastructure or place-based practices.** The least common outcomes selected were P02 services, resources, infrastructure and facilities, and P05 place-based practices. Projects in this tier mostly focused on upgrading community facilities or developing resources for volunteers. Stakeholders with projects in this tier noted that these projects often have long-lasting impacts on their communities and can strategically support drought preparedness for the region. Although a smaller number of projects nominated this outcome, stakeholders see these projects as critical to strengthening social resilience to drought.

The preliminary themes identified from this analysis are the intended outcomes of CIP projects. All CIP delivery organisations and CPOs will report on the final outcomes of their projects through the project completion report. The final evaluation report will provide a comprehensive review of the tangible outcomes the 161 CIP projects have achieved for rural and regional communities across Australia. This assessment will inform a view on how well the CIP grants has contributed to strengthening the social resilience of communities to future drought.

CIP grants engage a range of community stakeholders.

Projects are intending to deliver outcomes for community members and community-based organisations that would not typically be included in drought resilience planning or preparedness activities. Notably:

- **CIP projects intend to deliver outcomes for individuals not directly involved in agriculture.** Many CIP projects intend to build whole-of-community resilience to drought. Regional stakeholders emphasised that drought-related grants typically focus directly on farm businesses and agriculture workers. Funded CIP organisations, including agriculturally focused organisations, reinforced the importance of supporting all community members and local businesses that are impacted by drought. For example, Loxton Chamber of Commerce in SA is using their CIP grant to develop a space for a collective of local artisans to sell their products, upgrade the teleconferencing facilities in their Business Hub, and improve the Chamber of Commerce's governance processes. They emphasised the importance of delivering outcomes for non-farm businesses that support agriculturally dependent communities and experience challenging economic conditions during drought. They reiterated that drought impacts the whole community and often leads to a downturn in the entire local economy.
- **CIP projects are delivering outcomes for specific cohorts of community members.** Across the CIP grants program there are a significant number of projects that target a specific cohort in the community. Of note:
 - **At least 22 projects (13 per cent) focus on young people.** Projects for young people often focus on building networks, strengthening connection and strengthening leadership skills. One example is a Voices of Women Incorporated in Central West NSW project, which is delivering an intensive creative workshop focused on building relationships and confidence of young women.
 - **At least 44 projects (27 per cent) focus on First Nations communities.** Projects with a First Nations focus include sharing traditional knowledge, expanding cultural burning practices, or delivering local land management training. For example, First People of the Millewa-Mallee Aboriginal Corporation in Mallee Victoria is delivering land management training and mentorship of young First Nations people.
 - **At least 21 projects (13 per cent) focus on rural women.** Projects focused on rural women include rural women's day events, networking events and leadership programs that also foster a sense of connection and community. For example, Women Together Learning in the Eyre Peninsula is

engaging 12-15 young rural women in a series of drought preparedness workshops so they can play a leadership role in their community.

- **At least 6 (4%) projects focus on CALD communities.** Projects with a focus on CALD communities include providing resources and training for recent migrants. For example, the Food Next Door Cooperative is delivering irrigation management training for CALD communities in the Mallee Region of Victoria.
- **The CIP has engaged a diverse set of organisations some of whom would not have ordinarily delivered drought preparedness activities.** The social resilience and whole community focus of the CIP has attracted a wider range of small community organisations beyond agriculture-focused organisations. This finding was reflected in the co-design survey results. Almost two-thirds of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the co-design sessions helped a variety of organisations in their region lead the selected projects. Some of these organisations do not normally associate themselves with drought preparedness activities. For example, Meridian Regional Arts in Wheatbelt Central East WA has been engaged to make video case studies of senior locals who are asked about resilience and their reason for staying in Wheatbelt. This organisation would not traditionally associate themselves with drought resilience as their primary focus is on promoting regional art.

Figure 6 below provides a case study illustrating how CIP grants have engaged a range of community stakeholders across the two CIP regions in Tasmania.

Figure 6 | Tasmania Regional Case study

CIP projects in Tasmania target outcomes for a range of community stakeholders.

OVERVIEW OF THE REGION



Tasmania is split into two CIP regions.

Tasmania consists of two CIP regions, North/North-west and South.

- The North/North-west region is delivering four projects: an arts project, a leadership project, a series of drought related events and a series of youth volunteer workshops.
- The South region is delivering three projects: a series of cultural burn workshops, a series of business workshops, and youth volunteer workshops.

The CPOs for both Tasmanian regions work closely together to deliver a 'whole state' approach.

Although they are split in two regions there is growing collaboration between both regions to ensure the projects in Tasmania reach the right cross-section of stakeholders. The CPOs for the two Tasmanian CIP regions were motivated to work collaboratively due to the existing strong relationships across all of Tasmania. This approach has strengthened existing relationships between organisations and, has provided an opportunity for the two CPOs to share ideas and knowledge for good practice.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED

RANT Arts is working in drought resilience for the first time

RANT Arts in Tasmania has been engaged to make videos with young people to build awareness of drought. This organisation would not traditionally associate themselves with drought resilience, typically delivering regional or youth art projects, but they have diversified their networks through the CIP. They were inspired by their experience delivering previous projects for flood recovery to apply for CIP funding. The CPO noted that it was great to work with RANT Arts, and working with RANT has opened them up to new opportunities they 'wouldn't have done otherwise'. RANT Arts was confident that they would not have done this project without this grant opportunity.

Rural Business Tasmania aims to engage young people who might not ordinarily be engaged in building social resilience to drought.

Rural Business Tasmania is engaging young people (18-24) through a series of youth volunteer workshops. Young people are not ordinarily engaged in drought resilience activities, as they are underrepresented in the volunteer organisations that build social resilience to drought. This project is focused on running workshops designed by and for young people to build engagement. The project will build depth of social connection, a shared sense of purpose, and long-term community belonging. They hope to connect volunteer-based community organisations with young people in the region.

Southern Regional NRM is empowering First Nations organisations to strengthen culturally-informed drought preparedness.

Southern Regional NRM is building culturally informed drought preparedness and social resilience through community events. These events are facilitated by Firesticks Alliance and Aboriginal organisations across southern Lutruwita/Tasmania. They aim to build a shared sense of purpose, which can be drawn upon in future drought through a series of cultural burn workshops. The workshops are empowering First Nations organisations to facilitate cultural events and share local strategies for drought preparedness.



Source: stakeholder interviews, Nous analysis of regional context, CIP application data provided by FRRR, and photo provided by NRM South Website, Igniting Communities webpage

4.3.2 CIP organisations have strengthened their networks and realised unintended collaboration outcomes

There is growing evidence that the co-design and delivery phases of CIP grants are contributing to tangible outcomes for the participating delivery organisations and CPLOs. These outcomes are additional to the outcomes that grant projects intend to delivery. However, the experience of these outcomes is varied. The rest of this section outlines how:

- The co-design process strengthened networks and local collaboration.
- Organisations are experiencing unintended benefits during project delivery.
- Collaboration benefits for CIP grants participants have varied across regions.

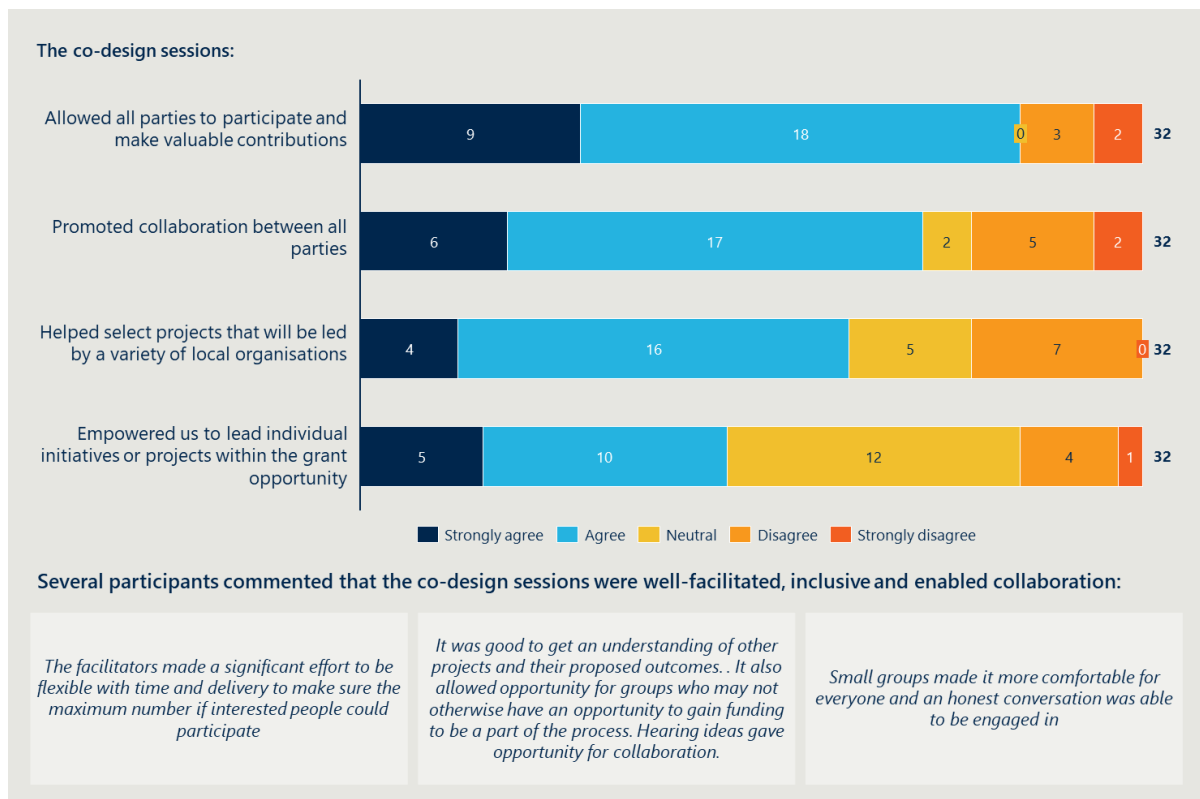
The co-design process strengthened networks and local collaboration.

Despite challenges with the co-design process (explored more in Section 4.4.2), participants highlighted three consistent benefits:

- **Co-design empowered local individuals.** The co-design process was intentionally flexible and locally led. This meant that facilitators could support participants to create initiatives and projects that were appropriate for the need of their local community. Participants reported that this process empowered them to design and then lead initiatives tailored to their local community. The co-design survey results reiterate this finding. Nearly half felt empowered to lead initiatives within their local community. Further, we heard from at least one stakeholder in each of the eight deep dive regions that the co-design process had empowered the participants to identify projects that would empower local individuals.
- **Co-design facilitated regional collaboration.** The CIP grants was available to all NFP organisations that could demonstrate a contribution towards CIP outcomes and assist local people and communities to prepare for future droughts. The breadth and diversity of organisations funded through the program enabled organisations to form new relationships and to collaborate with new partners. A substantial number of co-design survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the co-design sessions allowed all participants to make valuable contributions (84 per cent) and promoted collaboration between all parties (72 per cent). This sentiment was reiterated across most of the deep dive regions. For example, the Central Wheatbelt region of WA includes a farm improvement group, local travel association, and a youth mentoring organisation. The Central Wheatbelt organisations each highlighted the positive co-design experience and the lasting collaboration outcomes they have experienced.
- **Co-design strengthened existing and enabled new connections with First Nations organisations.** Responses to the co-design surveys indicate that building new connections with First Nations organisations was an important outcome. Four regions engaged in evaluation 'deep dives' include a First Nations-led delivery organisation. Across these regions, three CPLOs described that the CIP grants program has enabled them to build new connections with a First Nations organisation. The remaining CPLO already had a relationship with the First Nations organisation. The CPLO reported that the relationship has strengthened through the process of applying for and delivering the CIP project. Outcome panel participants validated this finding. One participant shared how the co-design process has allowed them to build and maintain a new connection with an Aboriginal community in their region.

Figure 7 below includes co-design survey responses that support the findings above.

Figure 7 | Codesign Participant and CPLO survey results show that co-design supported collaboration



Source: Co-design Participant Survey data (May – July 2023), n = 23, and Co-design CPLO Participant Survey Data (May-July 2023), n = 9.

Organisations are experiencing several benefits during project delivery

Delivery organisations have continued to benefit from the new and diverse relationships formed through the CIP co-design process. For example, some organisations have collaborated on future projects or grant applications while others continue to share ideas and resources amongst each other. These three types of benefits are highlighted below:

- Partnering for future projects** - Mallee Sustainable Farming (MSF) are a delivery organisation in the Murraylands and Riverlands region. Through the CIP they reported forming a new and strong relationship with a local Aboriginal economic development organisation, Ngarrindjeri Ruwe Empowered Communities (NREC). Both organisations plan to continue to work together, including a potential opportunity to profile the traditional drought management practices of the NREC to traditional groups in Africa.
- Collaborating for future grants and funding** - Four Landcare networks in NSW Tablelands were brought together through the CIP co-design process. These organisations would typically compete for grant funding. However, since working together to apply for and deliver their CIP projects the organisations have put forward a joint bid for grant funding.
- Sharing ideas and resources within regions** - The CPLOs in Mallee Victoria and NSW Northern Tablelands have started to run regular catchups with delivery organisations, facilitating opportunities for organisations within the region to meet and learn from each other. One delivery organisation in NSW Northern Tablelands noted that they had already experienced improved project management capability through tools and templates that another delivery organisation had shared.

Collaboration benefits for CIP grants participants has varied across regions

Across all deep dive regions, stakeholders noted that the level of collaboration and connection between organisations increased as the program progressed. However, some stakeholders reported mixed experiences of collaboration and connection. Some regions reported that the co-design timeframes made forming strong connections with other CIP organisations difficult. Through the regional deep dives and the CIP outcomes panels other organisations shared that there was little or no coordination or collaboration occurring in their region. Stakeholders attributed this to the absence of an active CPLO (explored further in Section 4.4.3). The codesign survey results reflect this challenge. Three examples of free-text responses are provided in Figure 8 to highlight some participant suggestions to adjust timeframes to harness greater collaboration outcomes.

Figure 8 | Codesign survey free-text responses highlight opportunities for improvement



Stakeholders raised opportunities across regions to better connect different projects to support outcomes beyond the funding period. For example, one stakeholder noted that a platform for CPLOs to discuss common challenges and share new ideas to support regional collaboration might be helpful. Another stakeholder noted that many organisations are delivering similar projects in other regions and are eager to learn from each other. They identified opportunities for delivery organisations to share ideas and lessons learned to inform project delivery in their own regions. This was further validated by the outcome panel participants. These participants emphasised an eagerness to build their connections with other funded organisations. FRRR has already started this process through the regional showcases at the CIP quarterly webinars. The regional showcases enable CPLOs and delivery organisations to share highlights and lessons learned from the delivery of the CIP in their region. Regional showcases will play a key role to support information sharing over the final 12 months of delivery.

4.3.3 CIP grants will need to respond flexibly to future capacity constraints and enable strategies to sustain outcomes

Future capacity constraints due to climatic events and staff turnover pose risks to project outcomes. Stakeholders are also turning their attention to how they can sustain project outcomes beyond the grant delivery period. Attention to these two factors will be important to ensure the CIP grants realises its full potential. Each is addressed in turn below:

- **Continued flexibility will be critical when responding to future capacity constraints.** Many regions are still recovering from recent natural disasters, such as floods or fires. This was most notable in Northern Queensland and in some areas of Victoria. FRRR has taken a flexible approach in these regions, allowing stakeholders more time to deliver on their project milestones. Further, many funded CIP organisations have dealt with staff turnover. Staff turnover has contributed to communication challenges and a loss of knowledge relating to project background and aims. Continued knowledge loss has the potential to impact project delivery. FRRR will need to work closely with CPLOs and delivery organisations to manage future capacity constraints related to staff turnover.

- **Strategies to sustain project outcomes beyond the funding period of the CIP will be increasingly important.** This is especially true as organisational and regional capacity may be impacted during project delivery. Part of the application and assessment process considered how projects will have lasting outcomes for drought preparedness. In some instances, ongoing impact was built into project design through the development of resources or new infrastructure. For example, Northern Slopes Landcare Association will repair the Gulf Creek Hall, which they note will have ongoing impact beyond the grant period. However, for most projects, building on the outcomes achieved in CIP projects will require access to additional support and resources.

4.4 The CIP grants design is appropriate, and delivery has been adapted in response to changing community needs

This Section provides findings on the design and implementation of the CIP, namely that:

- the design of the CIP grants was flexible to regional needs
- Co-design has merit but the approach can be strengthened
- the delivery of the CIP is adapting in response to changing community needs.

4.4.1 The design of the CIP grants was flexible to regional needs

FRRR intentionally designed the CIP to be flexible and locally led. This was reflected in the flexible nature of the program guidelines and locally led co-design process. The result of the built-in flexibility was that CPOs and delivery partners could tailor the program to their local context. This is critical for a national initiative that aims to have place-based impact. Section 4.4.2 looks at the co-design process in detail. The rest of this section presents three ways in which the flexible design of the CIP Grant program has enabled community organisations to align the CIP with their local context:

- CIP grants were open to more localised definitions of regional boundaries.
- Regions aligned the CIP with local strategies, including Regional Drought Resilience Plans.
- CIP grants enabled grantees to focus on drought and broader climate impacts more relevant to their region.

CIP grants were open to more localised definitions of regional boundaries

There is no consistent definition of regional and remote regions as it relates to drought preparedness and social resilience between local, state and national levels. In the absence of consistently agreed federal regional boundaries, CIP regions were loosely based on Australian Government Natural Resource Management (NRM) regions. NRM region definitions make sense for the physical management of natural resources and drought. However, the evaluation heard perspectives that they did not always align with the social dimensions of drought response. For example, some participants reported that the CIP regional boundaries did not reflect how people experienced drought in their region nor how local organisations operate and collaborate. There were also some examples of CIP region names that were not a commonly used name for the region. In these instances, participants indicated they would prefer the CIP program use the most common region name instead to provide more clarity.

FRRR outlined in the CIP guidelines that regions could discuss with FRRR how regional boundaries were defined to better reflect local context and provide flexibility when agreed. FRRR also reiterated this in webinars to grantees. FRRR reported at least seven occasions when they accepted the local definition of regional boundary to better reflect how locals experienced drought or collaborated with each other. As

the HRCPD Initiative matures there may be an opportunity to define a set of regional boundaries that better reflect the social resilience focus of the Initiative.

Regions aligned the CIP with local strategies, including Regional Drought Resilience Plans

Many regions have local strategies in place to support resilience to drought in its many forms. This includes local and state strategies. For example, the organisations in the NSW Northern Tablelands region shared that they aligned their projects with their local land strategy. More notably, CIP grants effectively supported regions to implement social resilience projects identified in their Regional Drought Resilience Plans (RDRPs).

RDRPs are strategic frameworks developed to enhance the ability of regions to withstand and recover from drought conditions. The staged rollout of the RDRPs means not all regions had one in place when they started the CIP co-design. Ten regions had an RDRP available when they completed the co-design process. Stakeholders in regions with an RDRP that included social outcomes noted that the CIP was a valuable mechanism to design or implement projects aligned with the RDRP. These projects typically did not have a clear funding option. For example, the CPLO for Wheatbelt Central East is an active partner of the South-West WA Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub and was an active participant in the development of their region's RDRP. This CPLO reported that some delivery organisations in its region designed CIP projects to align with the regional projects and key social priorities reflected in their RDRP.

CIP enabled organisations to focus on drought and broader climate impacts more relevant to their region

All the delivery organisations and CPLOs that participated in interviews and the outcome panels stressed that there is a significant need to build social resilience for drought. This was particularly true for programs delivered before a drought sets in. Stakeholders also noted that CIP grants were valuable for building social resilience for all types of climate impacts, not just drought. Furthermore, stakeholders noted that the language of drought resilience resonated differently based on regional and cultural context. For example, First Nations communities consider drought resilience in the context of broader climate change resilience. First Nations participants in the Initiative felt strongly that drought does not sufficiently capture broader climate impacts that their communities are experiencing and preparing for.

The Evaluation observed two consistent circumstances when organisations used broader climate resilience language. The first was in regions that recently experienced different climate events, such as floods. The second was in regions that were not in drought or had not recently experienced drought at the time of the CIP project design. Organisations in these regions believed that focusing on broader climate resilience meant that projects would appeal more to locals and encourage participation. This has had the added benefit of encouraging participation from young people who resonate more strongly with language of 'climate resilience' rather than 'drought'. Young people reported that they are considering their resilience to drought in the broader context of climate resilience. This is explored in the case study in Figure 9.

Figure 9 | Regional case studies highlight the range of climate impacts across regions

The language of drought resilience resonated differently based on regional experience of climate impacts.

North-West Queensland experienced Monsoon flooding



The region reported that the recent drought was broken by the 2019 Monsoon Flood which impacted the region with stock loss, landscape degradation, roadways washed away, and destruction of fencing and infrastructure. In the future, the region expects to have shorter drought periods and more flooding. Delivery organisations in this region are tailoring the language of their projects to appeal to locals and encourage participation. The typical federal government funding Southern Gulf receives is focused on climate resilience. Northwest Queensland reported that CIP was beneficial for resilience to all types of climate impacts, not just drought resilience.

Loddon Campaspe Victoria is using climate variability language

Loddon Campaspe Victoria reported that using other language (such as 'climate variability') was more effective in engaging community members. The CPLO Lead Loddon Murray is running a Community Leadership Program with a focus on Climate Resilience and is using language on climate variability. This is largely because parts of the region experienced significant flooding in 2022 and 2024 and are therefore vulnerable to a wide range of impacts of climate change.



Source: *Nous baseline assessments of CIP regions, stakeholder interviews; photos provided by the [LEAD Loddon Murray Facebook page](#) and [ABC News](#)*

4.4.2 Co-design has merit, but the approach can be strengthened

FRRR employed a participatory approach to co-design the CIP in each region. The co-design process in practice aligned with a participatory grantmaking approach. Participatory grantmaking is the involvement of non-grantmakers (in this case the CIP delivery organisations and CPLOs) in decision-making about funding intended for their community²⁴. For CIP grants this process saw participating organisations in each region work with an independent facilitator to identify a suite of local projects and then apply for funding through the CIP grants application. Research shows that participatory grantmaking can strengthen relationships between funders and grantees, provide networking and collaboration opportunities, build grantmaking knowledge and capability for non-grantmakers, enable more flexible and innovative responses to local challenges and increase decision-making transparency²⁵. The rest of this section provides an assessment of the co-design process, namely that:

- Communities welcome the opportunity for more participatory approaches to grantmaking.

²⁴ Ang, C., Abdo, M., Rose, V., Lim, R. and Taylor, J. Participatory Grantmaking: Building the Evidence. Centre for Evidence and Implementation. May 2023.

²⁵ Ibid.

- The co-design experience was highly variable across regions.
- There were consistent challenges with the co-design process.
- First Nations participation in the co-design presented opportunities and challenges.

Communities welcomed the opportunity for more participatory approaches to grantmaking

Nearly all CIP grants stakeholders that engaged with the evaluation agreed that a participatory approach was an appropriate way to identify place-based projects that build drought preparedness. Stakeholders reflected that this was especially important for a national program that aimed to achieve place-based impacts. As outlined in Section 4.3.2, the co-design process empowered communities to choose projects that best suited their local context. Regional stakeholders with positive experiences reported that the co-design process both created new networks between community organisations and strengthened existing networks. These findings align with the reported benefits of participatory grantmaking.

The co-design experience was variable across regions

Although nearly all stakeholders were supportive of a participatory approach, the experience of co-design process was variable. The quality of the facilitator and CPLO, regional context and co-design tranche each contributed to the variable experience of participants. Each is explored further below.

- **The quality of the facilitator and the CPLO played a key role in codesign effectiveness.** Effective facilitators had the right combination of skills, including strong facilitation, co-design and grant writing skills. These facilitators translated community needs and aspirations into grant applications that met the CIP guidelines and funding requirements. For example, Murraylands and Riverlands said their facilitator was critical to turn their understanding of local needs into compelling grant applications. Other regions reported that their facilitator provided little value beyond what the participating organisations brought to the table. Regional stakeholders reported that broad connections across a region and a positive reputation among local organisations was critical to the effectiveness of the CPLO role. For example, delivery organisations in one region in Queensland identified their CPLO's networks as critical for such a geographically dispersed region.
- **The context of the region impacted their experience of codesign.** A regions level of experience, willingness, and capacity to engage in co-design played a significant factor in their experience with the co-design process. Regions with experience collaboratively developing and implementing drought initiatives were better positioned to implement projects. This included experience developing RDRPs or other local strategies and setting up or operating drought hubs. Further, climatic events impacted several regions during the co-design process. These events delayed the process and, in some cases, had a negative impact on that regions ability to effectively participate in the co-design process.
- **The rollout of the CIP across four tranches enabled continuous improvement of the process.** The evaluation received feedback that showed the participant experience of the co-design process improved across the four tranches. Participants in later tranches generally reported a more positive experience and spoke highly of their facilitator and CPLO. These participants also reported feeling more confident in their understanding of the process compared to those in the first tranche. These perspectives reflect the positive work FRRR completed to continuously improve the co-design process between tranches.

There were consistent challenges with the co-design process

Despite the best efforts of FRRR, Stakeholders across regions and tranches emphasised five consistent challenges with the co-design process.

- **Predefined timeframes were too short for meaningful engagement.** CPLOs reported that the limited timeframes constrained their ability to engage meaningfully with organisations in their region. This in turn limited the reach of the CIP grants program. One CPLO reported that they had reached out to over 60 local organisations to test their willingness to participate in the co-design. Only five organisations participated and the CPLO reported that the major reason organisations could not participate was the short timeframes.
- **The proportionate reduction in funding created grantee tensions.** Regions underwent a proportionate reduction process to reduce their overall requested funding. The proportionate reduction in funding was determined by DAFF and communicated to organisations by FRRR. This concept was included in the guidelines, but the exact application of it was not clear at the time of program conception, the co-design or the application process. Feedback from tranche one organisations was particularly negative. This was because those organisations were not aware of the implications of the process. One organisation noted that they felt betrayed and disrespected. Later tranches shared that they went into the process with clear expectations and so did not have as negative an experience. This was due to the additional communication material and support FRRR provided. Nonetheless, all stakeholders agreed that the process did not align with the collaborative framing of the co-design process. Some regions found the process to be competitive. Regions chose how best to approach the proportionate reduction. The Evaluation heard of three approaches: applying a blanket reduction across all projects; applying uneven reductions in funding across projects depending on delivery needs; and removing whole projects through a prioritisation process, which maintained the level of funding for the remaining projects.
- **The co-design process required significant effort and time from stakeholders.** Most CPLOs and participants reported dedicating significant amounts of 'in-kind time' to support the co-design process. The facilitator role, although paid, often felt the need to commit additional 'in-kind' time to complete the co-design process to a high standard. The amount of 'in-kind time' was higher in larger regions with significant travel time. Regions with less grant maturity required more support. These regions reported that their facilitators had to play a more direct role identifying and designing projects. In addition, many organisations reported that the time they invested in the co-design was not always commensurate with the amount of funding they received and other grant application processes. This was compounded when they needed to reduce their budget through the proportionate reduction process.
- **It was challenging to engage young people.** Facilitators drew on CPLOs' local networks for recruitment. However, some organisations did not have the existing networks or capacity to effectively engage young people. Delivering sessions during working hours and with no remuneration was also cited by regional stakeholders as barriers to participation. Some stakeholders noted that there are typically lower numbers of young people engaged in drought preparedness or general community volunteering activities compared to older demographics. Some CIP organisations reported creative ways of engaging young people. For example, facilitating meetings at night, rather than during working hours or redesigning project delivery based on social habits of youth.

First Nations participation in the co-design presented opportunities and challenges

The co-design for the CIP grants required diverse and appropriate local representation to ensure the inclusion of First Nations people. The focus on First Nations participation in the co-design was appropriate. All stakeholders agreed that the experience and traditional knowledge of First Nations people was valuable for building community resilience to future droughts. The evaluation observed a strong interest in applying traditional knowledge in drought preparedness activities and resilience building from many stakeholders across the deep dive regions. Across the CIP there are nine First Nations-led projects.

These projects were often the result of an existing relationship between the First Nations organisation and the CPLO. This again highlights the value of the CPLO role.

First Nations stakeholders described their cultural expectations of what good community engagement and co-creation looks like. Namely that the co-design process should:

- enable communities enough time to get input with key community members (such as Elders)
- provide resources for travel across a region to enable in-person discussion
- allow sufficient time to plan and align with broader community development strategies.

The CIP co-design time parameters and constraints did not enable these expectations to be easily met. First Nations organisations, CPLOs and non-Indigenous delivery partners shared that the limitations of co-design timeframes, resourcing, and guidance on how CPLOs should best engage First Nations organisations resulted in a variable experience. CPLOs and delivery organisations provided feedback that they were unclear on how to best collaborate with First Nations organisations in a productive, culturally appropriate and mutually beneficial way. Some CPLOs and delivery partners that did not have established relationships with First Nations organisations shared that the compressed timelines for co-design meant that they felt rushed into establishing new or accelerating nascent relationships. One non-Indigenous delivery partner noted that this did not feel like an authentic process.

4.4.3 CIP grants implementation is on track despite some challenges

The CIP grants program is on track to see 161 place-based projects worth almost \$10 million delivered across the 30 participating CIP regions. This section provides an overview of current project delivery strengths and some opportunities for improvement. Specifically:

- FRRR's flexible and relationship-based approach has positively supported implementation
- CPLOs can play an important implementation role
- Variable CPLO role clarity limited the effectiveness of the CPLO role in some regions
- Capacity constraints and the climatic events continue to impact CPLOs and delivery partners.

FRRR's flexible and relationship-based approach has positively supported implementation

As noted earlier, FRRR successfully navigated four tranches of co-design after taking a flexible approach that responded to the capacity constraints and maturity of the 35 participating regions. In a similar fashion, FRRR has been flexible in how it supports project delivery.

FRRR has implemented several mechanisms to support grantees, including stepping in to support one region as the CPLO. Stakeholders from that region shared that FRRR have helped to foster relationships and collaborations as CPLO. FRRR has also provided quarterly webinars that build connections between all HRCPD Initiative participants, completed quarterly check-ins to monitor progress and identify supports, and visited organisations in regions to build person-to-person relationships.

Organisations in deep dive regions spoke positively of FRRR's commitment to relationship building. Stakeholders across all deep dive regions were appreciative of FRRR's relationship-led and flexible approach. Outcome panel participants confirmed this. One participant (a CPLO) said that 'FRRR has been really good at understanding the context of the project we're doing.' FRRR estimates that without these flexible program timelines they would have only received approximately one third of the participation.

CPOs can play an important implementation role

CPOs are actively fostering regional collaboration or leveraging existing networks through a range of activities. This includes formal activities, such as quarterly newsletters and regular coordination meetings, and informal activities, such as ad hoc project advice and guidance. Greater collaboration and stronger networks have been evident where CPOs have strong networks and their communities see them as local leaders. All organisations in deep dive regions reported that the CPO helped them to identify and apply for funding that they may not have otherwise applied for. For example, the two Tasmanian CPOs are working closely together to foster statewide collaboration, and stakeholders in Murraylands and Riverlands emphasised the role of the CPO in helping them apply for a range of impactful, smaller projects. Stakeholders in Fitzroy Capricornia reported that their CPO was vital to coordinate across a large region where many organisations do not know each other. A publicly advertised, transparent process was undertaken to call for and appoint CPOs.

Variable CPO role clarity limited the effectiveness of the CPO in some regions

FRRR defined the CPO role via grant guidelines, webinars, FAQs, induction meetings and implementation guides, and then via the budget and projects plans that were submitted by the CPO prior to funding. Despite these efforts, some CPOs expressed that they lacked clarity on how and when they were expected to engage delivery organisations beyond co-design. Four CPOs across the deep dive regions reported feeling unclear on the CPO role. One reported that they felt they were not best placed to deliver the CPO role. They went on to say that they would not have applied for the role if they had a clearer idea of the role during the co-design process. Several delivery organisations in the same regions independently reported that they had received little to no communication from their CPO. These delivery organisations were also unclear of the role their CPO should play to support implementation.

Some CPOs suggested that sharing examples of effective practices from other CPOs (e.g. building on what is in place through the HRCPI quarterly webinars hosted by FRRR and ARLF) can strengthen role clarity and better enable CPOs to maximise their coordination role. FRRR noted that for many CPOs, there was significant development required to undertake their coordination role effectively. FRRR also reported that they intentionally made the CPO role and responsibilities flexible to enable CPOs to meet local needs through their primary function of network development and information sharing.

Capacity constraints and the climatic events continue to impact CPOs and delivery partners

Stakeholders from organisations in remote or very remote regions reported that in retrospect they required a larger amount of funding to feasibly deliver their project. This was due to the additional costs to deliver activities to dispersed, isolated and hard-to-reach communities. For example, delivering services to First Nations communities in far-north Queensland. FRRR guidelines and assessment did include provisions to assess the need for additional funding to support such grantees, however, there appear to be opportunities to strengthen the approach in future funding rounds.

Many organisations have lacked continuity between the application and delivery phase, with up to eight organisations reporting that the individuals responsible for their applications have since left the organisation and handed the project over to new staff. Climatic events have also impacted project delivery, especially in regions that have been impacted by recent floods or droughts. A few grantees reported flexibility on the final delivery date would be welcome. These grantees noted that they felt stretched to deliver their project in the agreed timeframe due to significant capacity constraints and the need to respond to natural disasters during the project delivery period.

It is important to note that FRRR has been responsive to feedback through program implementation. FRRR have made several changes already to adapt the ongoing delivery of the CIP grants.

4.5 There are three recommendations to strengthen CIP grants

FRRR should consider three recommendations to improve the design and delivery of the CIP grants. These recommendations are outlined in Table 11 below.

Table 11 | Design and delivery recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS	SUPPORT FINDINGS
Current initiative delivery	
<p>1. Ensure role clarity for CPLOs to better deliver on their role CPLOs need to better understand the requirements of their role to ensure they provide sufficient coordination support to delivery organisations. To ensure this, FRRR can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a range of communication mechanisms to highlight good practice for CPLOs, for example, FRRR can use the insights from the evaluation report to develop case studies or guidance to share across the CPLO network. • Establish a dedicated CPLO network or platform so they can connect and share experiences or lessons learnt. This could include a private channel or group on Drought Ready 	See Section 4.4.1
<p>2. Continue to provide flexibility in program design Regional stakeholders have emphasised that the current flexibility of program design is a strength of the CIP. To reinforce this strength, FRRR can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to provide flexibility to delivery organisations through appropriate grant variations as they deliver projects. • Remain responsive and adaptive to situations in which FRRR may need to provide formal support to organisations or regions at risk of not completing their projects due to external circumstances (such as natural disaster or local capacity constraints). This could include timebound CPLO support for a region. 	See Section 4.4.3
Future initiative design	
<p>3. Reflect lessons learnt from CIP co-design in future collaborative grants application process. CPLOs and delivery organisations reflected that genuine co-design and community engagement takes time, especially for geographically dispersed regions. To continue to strengthen co-design processes, FRRR can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide an appropriate amount of time for co-design, adapted to the context and needs of the region. • Consider how to best approach proportionate reductions and other co-design processes in the future. • Continue to offer multiple tranches to provide more flexible timeframes for organisations to submit their applications. • Consider different geographic requirements, such as smaller region sizes, to enable more effective co-design processes. 	See Section 4.4.2



5 Evaluating the Community Leadership Activities

The CIP leadership activities aim to support community members in remote, rural and regional Australia to develop their leadership skills to contribute towards drought resilience in their community. ARLF originally planned to deliver 35 sessions in 35 regions, alongside the CIP grant projects. ARLF has since expanded the program's scope to deliver 100 sessions across Australia. To-date, ARLF has delivered leadership activities to over 228 people across 14 communities.

This Section explores findings related to the CIP Leadership Activities, namely that:

- ARLF has so far delivered the CIP leadership activities to 14 communities across Australia (Section 5.2).
- The CIP leadership activities are contributing to leadership, wellbeing and community outcomes (Section 5.3).
- The flexible design and delivery of the CIP leadership activities is mostly fit for purpose (Section 5.4).
- There are four opportunities to strengthen the CIP leadership activities (Section 5.5).

5.1 The CIP leadership activities are making progress towards their intended outcomes

The MEL plan expected that the CIP leadership activities would contribute to all seven short-term outcomes identified for the HRCPD Initiative. Nous has assessed progress towards achieving the short-term outcomes and indicators, noting that ARLF is only through the initial delivery of leadership activities.

The overarching assessment is that the CIP leadership activities are making progress towards achieving their intended outcomes. They have demonstrated limited evidence to date across four of the short-term outcomes. Nous expects that more evidence will emerge as a greater number of communities complete the leadership activities and participants begin to implement their learnings. Nous will update the assessment in the final report. The assessment is shown below in Table 12.

Table 12 | Summary of assessment against the intended CIP leadership activities outcomes

OUTCOME	ASSESSMENT	RATIONALE
Communication, social connection and collaboration.	 Developing	Most participants (74 per cent) reported improved communication, social connection and increased collaboration as an outcome of participating in the leadership activities (see Section 5.3.2).
Services, resources, infrastructure and facilities.	 Limited	In the Changemaker activity, participants received booklets with the models and techniques from the session so they could continue to reference the learning content beyond the program. Participants have also been encouraged to join the Drought Ready network to stay connected beyond the leadership activities.
Diversity of community members and organisations.	 Limited	The leadership activities have attracted participants from a broad range of sectors and industries. Engagement from First Nations and young people has been limited at this stage however, ARLF has designed and plan to deliver tailored activities focused on both cohorts (see Section 5.4.1).
Awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies.	 Limited	The broad resilience focus of the leadership activities has led to limited reports from participants relating to increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies to prepare for and adapt to drought (see Section 5.3.3)
Place-based practices.	 Limited	There have been limited reports of participants employing or modifying place-based practices following the leadership activities. Some participants (39 per cent) noted an increased awareness of new drought resilience practices and skills required to implement practices (see Section 5.3.3).
Leadership capacity and capability.	 Developing	At this stage, only three out of five activities have been delivered. Participants from two activities, the Changemakers workshop and Leadership Action Initiative, commonly reported leadership outcomes related to increased confidence, practical skills development and openness to new ideas (see Section 5.3.1).
Community-based networks.	 Developing	Majority of participants (82 per cent) noted creating, expanding or diversifying their community-based networks because of participating in the leadership activities (see Section 5.3.2).

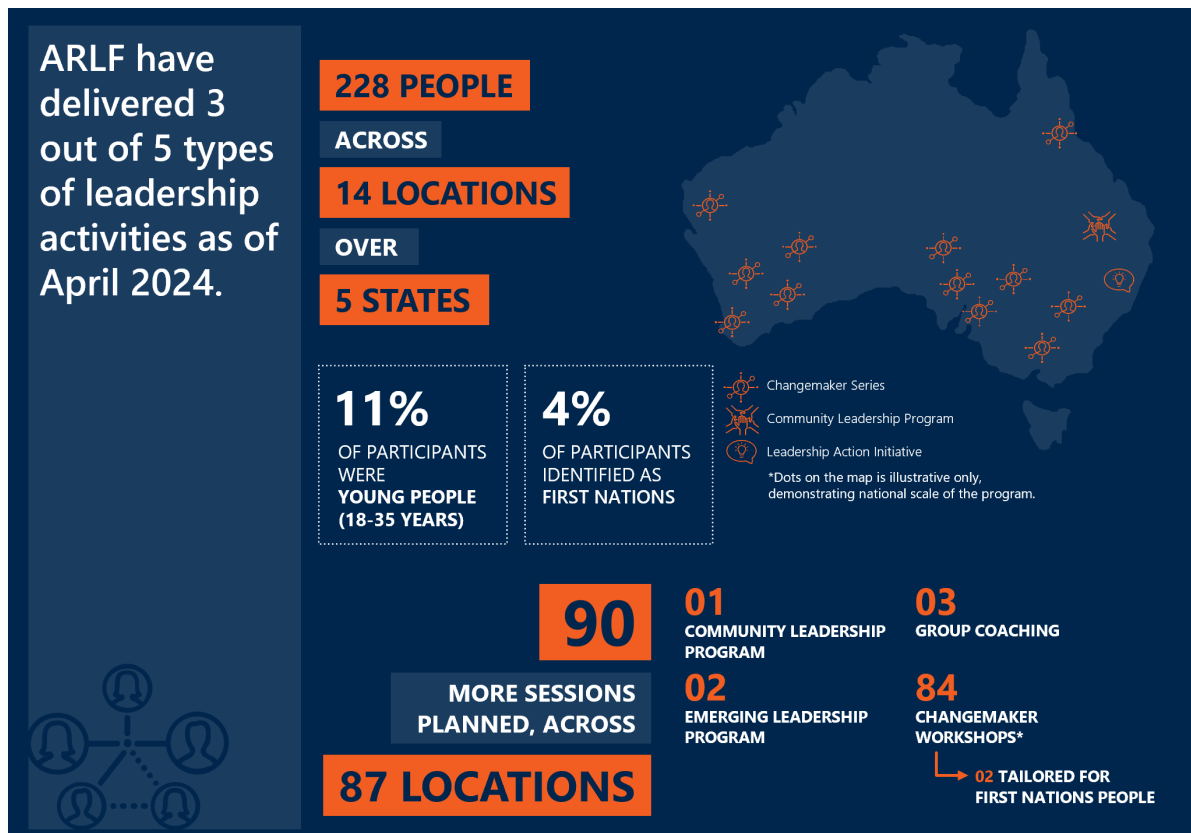
5.2 ARLF has so far delivered the CIP Leadership Activities to 14 communities across Australia

The CIP Leadership Activities are part way through delivery. As of April 2024, ARLF had delivered just over 10 per cent of planned leadership activities. This included 14 sessions that 228 people from across Australia participated in. So far, ARLF has delivered three out of five leadership activity options (shown in Figure 10). A summary of the current progress of the leadership activities and planned sessions is depicted in Figure 11.

Figure 10 | Leadership activity options

LEADERSHIP ACTIVITY	DESCRIPTION	SESSIONS DELIVERED (AS OF APRIL 2024)
 Community Leadership Program	A five-day program delivered in two sessions focused on building collaboration skills, networks and mindset required to influence and embed resilience practices.	1
 Emerging Leadership Program	A five-day, introductory, outdoor based program for 18–30-year-olds. Focused on developing their network, community and personal resilience.	
 Community Learning Series	Learning labs designed to build both knowledge and networks. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stream A - The Changemaker Series: Focused on building place-based change readiness. • Stream B - The Shaping our Future Series: Focused on building collective leadership capacity. 	12 (Changemaker series)
 Group Coaching	Virtual coaching offered over seven two-hour sessions to help groups who are delivering projects focused on building community resilience.	
 Leadership Action Initiative	A two-day program that brings together established leaders and community members to explore complex local challenges.	1

Figure 11 | Summary of leadership activities completed and planned



5.3 The CIP leadership activities are contributing to leadership, wellbeing and community outcomes

The leadership activities are achieving positive outcomes for participants. Participants plan to turn individual outcomes into broader community benefits by initiating programs and stepping into local leadership roles. The Evaluation has observed that:

- The leadership activities are strengthening individual leadership capability (PO6)
- Participants have experienced improved social connections and expanded their networks (PO1 & PO7)
- Outcomes related to drought preparedness are a secondary benefit for participants (PO4 & PO5)
- Participants intend to realise benefits beyond the leadership activities.

These four insights are explored further below.

5.3.1 The leadership activities are strengthening individual leadership capability

Participants reported strengthened leadership capability as the primary benefit of leadership activities to-date. Outcomes relating to heightened confidence, practical skills development, and a greater receptiveness to new ideas were among the most common reported outcomes. Participants cited theories and practical skills that they learned through their leadership activity as factors that have contributed to their personal and leadership capability development. Testimonials from outcome panels corroborated participant survey feedback. One CPLO reported that Changemakers workshops were oversubscribed in their region and have empowered community members with the confidence and tools essential for addressing local challenges. Figure 12 overleaf presents a summary of the leadership outcomes participants have experienced.

Figure 12 | Leadership outcome themes from survey responses

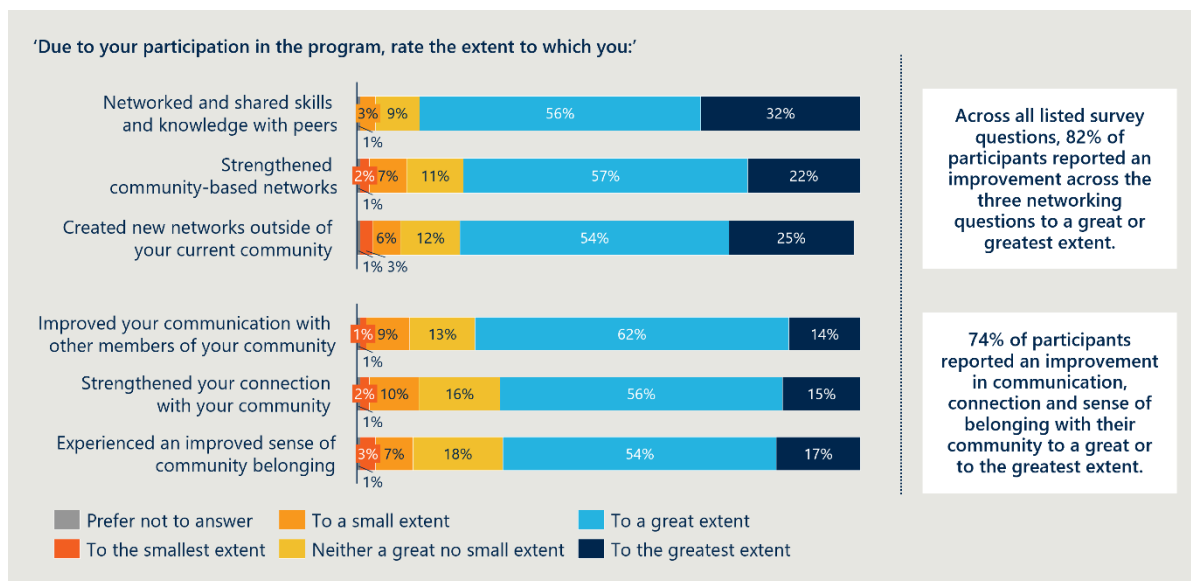
Increased confidence (22)	Practical skills development (35)	Openness to new ideas (21)
<i>[I will] listen and learn from those around me, get out of my bubble and truly become a changemaker in my community.</i>	<i>I will revisit a work issue using the tools we practice to help create change. I will also use these practices as a platform for discussions with a family issue. I feel more equipped to initiate some community activities.</i>	<i>I will continue to approach things with an open mind and continue to involve more perspectives in projects and discussions.</i>
<i>[I will] create a new community initiative that I had been considering - I now feel empowered and better equipped to proceed.</i>	<i>I learned a lot about good facilitation techniques, how to make everyone feel so safe and the use of practical activities to fully engage participants in the process.</i>	<i>I will try to look at things from different perspectives and revisit some past views I may be holding on to.</i>
<i>[I will start] having confidence to inspire change and other people to get behind causes.</i>	<i>[I will] build on the skills and tools learnt and utilise them to the full advantage to succeed in activity contributing to my community.</i>	<i>I will endeavour to judge less the people who have differing views and be curious about where the common ground is.</i>

Source: Participant completion surveys, Changemaker activity (Sep 2023 – Mar 2024), Leadership Action Initiative (Mar 2024), Community Leadership Program (Jun 2024), n=156.

5.3.2 Participants have experienced improved social connections and expanded their networks

Participants consistently reported that improved social connections and expanded networks were key outcomes of the leadership activities. Over 80 per cent of participants reported that the leadership activity enabled them to network and share skills and knowledge with peers, strengthen community-based networks and create new networks outside their current community. Most participants also reported that they improved their communication with other members of their community, strengthened their connection with their community and experienced an improved sense of belonging. Figure 13 below summarises these insights from survey responses.

Figure 13 | Survey responses on networking and community connection outcomes



Source: Participant completion surveys, Changemaker activity (Sep 2023 – Mar 2024), Leadership Action Initiative (Mar 2024), Community Leadership Program (Jun 2024), n=162

Participants also reported the benefits they had experienced relating to their social connections and improved sense of belonging in qualitative responses and interviews. Participants shared that the leadership activities provided an opportunity for likeminded individuals within each region to collaborate and connect. Participants described the leadership activities as an important and rare opportunity for community members to spend time together, in-person, constructively discussing the challenges facing their region. Two participants reported in interviews that the leadership activity enabled them to strengthen their existing networks, and four participants reported that it enabled them to create new connections. Several participants reported motivation to continue to strengthen communication, networks and collaboration post the leadership activity. Examples of these responses are outlined below.

- **Improved communication:** One respondent noted “[I will start] having deeper conversations with members of the community. Having a more open mind when it comes to change and people’s responses to change.”
- **Expanded networks:** One participant reported, “[I will start] establishing relationships with a broader cross section of my local community.” Another said, “[I will start] networking to draw on others to drive change.”
- **Strengthened community connection and collaboration.** One participant said, “[I will] build connections and collaborate with likeminded people in the Wheatbelt. Together we can achieve more

than on our own.” Another participant said, “[I will] connect with different people in the community to collaborate on projects.”

5.3.3 Outcomes related to drought preparedness are a secondary benefit for participants

The leadership activities are strategically designed to enhance general leadership qualities without an exclusive focus on drought-related issues. The session content emphasizes attitudinal change and aims to equip participants with the skills and tools required to lead effectively. Most participants reported that the leadership activities enabled them to improve their understanding or participation in strengthening community resilience (see Figure 14 below).

Figure 14 | Survey responses to drought and community resilience outcomes



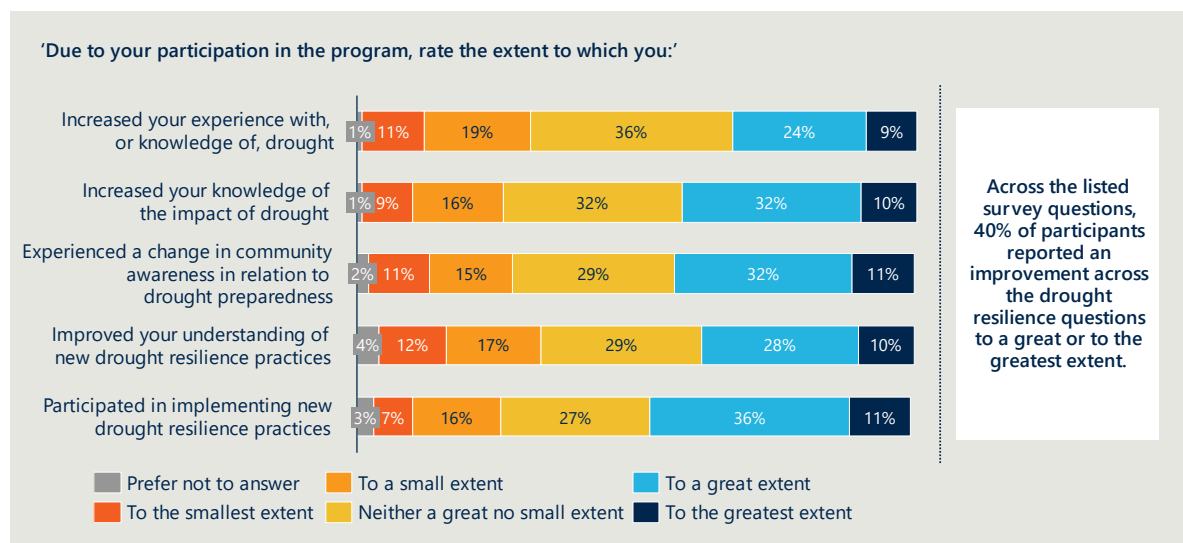
Source: Participant completion surveys, Changemaker (Sep 2023 – Mar 2024), Leadership Action Initiative (Mar 2024), Community Leadership Program (Jun 2024), n=162.

While these activities contribute to improved drought preparedness, this is a consequential rather than the central outcome for participants of the leadership activities. Participants were therefore less likely to report outcomes related to drought preparedness. On average only 40 per cent of participants reported that the leadership activities enabled them to:

- increase their experience with or knowledge of drought
- increase their knowledge on the impact of drought
- experience a change in awareness in community in relation to drought preparedness
- improve their understanding of new drought resilience practices
- participate in implementing new drought resilience practices.

The deliberate use of broader resilience language in the leadership activities may have influenced participant responses to drought specific questions. Figure 15 presents these participant responses.

Figure 15 | Survey responses to drought resilience outcomes



Source: Participant completion surveys, Changemaker (Sep 2023 – Mar 2024), Leadership Action Initiative (Mar 2024), Community Leadership Program (Jun 2024), n=162

5.3.4 Participants intend to realise benefits beyond the leadership activities

Participants of the leadership activities plan to take action applying their new skills and capabilities.

Participants reported a commitment to leveraging the skills and capabilities developed during the leadership activities to address community challenges and opportunities. Specific action plans included:

- **Creating and implementing community programs.** One participant reported that they intend to develop and deliver a program to support local male youth engagement. Another participant plans to create a local youth network to support ongoing communication and collaborative problem solving.
- **Promoting community leadership and enhanced resilience.** This includes inspiring peers to recognise their potential as agents of change, especially in adaptive scenarios. One participant expressed an aspiration to stimulate participation in future Changemaker workshops held within their community.
- **Refining approach to community inclusion.** Participants have altered their perspectives on engaging with First Nations peoples. One participant cited the leadership activity as the impetus for re-evaluating their engagement strategies within local Aboriginal partners.

It is important to acknowledge these actions as intentions at this stage, representing a planning phase rather than the execution or outcomes of these plans. It is expected that as more time passes, participants will realise the outcomes and behaviour change resulting from the leadership activities.

Participants expressed an eagerness to realise benefits beyond the leadership activity sessions.

Participants show a strong interest in extending the impact of their learning beyond the immediate timeframe of the leadership sessions. Given that the activities are structured as one-off events spread across several days, there is a limited window for active participation. This has led to participants seeking support to fully realise the long-term benefits of their enhanced capabilities and newly formed or strengthened connections. To address this need, there are multiple options that participants recommended that ARLF could explore:

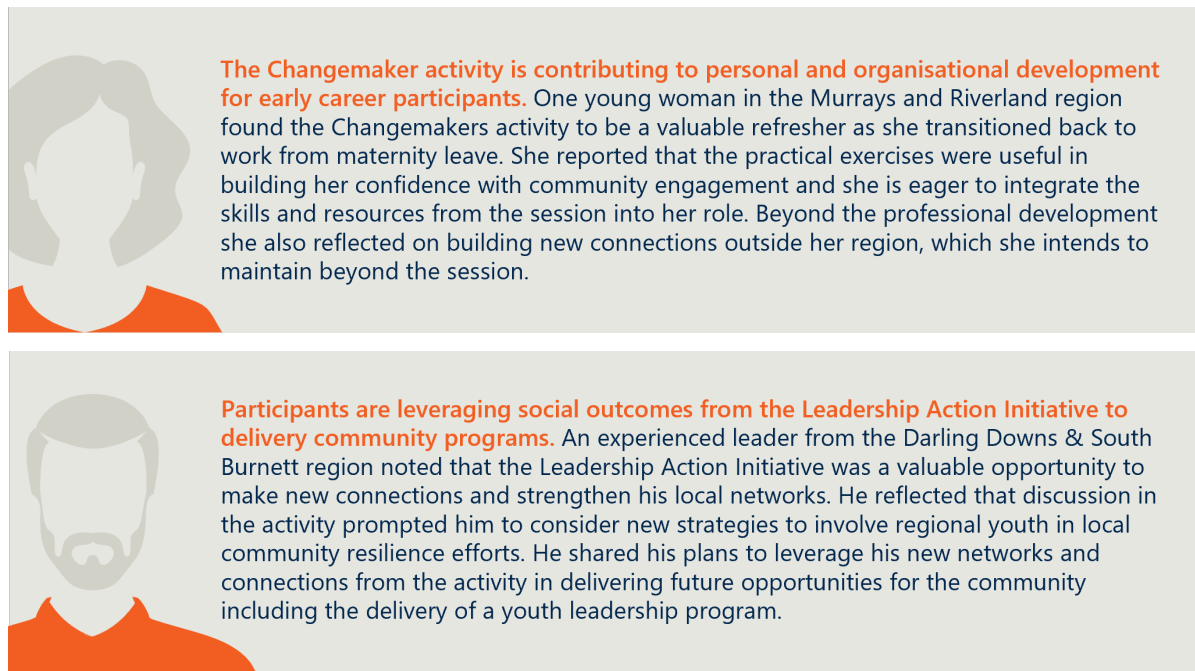
- Developing supplementary materials, such as online resources that elaborate on session models and theories.

- Encouraging participants to engage in ongoing development HRCPD Initiatives, such as those available through ARLF, including the Leadership Circles within the Drought Ready Network.
- Facilitating additional regional follow-ups where this is a marked interest.

In response to participant feedback for sustained engagement, ARLF has already taken active steps in certain areas. For example, in Murray NSW, ARLF, in collaboration with the CPLO, is orchestrating a podcast series to continue the dialogue and learning from the Changemaker activity.

Figure 16 presents two case studies that reflect the themes shared across the outcomes Section and provide insight on how outcomes varied between different participant groups.

Figure 16 | Case study on the Changemaker activity and the Leadership Action Initiative



5.4 The flexible design and delivery of the CIP leadership activities is mostly fit for purpose

The evaluation has found that the leadership activities are appropriately designed to meet community needs and have been delivered efficiently. Participants have had mostly positive experiences with some minor challenges. This Section provides more detail on these three key insights.

5.4.1 The design of the leadership activities is appropriate for community needs

The focus on broad community resilience and adaptability in the design of the leadership activities has enabled wider community participation. ARLF advised that they chose to focus on broader concepts than just drought resilience to be more inclusive of individuals who do not view themselves as directly engaged with drought related activities. This was especially important for individuals not involved in farming. Many CIP participants supported this decision. CIP participants noted they more strongly resonate with language relating to 'climate resilience' as opposed to the narrower frame of 'drought' in interviews and the outcome panels. Furthermore, ARLF advised that the term 'changemakers' resonated more than 'leader'.

Participant feedback noted that changemaker was more inclusive of community members who do not see themselves as ‘community leaders’ but who are motivated to create change in their community.

Participants and CPLOs confirmed that the adapted language used in the leadership sessions were inclusive and reflective of the diverse experiences of their region. Some CPLOs also noted that the carefully chosen language and inclusive design has supported wider community engagement in the leadership activities. This is reflected in the broad range of industry sectors represented at the leadership activities. Participants represent more than 12 industries from across community with the most participants involved in the Community or Not-for-Profit sectors (see Table 13).

Table 13 | Summary of participant industry background²⁶

Industry	No. of times industry was selected
Community	73
Not-For-Profit	70
Environment	47
Food Fibre and Forestry	40
Education and Training	26
Arts and Culture	22
Health Care and Social Assistance	21
Professional and Consultant Services	16
Hospitality and Tourism	16
Public Administration	14
Sport Lifestyle and Recreation	12
Social Enterprise	11
Other options	40

Source: Participant registration form; Changemaker activity (September 2023 - March 2024), Leadership Action Initiative (2024), Community Leadership Program n = 212.

The flexible design of the sessions has engaged underserved communities and cohorts. ARLF collaborated with CPLOs to understand community needs and existing leadership programs in the region. This approach has allowed ARLF and the CPLOs to tailor the leadership activities to underserved communities and cohorts. This included:

- **Remote and isolated communities** – Five interviewed CPLOs chose to deliver the leadership activities in smaller, more isolated communities that would not usually have access to professional development programs. This has enabled the leadership activities to reach a greater breadth of participants. Those same stakeholders noted that a potential trade off from this approach was limiting the total number of

²⁶ The total number of times an industry was selected is greater than the total number participants because some participants are involved in multiple sectors.

participants who would attend a session due to the smaller size of these communities and the travel required of potential participants from other communities.

- **First Nations communities** – ARLF will deliver tailored Changemaker activities tailored for First Nations communities. ARLF will design these activities with local First Nations community leaders. ARLF will also engage First Nations staff and facilitators to deliver the sessions. As of June 2024, ARLF plans to deliver First Nations sessions in Woorabinda Aboriginal Shire (Fitzroy Capricornia QLD region) and Arrernte country (Alice Springs NT region).

ARLF will continue to adjust session designs according to participant and CPLO feedback. This will enable ARLF to align the leadership activities with the needs and dynamics of local communities.

CPLO engagement is critical to the effective design and delivery the leadership. CPLOs played an important role in selecting the leadership activity to be delivered, identifying the delivery location and timing, and supporting participant recruitment. This local intelligence provided by CPLOs supported ARLF to align the leadership activities to local needs. CPLO engagement also increased interest and participation from community members. However, some CPLOs were less effective at advising ARLF on the most appropriate timing and location for leadership activities. The evaluation heard three examples when the scheduling of a leadership activity limited participations. For example, stakeholders shared examples when a leadership activity was scheduled during peak agricultural activity periods (e.g., harvest or planting) or in conflict with another key local event. ARLF have often engaged directly with the broader community to increase participation in the activities. ARLF reported that this allowed them to better understand the needs of the region. For example, two interviewed participants reported that ARLF had called them directly to increase participation in their local leadership activity.

5.4.2 The delivery of the leadership activities has been mostly effective

Engagement in the leadership activities has varied across regions. Some regions have had high participation across multiple communities. Other regions have had smaller numbers participate. A summary of the participation data is presented in Table 14.

Table 14 | Number of leadership activity participants by region

Region	No. of total participants
Great Southern WA – Changemaker (2 sessions)	41
Murray NSW – Changemaker	27
Darling Downs and Burnett QLD – Community Leadership Program	20
Arid Lands SA – Changemaker (2 sessions)	19
Far West NSW – Changemaker	18
Murraylands and Riverland SA – Changemaker	18
Cape York Torres Strait QLD – Changemaker	15
Northern Tablelands NSW – Leadership Action Initiative	15
Wheatbelt South WA – Changemaker	12
Wheatbelt Central East WA – Changemaker	11

Region	No. of total participants
Gascoyne WA – Changemaker	9
Goulburn VIC – Changemaker	7

Source: Participant registration form; Changemaker activity (September 2023 - March 2024), Community Leadership Program (March 2024), Leadership Action Initiative (2024), n = 212

Stakeholders shared two key factors that have contributed to variable participation:

- CPLO and delivery organisations with strong networks support participant recruitment.** Well-connected CPLOs and delivery organisations were the most effective at supporting ARLF to attract diverse participants to the leadership activities. ARLF delivery leads reported that engaging hard-to-reach population groups, such as regional youth, First Nations participants, those with a disability or CALD background, was a challenge and that local relationships helped to address this. One CPLO reported that the recruitment of participants was supported by contacting other delivery partners and using their networks to invite local stakeholders. Conversely, some regions reported that the CPLO had not supported the advertisement of the activity in their region.
- The external context of regions can limit the capacity of community members to fully engage in a leadership activity.** The willingness and capacity of the regions to engage in a national leadership program was highly dependent on the broader external context facing a community. For example, a region's recent natural disaster experience, other funding or programs delivered in the region (e.g., bushfire or COVID recovery funding) or the current drought status. Some participants thought the free cost to attend the leadership activities contributed to a lack of 'buy in' from the community. However, this was balanced with most participants expressing an appreciation for the accessibility and free cost to participate.

The Murray NSW region provides a case study of a regions with high levels of engagement and participation (see Figure 17).

Figure 17 | Case study on Murray NSW

The Changemaker activity in Murray NSW has had high levels of engagement and participation.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED



Proactive coordination and local expertise has driven high levels of local engagement with the leadership activities.

Holbrook Landcare Network, the CPLO for the Murray NSW region, has driven high levels of local engagement with the leadership activities through proactive coordination and local expertise. The region has experienced severe climate variation through droughts, floods and bushfires which have highlighted the need for community resilience efforts. The CPLO recognised a clear demand in the region, that community members were seeking skills and resources to effect local change. Aligning with this need, the region selected the Changemaker activity, which has since been delivered four times in various locations to cater to the broad geographic spread.



High engagement and positive outcomes have warranted an additional changemaker session.

There has been high engagement with the activity and residents have generated enough interest to warrant an additional session to meet the long waiting list. The activity's success was highlighted by the CPLO who noted its instrumental role in equipping community members with the confidence and skills to drive change and strengthen community resilience. The CPLO is now working with ARLF to host a podcast to meet the eagerness from participants to continue their development and sustain the long-term from the activity.

Source: HRCPD quarterly webinar 8th of April 2024.

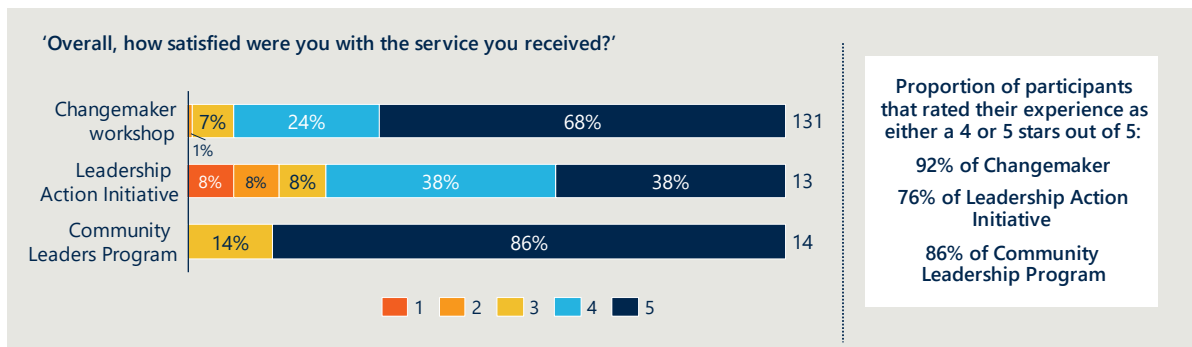
The delivery of mostly Changemaker sessions has resulted in efficiencies, but increased the effort required from ARLF. Most regions have opted for the two-day Changemaker activity out of the five available leadership activities available. The delivery of the same type of activity has resulted in significant delivery efficiencies for ARLF. ARLF has streamlined the delivery of the Changemaker sessions effectively through increased consistency in session materials, streamlined preparation and ongoing facilitator learning.

The resultant cost savings from these efficiencies has enabled ARLF to expand the program's reach, increasing the number of sessions from an initial 35 to 100. This expansion has enabled broader geographical coverage to meet community needs. However, ARLF acknowledges that delivering a program of this magnitude nationally is unprecedented for them. They noted several implementation challenges related to staff capacity, IT infrastructure, data management and administrative capacities.

5.4.3 Participants have had mostly positive experiences with some minor challenges

Participants have been highly satisfied with the leadership activities. Most participants indicated a positive experience from the leadership activities. Over 90 percent of changemakers participants, nearly 86 percent of community leadership program participants and 77 percent of the leadership action initiative participants rated their experience as either 4 or 5 stars out of 5 (see Figure 18).

Figure 18 | Survey responses rating the overall satisfaction with the activity



Source: Participant initial and completion surveys; Changemaker (Sep 2023 – Mar 2024), Leadership Action Initiative (Mar 2024) and initial Community Leadership Program (2024), n = 158.

Three factors have contributed to the positive participant experience. Stakeholders shared through the survey and interviews that:

- **The facilitators presented effectively and enabled open discussion between participants.** Over half of the Changemaker survey respondents as well as half of the interviewed participants identified facilitation as a strength in the session delivery. Stakeholders noted that the facilitators were effective in maintaining engagement and creating a safe environment for group discussion.
- **The use of multiple delivery mediums was engaging and allowed participants to work collaboratively.** The leadership activities are delivered in various forms including theory, individual work, group discussion and practical community engagement. Many participants highlighted that they enjoyed the interactive elements of the activity and found it useful to put their learning into practice.
- **The practical resources have allowed participants to sustain learnings beyond the activity.** In some of the leadership activities, participants are given a booklet with the models and tools covered in the session. Many participants have reported that have found the resources beneficial. One CPLO noted that the resources are good to build organisation capability and they will continue to use them in the future.

Two main reasons have contributed to a less than positive participant experience. Through interviews and survey responses, stakeholders shared that:

- **The content was not engaging for some experienced leaders.** Participants who were experienced leaders reported that they did not find value in the leadership upskilling however, they still benefited from social outcomes such as creating new connections. One interviewed participant suggested that session content could be better targeted to stages of career or life along with more deliberate participant recruitment.
- **The sessions did not meet some participants' expectations for drought related content.** Some participants had expected more drought focused content and were attending the session with the aim to collaborate on drought resilience goals.

5.5 There are four opportunities to strengthen the CIP leadership activities

There are opportunities for ARLF to enhance the design and delivery of the leadership activities based on participant feedback and Evaluation findings. These recommendations are outlined in Table 15.

Table 15 | Design and delivery recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS	SUPPORT FINDINGS
Current initiative delivery	
<p>1. Continue to adapt delivery to reflect diverse regional needs ARLF could consider approaches to boost diverse engagement with the leadership activities. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue leveraging local insights from CPLOs, who offer local knowledge on regional needs and preparedness. This information is valuable for adapting program delivery to local contexts. • Use established community groups for targeted recruitment efforts. Engage local organisations — such as sporting clubs that already interact with regional youth — to promote leadership activities and reach target participant cohorts. 	<p>See Section 5.4.1 and Section 5.4.2</p>
<p>2. Consider ways to capture insights for future investments: The place-based delivery of the leadership activities has enabled ARLF to gain a deep understanding of regional and remote communities. To leverage this for future programs, ARLF could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a system for capturing insights and lessons. This should include structured debriefs and the collation of quantitative and qualitative data on regional context relating to demand for and engagement with the leadership activities. • Prioritise future funding based on the evidence to ensure resources are allocated to areas where they will have the most significant impact. 	<p>See Section 5.4.2</p>
<p>3. Support participants to realise benefits beyond the sessions ARLF could consider strategies to support participants, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a suite of supplementary materials, including digital resources, which expand on the models and theories presented in sessions. • Encourage participants to engage in ongoing development initiatives. This could include those available through the HRCPD Initiative, including the Leadership Circles within the Drought Ready Network. • Facilitate targeted regional follow-up sessions in areas showing significant interest. This will reinforce learning, address region-specific challenges, and build localised support networks for sustained leadership development. 	<p>See Section 5.3.4</p>
Future initiative design	
<p>4. Offer fewer leadership options, tailored to need Build on the work done to tailor the Changemaker sessions to community needs as part of future leadership programs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consolidate leadership options to provide a more focused suite of options, directly addressing the expressed needs of communities. This will not only support the preferences of participants but also streamline decision-making processes and program delivery. • Provide tailored activity options that reflect the unique challenges and opportunities within regions and priority communities. This focused approach will enable ARLF to meet regional contexts (i.e. more sessions in geographically dispersed regions) and community needs (i.e. engaging with First Nations and CALD communities). 	<p>See section 5.4.1</p>



6 Evaluating the Small Network Grants

The SNG element contains two rounds of funding aimed to support simple initiatives that build stronger connectedness and strengthen social capital. The Small Network Grants are designed to extend the impact and reach of the HRCPD Initiative. Priority for the Small Network Grants include not-for-profit organisations based in the Local Government Areas (LGAs) outside of CIP Grant delivery locations.

This Section describes the evaluation findings that underpin the overarching finding, namely that:

- The SNG is on track to deliver its intended outcomes (Section 6.1)
- Round 1 of the SNG has delivered \$718k across 28 projects (Section 6.2)
- The SNG shows promising signs that it will positively contribute to social resilience (Section 6.3)
- The design and initial delivery of the SNG has been effective (Section 6.4)
- Recommendations for SNG will be determined in the next reporting period (Section 6.5)





6.1 The SNG is well positioned to deliver its intended outcomes

The SNG intends to contribute to all seven short-term outcomes identified in the HRCPD initiative MEL Plan. Nous has assessed progress towards achieving the short-term outcomes and indicators noting that the SNG is in the early stages of implementation. At the time of the mid-term Evaluation data collection activities, FRRR had awarded Round 1 funding one month prior and were yet to award Round 2 funding.

The overarching assessment is that the SNG design and early delivery of round 1 projects provide promising signs that it can deliver on its intended outcomes. Table 16 include the initial assessment of progress towards intended outcomes. Nous will update the assessment in the final evaluation report.

Table 16 | Summary of assessment against the intended Small Network Grants outcomes

OUTCOME	ASSESSMENT	RATIONALE
Communication, social connection and collaboration.	 Developing	This outcome is a core focus of SNG projects. Most SNG projects (71 per cent) intend to contribute to this outcome (see Section 5.3.1). This is because the most common project type (at 57 per cent) is delivering a local event or facilitating a gathering (see Section 5.3.1).
Services, resources, infrastructure and facilities.	 Developing	Six out of 28 SNG projects (21 per cent) have identified this as an outcome (see Section 5.3.1). Five projects (18 per cent) will create new infrastructure or facilities, such as Orroroo Carrieton upgrading their community church hall or Rural Business and Community Limited creating and extending their Shared Shops trail (see Section 5.3.2).
Diversity of community members and organisations.	 Developing	Three SNG projects (11 per cent) identify this as an outcome (see Section 5.3.1). Six Round 1 SNG projects include an explicit focus on outcomes for First Nations community members. The SNG was also effective in increasing the diversity of participating organisations and expanding the reach of the Initiative (see Section 5.3.2).

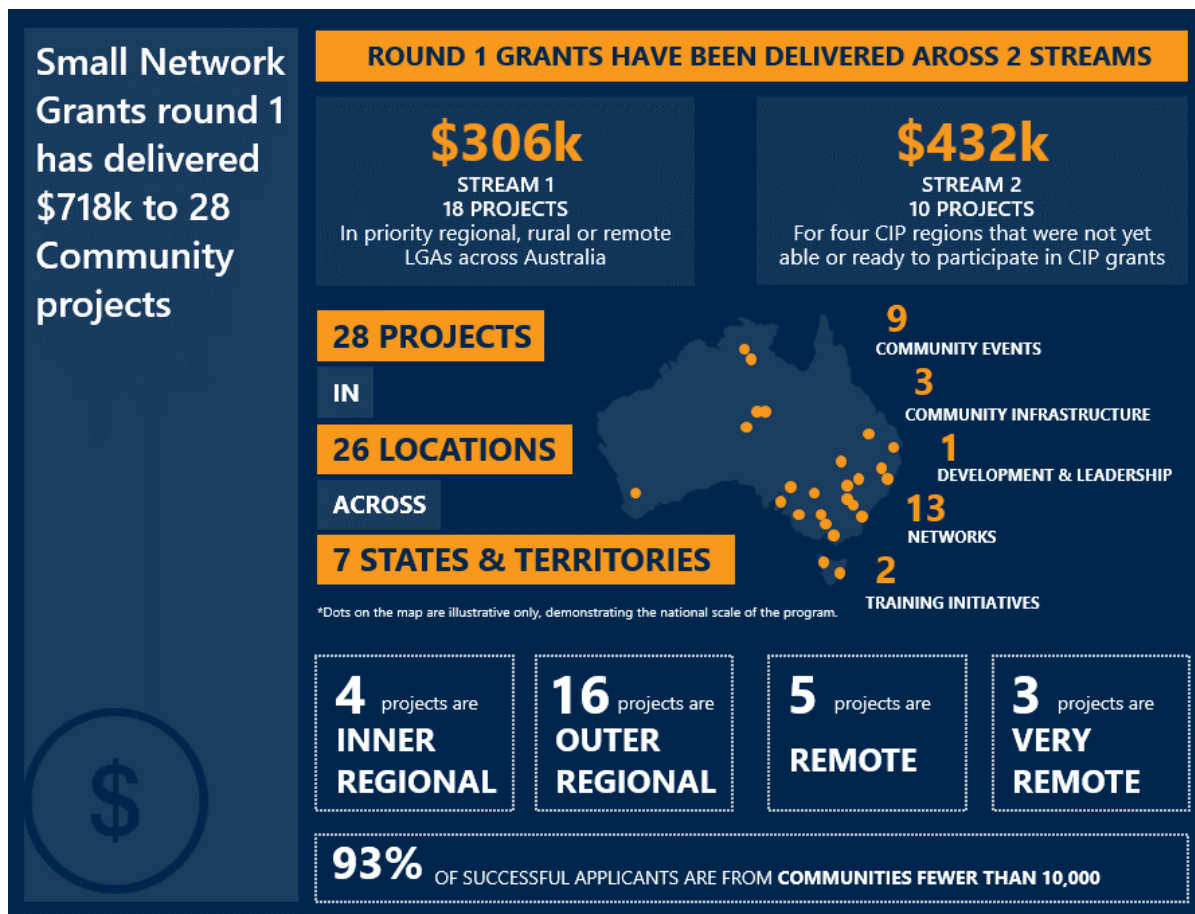
OUTCOME	ASSESSMENT	RATIONALE
Awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies.	 Developing	Seven projects (25 per cent) identify this as an outcome (see Section 5.3.1). Projects like those in the Northern Tablelands are aligning with local strategies to support drought resilience (see Section 5.3.2).
Place-based practices.	 Developing	The place-based nature of the SNG and CIP funding has enabled regions to identify the most impactful projects for their region (see Section 5.3.2). Eight projects (29 per cent) have identified this as an outcome (see Section 5.3.1).
Leadership capacity and capability.	 Limited	Two projects (7 per cent) have identified this as an outcome (see Section 5.3.1). These two projects are small but may create significant impact in their local communities, such as Mallee Sustainable Farming's delivery of leadership training for rural women in Far Western NSW (see Section 5.3.2).
Community-based networks.	 Developing	Eight projects (29 per cent) have identified this as an outcome (see Section 5.3.1). The design of the Small Network Grants aligns with the needs of smaller community organisations who are focused on setting up networks tailored to their local community needs (see Section 5.4.1).

6.2 Round 1 of the SNG has delivered \$718k across 28 projects

The SNG Round 1 awarded \$737,774 to 30 organisations to deliver 29 projects. As of April 2024, one project intended to be delivered by two organisations had withdrawn their grant valued at \$20,000. The rest of this section refers to the 28 active grants for SNG Round 1 valued at \$717,774.

Round 1 of the SNG has supported a diverse range of projects. Project delivery is spread across 26 different locations. Over half of those projects (53 per cent) will directly focus on strengthening connectedness. Round 1 of the program was delivered across two streams. Stream 1 delivered funding to priority LGAs in agriculture-dependent locations. Priority LGAs were defined as delivery locations with a higher potential for drought impact and outside the geographical reach of existing Future Drought Fund investment locations including CIP grant recipients. Stream 2 delivered funding to four of the five CIP regions that were not able or ready to participate in CIP grants. This is shown in Figure 19 below.

Figure 19 | Small Network Grants have delivered \$718k to 28 projects



Source: Nous analysis of SNG grant applications and SNG grant recipient data provided by FRRR

6.3 The SNG shows promising signs that it will positively contribute to social resilience

This Section provides findings on the progress of the SNG towards the program’s intended outcomes. The Evaluation has found that Round 1 projects intend to contribute to all seven short-term evaluation outcomes. Furthermore, SNG projects are likely to extend and deepen the impact of CIP grants. Lastly, the smaller size of SNG grants is likely to influence the depth, breadth and sustainability of project outcomes. These findings are explored further below.

6.3.1 Round 1 SNG projects contribute to all seven short-term outcomes

Round 1 of the SNG has funded a diverse set of projects that together will contribute to all seven short-term outcomes. A summary of the intended project outcomes that SNG grantees identified is provided in Figure 20.

Figure 20 | Number of projects contributing to each outcome as identified in Round 1 SNG applications



Source: *Nous analysis of Round 1 SNG application data provided by FRRR*

Analysis of the intended primary and secondary outcomes listed in SNG grant applications and insights provided through grantee interviews highlights three key insights:

- Projects contribute to multiple outcomes.** All SNG grantees selected two primary project outcomes of the seven short-term outcomes. Grantees described in interviews that they saw the seven short-term outcomes as interconnected. For example, Charles Darwin University is building social drought resilience among culturally and linguistically diverse groups in Katherine. The primary aim of the project is to increase drought knowledge and enhance the skills of the CALD community to navigate times of drought. The project aims to support individuals to identify and understand the signs of stress and implement strategies to maintain their wellbeing. A further aim of the project is to equip the participants with the skills to support others impacted by drought. Ultimately, the project hopes to enhance social connection and increase a shared sense of purpose for drought preparedness and resilience.
- Most projects intend to improve communication, connection and collaboration.** This is reflected by 57 per cent of SNG projects delivering a local event or facilitating a gathering. Improving social connection was often connected with strengthening networks or a connected outcome with projects that brought community together to learn about new drought resilience strategies. All eight grantees interviewed through the evaluation reported that their project would contribute to improved connection and collaboration. Several stakeholders also noted that improving communication, connection and collaboration is particularly important to strengthen community resilience in more remote communities, which were the focus of 87 per cent of SNG projects. For example, Facey Group in Wheatbelt South WA said that they will deliver a half-day event with guest speakers and catering. Connecting farmers with the right referral services for physical and mental health and providing social connection and networking opportunities were the main outcomes for the project.
- Round 1 of the SNG has a strong focus on building community infrastructure.** Three projects will directly improve community infrastructure. This includes projects that will upgrade a church hall to use it as a family day care, upgrade a clubhouse roof, and provide a custom-made cool room. These three projects represent 11 per cent of all projects, compared to 7 per cent of CIP. Investments in community infrastructure – even small ones like those in the SNG – can play a positive role in supporting communities build and sustain their social resilience and drought preparedness.

SNG applicants highlight in their applications that they want to empower their communities and support regional drought strategies. There was also a strong focus on building protective factors that strengthen

resilience and prevent or mitigate the worse impacts of drought. Figure 21 includes a thematic analysis of these responses along with quotes from organisations that highlight how SNG grantees hope their projects will contribute to drought preparedness.

Figure 21 | Thematic analysis of free-text answers in SNG Round 1 applications



Source: Nous analysis of SNG Round 1 applications and free-text responses, provided by FRRR

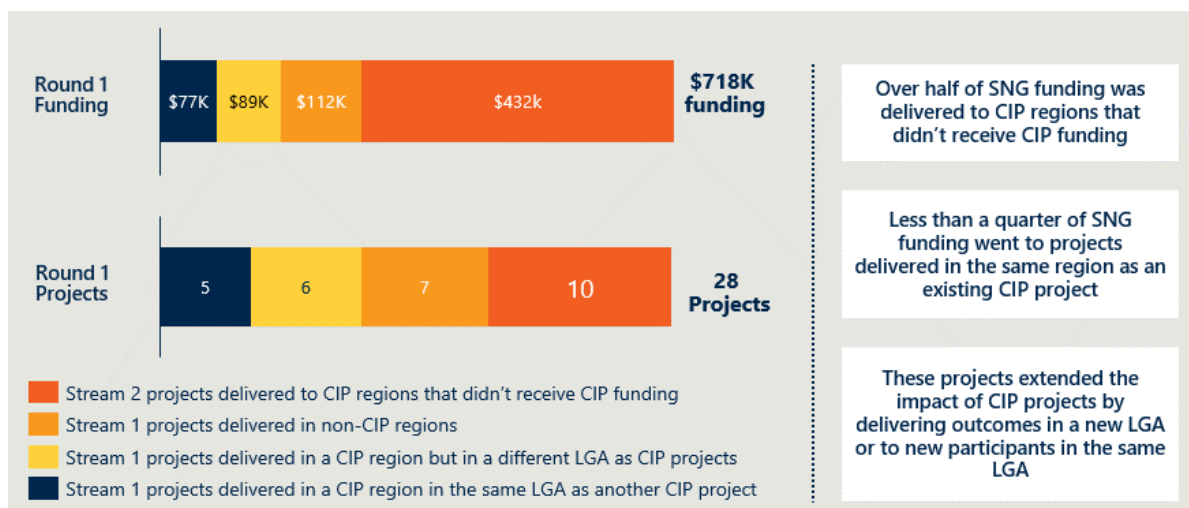
6.3.2 The SNG is on track to complement and extend the impact of CIP grants

The SNG Round 1 was effective in complementing CIP grants. The SNG both extends the HRCPD Initiative's geographical reach beyond CIP supported communities and increases the diversity and number of participating organisations. This is due to the structure of the two streams of funding and the deliberate focus on supporting regions, communities and population groups that had not participated in CIP grants. Across the two streams:

- Stream 1 successfully extended funding to new communities within CIP and non-CIP regions.** Stream 1 funding was available to regions that had previously received CIP grant funding, but prioritised those LGAs or population groups that were not directly benefiting from CIP projects. LGAs that are not within a CIP region but are impacted by drought were also considered for Stream 1 funding. Within Stream 1, 32 per cent of funding went to new communities within CIP regions and 40 per cent of funding went to non-CIP regions. This has enabled the HRCPD Initiative grant funding to reach new communities that had not previously received funding.
- Stream 2 successfully saw funding reach four of the five CIP regions that had not yet been funded.** Five CIP regions were unable to secure CIP grants due to varied reasons, including region readiness and capacity to participate in the HRCPD Initiative. Stream 2 of the SNG was designed to provide those regions a dedicated opportunity to apply for grant funding. 60 per cent of Round 1 funding was distributed through Stream 2. This deliberate funding source has ensured that these four CIP regions can deliver social resilience projects that they had otherwise hoped to deliver through the CIP.

A breakdown of the distribution of funding and projects across CIP funded regions is provided in Figure 22 below.

Figure 22 | Round 1 SNG funding and projects broken down by stream and funding location²⁷



Source: *Nous analysis of SNG application data provided by FRRR, see footnote below for detail*

Five Stream 1 organisations were successful in accessing both CIP and SNG grant funding. Through interviews, three of these organisations reported that they hoped to extend the benefits of their CIP projects or to deliver new projects in new communities. Examples of these are highlighted below:

- **Rural Business and Community Limited are using SNG funding to extend the Shared Shops trail CIP project.** The SNG has enabled them to create a coordinating role to network up to 6 micro business Shared Shops in rural towns across the Mallee. Rural Business and Community Limited also intend to link the physical 'trail' with recognisable "Shared Shops Stop" signage.
- **MSF will reach new communities in Far Western NSW through leadership training for rural women.** MSF are delivering two CIP projects, one in the Mallee Region and another in Murraylands and Riverlands SA. MSF is also the CPLO for the CIP Mallee region. MSF is using SNG funding to deliver personal development and leadership training for rural women in isolated areas of Far-Western NSW. MSF reported that SNG has enabled them to extend the reach of their organisations so they can support rural women in NSW. This will enable them to create outcomes for rural communities across three states.

Additional collective impacts may emerge in regions that received both SNG and CIP grants. The delivery of SNG and CIP projects may deliver additional collective impacts for regions beyond the intended individual project impacts. Complementary regional grant programs, such as the CIP and SNG, can make deliberate attempts to deliver cumulative and flow on effects within a region²⁸. When done well, a series of projects, including some smaller projects, can support additional aggregate benefits. For example, aligning SNG projects with CIP projects and broader regional strategies can amplify the impact of individual projects.

The NSW Northern Tablelands provides an example of a region that has aligned SNG and CIP projects with local strategies to build drought resilience. This is in addition to efforts from the regions CPLO to foster a region-wide and collaborative approach. The region expects that the cluster of HRCPD Initiative projects will support collective, localised benefits. Figure 23 provides further detail on the Northern Tablelands case study.

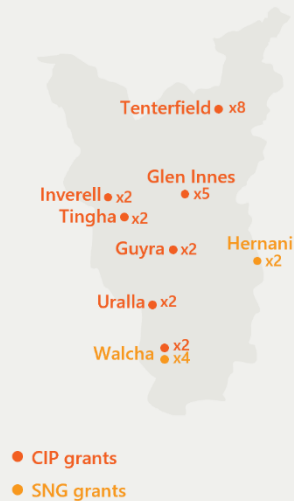
²⁷ This was determined based on the LGA of the primary project location as defined by delivery organisations in their application. This LGA was matched to the LGAs listed in CIP regions.

²⁸ This is discussed in [Assessing Local Capacity for Federal Grant-Getting \(2008\)](#) and more recent examples of how cumulative benefits occur for regional grant programs can be seen in the [SCCF Outcomes and Economic Evaluation Final Report \(2022\)](#)

Figure 23 | NSW Northern Tablelands case study

SNF funding strategically complemented the CIP in the Northern Tablelands

OVERVIEW OF THE REGION



The NSW Northern Tablelands region was eager to build social connection and resilience.

The NSW Northern Tablelands region was heavily impacted by climate events from 2018 to 2020. The 2018/2019 drought contributed to the severity of their experience with the 2019 bushfires, 2020 hailstorm, and experience with COVID in the years following. Four Landcare networks in the region were therefore eager to use CIP and SNG funding to deliver projects in their region to build social connection and resilience in their local communities

CIP and SNG projects contribute to the local strategic plan

The four Landcare networks have tied their CIP and SNG projects to their local strategic plan and are working closely together to achieve region-wide outcomes. This is being led by their CPO, Glen Innes Natural Resource Advisory Committee (GLENRAC), which is led by a team that has extensive experience working on drought resilience in the region. The process has brought the networks, who typically compete for the same grants, closer together. They are now collaborating on other grant applications.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT

Southern New England Ltd received CIP and SNG funding.

Southern New England Ltd (SNE Ltd) was funded by the CIP to deliver a series of six events for their local community, including a young farmers dinner, rural women's day event, and pillowcase workshop activity for children in towns like Guyra, Uralla, and Walcha. When applying for SNG funding, they saw an opportunity to extend their impact by delivering six projects in Hernani and Walcha.

SNG funding is deepening impact in the same location.

SNE Ltd is delivering an additional four events in Walcha, to complement the existing CIP activity they have planned for that location. The CIP activity is delivering a pillowcase workshop to school-aged children in Walcha, and the four SNG projects will engage other age groups by delivering a range of different activities to be planned.

SNG funding is extending impact to new locations.

SNE Ltd is also delivering two events in a new location, Hernani. Hernani is located between three local government areas, and so is sometimes overlooked for projects. Southern New England reported getting an enthusiastic reaction from locals, as well as many letters of support, demonstrating the benefit of delivering projects in more remote locations like Hernani. The organisation is excited to use SNG funding to extend its reach to more remote locations, engage new participants and create impact for communities which might otherwise be overlooked by larger grants.

The SNG project complements CIP projects.

The SNG project will deliver six community events, complementing and extending the impact of existing CIP projects. These CIP projects will deliver:

- **Two community event projects:** GLENRAC is supporting 42 community events in Glen Innes, 22 will be hosted by GLENRAC and supporting a further 20 events, including rural women's day and evening farmer events. SNE is delivering six events (see left hand side).
- **One development and leadership project:** Gwymac is delivering a series of development and leadership activities across Tingha and Inverell, including cultural activities.
- **One training initiative project:** Granite Borders Landcare is delivering eight workshops in Tenterfield to build capability and connection, including workshops on soil health, bird hollows, and permaculture.



Source: stakeholder interviews, CIP application data, and [Southern New England Landcare website](#)

6.3.3 SNG projects aim to contribute to sustainable outcomes beyond the grant period

Ongoing impact beyond the grant period was considered in some Round 1 projects through the development of resources or new infrastructure. Three projects will directly improve community infrastructure that will be available for the community beyond the project. These projects will upgrade a church hall to use it as a family day care, upgrade a clubhouse roof, and provide a custom-made cool room. Two projects will primarily develop resources. Far North West Joint Organisation in the NT is developing a toolkit to support volunteers who are working in drought planning and resilience. Agriculture Kangaroo Island Incorporated will develop training resources and host a demonstration day for the weather station and soil probe network. Grantees noted in their application that these projects can provide lasting outcomes for their communities. For example, one grantee said that 'keeping facilities and opportunities available to our community is vital for the survival of the town'.

Round 1 SNG grants have catalysed additional financial and in-kind contributions, which may sustain project outcomes beyond the funding period. Nine out of the 28 grantees (32 per cent) have accessed contributions from other organisations (such as local councils). Four of the eight delivery partners interviewed noted that they will rely on accessing new funding to sustain project outcomes (e.g. to continue to deliver one-off events or activities). These organisations were confident that they can continue to sustain project outcomes provided they secure new funding. This suggests that continued access to funding opportunities can support the achievement of longer-term outcomes. This finding will be further explored upon delivery of the SNG grants, in the final evaluation reporting period.

6.4 The design and initial delivery of the SNG element has been effective

The design and implementation of the SNG has been appropriate. The program design meets a need identified by smaller community organisations. The application structure and process was positively received by Round 1 grantees. These points are discussed in more detail below.

6.4.1 The design of the SNG aligns with the needs of smaller community organisations

Small projects are often well placed to support small community organisations to address unique challenges in their community. Research has shown that small, local funds are sometimes best placed to deliver positive impacts for regional communities and to enable local governance²⁹. Six out of eight interviewed grantees confirmed that the SNG provided access to the 'right amount' of funds for them to deliver small, targeted and impactful projects that addressed pressing drought resilience needs in their region. Small grants can often empower local communities to identify what projects they need most and play an active role in driving those projects³⁰. Round 1 grantees shared a similar sentiment. For example, one organisation in NSW reported that the SNG funding allowed them to 'dovetail their SNG project' into regional strategies like their RDRP to address local challenges. Figure 24 provides thematic analysis of free-text answers in Round 1 applications that highlight the current challenges facing communities that have received SNG.

²⁹ Source: [Aiding Local Governance: How Effective Are Small Funds \(2006\)](#)

³⁰ Source: [Community driven development \(2003\)](#)

Figure 24 | Thematic analysis of free-text answers in SNG Round 1 applications

Communities impacted by drought are facing deep and pervasive challenges		
<p>'When disaster strikes, we rely on volunteers to take action. Populations in our rural communities are on the decline and it is difficult to recruit and engage community volunteers.'</p> <p>– Far West NSW</p>	<p>'The Arid Lands region is huge and vast, and the small population is geographically dispersed and isolated. The extremely large distances pose major challenges in accessing essential services and infrastructure.'</p> <p>– Arid Lands NT</p>	<p>'Our town has already lost so much we now find ourselves fighting to keep what we have left. Keeping facilities and opportunities available to our community is vital for the survival of the town.'</p> <p>– Murraylands and Riverland SA</p>
There is a need to build greater drought resilience		
<p>'Creating opportunities for the community to connect, engage and share is essential for long term wellbeing as we face climate challenges coupled with low livestock prices and high cost of living. Improving collaboration will lead to better outcomes for drought preparedness.'</p> <p>– Kangaroo Island SA</p>	<p>'Traditionally in times of drought, each rural community has had to work their way through difficult times, often in competition with neighbouring communities or in isolation from other communities.'</p> <p>– Mallee VIC</p>	<p>'These pockets of the community have so much knowledge that they seek to share, yet often they do not have the forums or networks to share.'</p> <p>– Freshwater Creek VIC</p>

Source: Nous analysis of SNG Round 1 applications and free-text responses, provided by FRRR

The SNG provides a valued funding opportunity for small community organisations. There are few similar funding opportunities for small organisations to undertake drought preparedness activities. Funded organisations shared appreciation for the SNG program due to two main reasons:

- **Smaller community organisations often have limited capacity for grant applications, and so have fewer funding options available.** Grantees reported that the Small Networks Grants provided low-burden funding to communities and organisations who typically have limited funding options. One participant noted that this program “has been needed for a long time...I wish we had something like this when I was younger”.
- **More remote communities with lower population density have difficulty demonstrating a large need or return on investment for funding.** Two organisations based in smaller, remote areas noted that regions such as theirs often ‘fly under the radar’ when it comes to community funding opportunities. Furthermore, they noted that it is not feasible to apply for large grant programs as their projects are less competitive with projects from larger communities.

Four Round 1 delivery organisations reported that they would not have been able to deliver their projects if not for the SNG. One grantee identified that they had plans to deliver their project but did not have a clear funding plan. Another grantee noted that since their organisation is so small, they do not have access to as many funding opportunities. However, the SNG has allowed them to deliver a roadshow, which they believe will have a significant impact for their region. This is due to the very few similar events for locals to attend and build a sense of connection and community.

Grant sizes across both streams were mostly appropriate. Stream 1 grant amounts (\$20k limit) were mostly appropriate to support a range of projects. Nearly all SNG participants interviewed felt that the grant amount they received was sufficient for their project, and appropriate for the level of effort to apply. The larger size of Stream 2 grants (\$50k) was appropriate to account for the unspent CIP grants. Some participants in the Northern Territory wished they had received more grant funding to reflect the higher costs to deliver projects across their more geographically dispersed and remote region. The high number of remote applicants suggests that this was not a significant barrier. Two Stream 2 grantees noted that they had redesigned their initial CIP project to fit within the reduced budget of the SNG project. Those grantees reported that their reduced project scope may lead to less depth of impact (i.e. the degree of change created) or breadth of impact (i.e. the number of people reached). Further, the SNG encouraged co-contributions to catalyse further investment. Fifteen Round 1 organisations (54 per cent) took

advantage of this opportunity to deliver their SNG project. SNG funding supported 56 per cent of total project costs, with the remainder coming from in-kind support (34 per cent), organisational contributions (4 per cent), or other contributions (6 per cent).

6.4.2 A fit-for-purpose application process and FRRR support has enabled a smooth experience for Round 1 SNG applicants

The application process was fast and easy for organisations to navigate. All eight interviewed grantees were appreciative of the straightforward grant application. Three grantees noted the simplicity of the application process was a determining factor of whether they would apply. One participant that applied for both the CIP and SNG noted that the SNG guidance was clearer. Another participant commented that it was a “fast, simple and easy application to write, especially compared to a lot of others out there”. Another participant reported that the simple language and straightforward nature of the application form was much better than other application forms they were used to.

All interviewed grantees deemed the effort to apply was proportionate to the grant size. Some organisations had limited capacity when applying, but noted this is common. One organisation reported that they outsourced the writing of their grant application because they did not have the time to do it but also noted that this was not unusual. Another organisation commented that they had to make a couple of amendments to their application with limited capacity but that the process was not burdensome.

Effective outreach and support from FRRR may have diversified the organisations engaged in the program. FRRR implemented several mechanisms to support organisations with the SNG applications process. This included providing pre-application information to applicants through guidelines, phone conversations, regional visits, webinars and online drop-in sessions. Community coordinators provided a further level of support by providing advice on how to develop their applications. For example, the Community Engagement Coordinators liaised with applicants to explain the application process and the supporting information they required, such as the letters of support.

All SNG participants interviewed were highly appreciative of the support that FRRR provided. Three of the interviewed participants explicitly stated that someone from FRRR called them up to talk through aspects of their application. One grantee reported that having someone from FRRR to talk them through the letters of support process was pivotal in helping them to submit their application. Another participant emphasised that ‘FRRR was helpful and understood our needs’.

FRRR’s support and targeted outreach to priority locations has resulted in Round 1 SNG reaching a diverse group of organisations. Ten of the 28 grants (36 per cent) were awarded to organisations that FRRR had not previously funded³¹. The broad reach of the SNG applications is in part due to the additional engagement activity that FRRR undertook to reach potential applicants. Grantees noted that the pre-application engagement that FRRR provided to increase their readiness to participate in the program was crucial. For example, one grantee appreciated the practical help that FRRR provided through phone calls. The organisation reported that without this degree of help from FRRR they might not have applied.

6.5 Recommendations for SNG will be determined in the next reporting period

Due to the early stage of the SNG at the point of this mid-term evaluation, most delivery partners had yet to commence delivery at the time of being interviewed. Round 2 of SNG funding was also underway at the point of writing this midterm evaluation. Therefore, is too early to determine recommendations for the

³¹ Source: Data provided in the PAC papers by FRRR

SNG. These will be determined in the next reporting period following further data collection and engagement with stakeholders.



7 Evaluating the Expertise Pool

The Expertise Pool is an online network of consultants across Australia. The Social Impact Hub (SIH) facilitates the expertise pool. The platform offers a range of professional skills, sector expertise, specialist advice and support to enable community organisations to deliver place-based projects. The Expertise Pool was initially designed to assist community organisations involved in the HRCPD Initiative however is now open to all Australian-based community and social purpose organisations. The platform launched in July 2023.

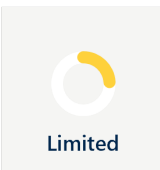
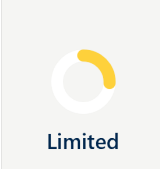
This Section describes the evaluation findings relating to the Expertise Pool. The evaluation found that:

- The Expertise Pool is beginning to deliver its intended outcomes (Section 7.1).
- The Expertise Pool hosts 121 experts but has had limited uptake (Section 7.2).
- The concierge service provides value to NFP organisations (Section 7.3).
- The Expertise Pool design is mostly appropriate with implementation building momentum (Section 7.4).
- There are three opportunities to improve the program (Section 7.5).

7.1 The Expertise Pool is beginning to deliver its intended outcomes

The MEL Plan expected that the Expertise Pool would contribute to two of the seven outcomes identified for the HRCPD Initiative. At this point of implementation, the Evaluation has observed both intended outcomes to a limited extent. The assessment against the intended outcomes of the Expertise Pool is shown below in Table 17.

Table 17 | Summary of assessment against the intended Expertise Pool outcomes

OUTCOME	ASSESSMENT	RATIONALE
Services, resources, infrastructure and facilities.	 Limited	The Expertise Pool has been developed as an ongoing service for organisations with over 100 experts and 63 represented skills (see section 6.2). Despite the engagement of FRRR and the concierge service provided by SIH, only eight organisations have engaged the concierge (see section 6.4.2). Demonstrating the value of the Pool and concierge service will be important to increase engagement (see section 6.4.2).
Awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies.	 Limited	The Expertise Pool has demonstrated value through its concierge service for a small number of organisations (see section 6.3.1). In at least one instance the Expertise Pool has supported a community organisation to deliver its CIP project, thereby increasing awareness and understanding of drought preparedness (see section 6.3.1). However, due to the limited uptake of services to date, this outcome has been observed to a limited extent (see section 6.4.2).

7.2 The Expertise Pool hosts over 100 experts but has had limited uptake

The expertise pool has expanded beyond its target of 100 experts and counting. The platform was launched in July 2023. It started with an existing pool of 81 experts sourced from SIH’s Professional Impact Network (PIN). Since its launch, SIH has intentionally grown the pool of available experts on the platform with a focus on experts from regional communities. Through an EOI process SIH added 40 experts. All these experts came from rural and regional communities. SIH also focused on experts that brought skill sets not already covered by five or more existing experts. This fulfills the Expertise Pool’s goal of having a minimum of 100 experts available. While the number of regional based experts has increased over the last year, community organisations continue to express a strong desire for more regional based experts. SIH continues to actively review and recruit experts to the pool to increase the breadth of skills and geographic spread of experts.

There has been limited uptake from organisations. The evaluation has considered engagement with the platform until April 2024. As of April 2024, a total of 19 organisations had completed an EOI of which eight were HRCPD funded organisations. The eight CIP organisations are located across all states except for WA. Of the eight HRCPD organisation EOIs, five were seeking strategic support, one was seeking support with an employment contract, one with fundraising support, and one with accessing local speakers for events. No HRCPD Initiative organisations had formally accessed consulting services through the Expertise Pool. One CIP organisation reported they had received useful advice from the Expertise Pool concierge service. Figure 25 below provides a summary of the platform experts and activity since its launch.

Figure 25 | The Expertise Pool has over 121 experts and counting, representing 63+ skills



7.3 The concierge service provides value to NFP organisations

The concierge service can deliver value connecting organisations to the expertise they need. The concierge service aims to provide a 'front door' service to community organisations. Through the concierge, SIH helps prospective organisations identify what services they require and then broker a connection to an appropriate 'expert'. Of the ten CIP project delivery organisations interviewed on the Expertise Pool, eight had used the free concierge service. These eight organisations reported that SIH provided prompt and valuable responses. While the organisations did not directly access experts through the pool, they noted that the concierge was effective at providing advice on the services, resources and expertise they required. The two organisations that did not engage the concierge noted that they felt like the Expertise Pool was overly Sydney-based and would not understand the local nuance of natural disaster in regional areas. SIH and FRRR are working to communicate more clearly the availability of the growing pool of regional experts.

The concierge has created value through direct support to a CIP organisation. One stakeholder reported that SIH had provided direct expert assistance in developing three key messages for their CIP project. Further detail is provided in the case study in Figure 26. It is likely that community organisations will continue to benefit from access to the concierge service for direct support.

Figure 26 | RANT Arts case study

The Expertise Pool concierge service helps RANT Arts to develop three key messages for their CIP project

OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED

RANT Arts requested SIH's support in developing three key messages.

RANT Arts requested expert assistance in developing three key messages for their CIP project 'Close Up: a Drought Preparedness Project'. When completing their Expertise Pool EOI form, they noted that they had no budget allocated for the service but were still seeking support. They reported that Social Impact Hub was very prompt in replying. RANT Arts worked closely with someone from Social Impact Hub who provided advice and recommendations to help them develop their project.

RANT Arts found the concierge service extremely useful and accessible.

RANT Arts reported that SIH's advice and recommendations were extremely useful. They found it reassuring to know that their project, as it progresses, is aligning with the funding objectives.

They also found it financially accessible. The concierge service was free, and RANT noted that for future projects they now know they can build an appropriate fee into their budget. They hope to use the Expertise Pool in this way in the future.

RANT Arts highly recommended that other organisations use the service.

Source: stakeholder interviews

7.4 The Expertise Pool design is mostly appropriate with implementation building momentum

The Expertise Pool design meets an identified capability and capacity need across small community organisations. However, three key barriers have slowed the uptake of Expertise Pool services. Demonstrating the value of the Expertise Pool will be critical to overcome these challenges and increase engagement. Each of these findings is explored further in this Section.

7.4.1 The Expertise Pool design meets an identified capability and capacity need across small community organisations

Community organisations in rural and regional communities often face capacity or capability constraints. The qualitative baseline assessments of the CIP regions included consistent themes related to capacity challenges due to volunteer fatigue and a lack of discretionary funding. CIP delivery organisations that participated in the evaluation reinforced this finding. Twenty out of 22 total delivery organisations interviewed reported experiencing some capacity constraints due to a variety of factors that included skilled labour shortages, volunteer or staff burnout and limited access to long-term funding. Several stakeholders noted that accessing high quality expert advice to address these capacity and capability gaps can be challenging in some regional, rural and remote regions.

The Expertise Pool has experts with skills relevant to the needs of CIP organisations. The wide range of skills that the Expertise Pool offers aligns with the needs of HRCPD organisations. The eight HRCPD EOIs to date principally identified looking for operational and specific support, rather than broader strategy or service delivery support. These support needs align with the skills available through the platform. Figure 27 below shows the alignment between the types of support CIP organisations have requested and the skills represented on the Expertise Pool.

Figure 27 | Comparison of skills available in the Pool and requested services

HRCPD organisations seek four types of support	63+ skills are represented in the Pool, including the requested types of support
<p>Marketing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marketing and communications Social media training 	<p>Marketing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marketing and communications, market research Training and development
<p>Governance support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business governance Employment contract drafting 	<p>Governance support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governance, business processes, monitoring & evaluation Legal, HR and recruitment
<p>Finance support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to funding opportunities Financial reporting support 	<p>Finance support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bid writing, campaigning, and fundraising Financial modelling, advocacy
<p>Access to local leaders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to guest speakers and facilitators 	<p>Event management and recruitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project management, recruitment, and procurement

Source: Stakeholder interviews, EOIs

There is value to having a national platform for the Expertise Pool, if it provides the right service for rural NFPs. Administering a national Expertise Pool provides opportunities for operational efficiencies and access to a broader range of skills than a smaller platform. One organisation interviewed noted that it is 'exciting' that a regional-focused Expertise Pool is being set up. However, that same stakeholder was keen to see more concrete examples of how the platform has helped other community organisations before engaging with it. Outcomes panel participants identified that a national platform for an Expertise Pool is a worthy concept. However, many organisations noted they will continue to reach out through their own in-person networks before going to a website. The benefits of having a national platform will therefore need to be weighed against the need to provide the right service to support engagement.

7.4.2 Three factors have limited engagement

CIP organisations shared a range of factors that have limited their engagement with the Expertise Pool. There are three main considerations that the Expertise Pool should address to support further engagement:

- **Delayed implementation contributed to low awareness of the platform and limited available funds to engage paid experts.** The Expertise Pool was initially designed to roll out at the commencement of the HRCPD Initiative. In practice this implementation occurred later than planned. FRRR reported that the intention was for organisations to use CIP or SNG grant funding to support accessing Expertise Pool services. The Expertise Pool launched after the early CIP tranches had completed the co-design process. Although the pool was available for later CIP tranches, the Evaluation saw evidence of generally low awareness among CIP organisations that participated in the Regional Working Sessions. CIP organisations reported that they would have been more likely to access the services if they were aware of it earlier. By the time these organisations found out about the Expertise Pool they had already completed planning and obtained the required expertise. When asked to specify their allocated budget for expert services in the EOI, six out of eight CIP organisations indicated none. Several organisations that participated in the outcomes panel confirmed that they no longer had budget as part of their CIP grants to engage the Expertise Pool. Several organisations noted that they would build an appropriate fee into their budget in future programs that provided access to expert support. Other organisations noted they would engage the free concierge service a no cost option to access advice. SIH and FRRR are considering strategies to increase the use of experts by exploring pro bono opportunities and increasing awareness of the platform. The Expertise Pool was available for all SNG grantees. FRRR promoted the Expertise Pool to recipients prior to application, for example through the Grant seeker webinars. However, none of the Round 1 SNG organisations have chosen to use the service.
- **Initial perceptions that the Expertise Pool has only metro-based experts and a preference for regionally based experts limited engagement.** CIP organisations shared that they prefer regionally based experts. They highlighted that regionally based experts understand the nuances of regional Australia, and if possible, their specific local context. Interviewees from organisations that submitted an EOI noted that the geographic spread of experts was overly metro-focused and suggested that this might be a barrier to others engaging in the platform. Filtering functionality on the platform does not identify the region an expert is based in, only the state/territory. One organisation reflected that 'it feels like almost all the experts are just based in Sydney'. Two organisations confirmed that adding a filtering feature that identifies the region-based location of experts would increase their likelihood of engaging with the platform.
- **An unclear value proposition has reduced engagement.** Stakeholders across CIP organisations, and FRRR and SIH agreed that the Expertise Pool needs to communicate a stronger value proposition. The low levels of awareness and engagement with the Expertise Pool indicate NFPs either see little value in engaging the Expertise Pool or do not have a strong understanding of its value proposition. Seven out of the ten interviewed CIP organisations noted that they felt unclear on the value of the Expertise Pool. One CIP organisation acknowledged that while FRRR's engagement was valuable, the value proposition of the Expertise Pool remained unclear. Two organisations that submitted an EOI noted in the form that they wanted further information to understand the value the Expertise Pool can provide them. Meanwhile, two of the three experts engaged by the Evaluation noted that the Expertise Pool needed a more visible profile. One suggested that 'a bit more profile building via social media platforms may be useful'. Lastly, FRRR and SIH are working closely together to better promote the Expertise Pool. Critical to the success of awareness raising activities – which includes marketing through the FRRR website, social media campaigns, direct email, fact sheets, features in FRRR E-News, and webinars with CPLOs - will be communicating a clear value proposition. Case studies of successful

engagements with the Expertise Pool is one way that FRRR and SIH can communicate the value of the Expertise Pool. However, this must be addressed alongside the other barriers noted above.

7.5 There are three opportunities to improve the program

There are opportunities to enhance the design and delivery of the Expertise Pool. These recommendations are outlined in Table 18 below.

Table 18 | Design and delivery recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS	SUPPORT FINDINGS
Current initiative delivery	
<p>1. Better communicate the regional experts that are hosted on the platform</p> <p>Regional stakeholders have identified that access to local experts is a high priority for them. They also highlighted a low awareness of the regional experts available on the Expertise Pool. To better communicate the regional experts hosted on the platform FRRR and SIH can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly identify on the Expertise Pool website which experts are regional. • Allow users to filter or search experts based on region/location, not just state/territory. 	<p>See Section 7.4.2</p>
<p>2. Provide support to organisations to better understand the value the Expertise Pool can provide</p> <p>Community organisations reinforced that they largely do not understand the value of the Expertise Pool, and that understanding this value will increase their likelihood of engaging with the Pool. To increase engagement, FRRR and SIH can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate the value of the Pool through case studies of how organisations have benefited from the concierge service or through receiving expert support through the Pool. • Explore opportunities to provide pro bono support to organisations with no budget to access services. 	
Future initiative design	
<p>3. Promote the platform earlier to align with grant project planning and funding allocations</p> <p>Regional stakeholders have highlighted that if they were aware of the Expertise Pool earlier, they would have been more likely to allocate a budget in their CIP project planning and/or access the services. To increase this engagement for future programs, FRRR and SIH can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the platform earlier to align with grant project planning and funding allocations. • Identify more explicitly how existing funding can be used to engage the Pool, where the need exists in local communities. 	<p>See Section 7.4.2</p>



8 Evaluating the National Mentoring Program

The National Mentoring Program is a 12-month mentoring and learning program. The program brings together diverse and experienced mentors with mentees who have a connection to agricultural-dependent communities. The National Mentoring Program builds on the Stage 1 FDF Drought Resilience Leaders Mentoring Program that was delivered in 2021-2022.

This Section describes the evaluation findings relating to the National Mentoring Program. The Evaluation found that the mentoring program is contributing towards its intended outcomes and the design and delivery of the program have been fit for purpose.

Specifically, the Evaluation found that:




- The mentoring program has made strong progress towards its intended outcomes (Section 8.1).
- ARLF is delivering the mentoring program to 203 participants across two rounds (Section 8.2).
- The mentoring program is creating positive outcomes for participants (Section 8.3).
- The design and delivery of the mentoring program was effective (Section 8.4).
- There are three opportunities to improve the program (Section 8.5).

8.1 The mentoring program has made strong progress towards its intended outcomes

The overarching assessment is that the mentoring program has made good progress towards achieving its intended short-term outcomes. It is important to note that this assessment has been made primarily based on Round 1 of the program. Round 2 was underway during the evaluation data collection period. Nous will update the assessment of outcomes to consider both rounds of the program in the final evaluation report. The assessment against outcomes is shown in Table 19 below.

Table 19 | Summary of assessment against the intended National Mentoring Program outcomes

OUTCOME	ASSESSMENT	RATIONALE
Communication, social connection and collaboration.	 Developing	The program provided participants with several channels of communication and opportunities to collaborate and connect with each other. Many participants reported building strong connections with their mentor/mentee and improving communication with their community (see Section 7.3.1).
Diversity of community members and organisations.	 Limited	Across both rounds of the program, participants represent a diverse range of sectors and regions across Australia (see Section 7.3.1). There are many young mentees across both rounds however, there is limited engagement with First Nations people.
Awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies.	 Developing	The program content does not have a drought focus and there have been limited reports from participants on outcomes related to improved awareness or knowledge of strategies to prepare for drought (see Section 7.3.3).

OUTCOME	ASSESSMENT	RATIONALE
Place-based practices.	 Limited	Due to the broader resilience focus of the program, few participants have reported implementing or improving place-based practices as an outcome of the program (see Section 7.3.3).
Leadership capacity and capability.	 Fully realised (Round 1)	Leadership outcomes were commonly reported by participants including improved self-confidence, communication skills and self-awareness (see Section 7.3.2).
Community-based networks.	 Fully realised (Round 1)	The program enabled participants to broaden, diversify and strengthen their community-based networks. Most participants reported that the program enabled them to network with participants, create new networks outside their community and strengthen community-based networks (see Section 7.3.1).

8.2 ARLF is delivering the mentoring program to 210 participants across two rounds

The mentoring program involved 66 participants in Round 1 and 144 in Round 2. Participants from across Round 1 and Round 2 represent all states and territories. Across both rounds 66 per cent of participants were female (77 per cent in Round 1 and 61 per cent in Round 2). The age of mentors and mentees differed. The average age of mentors across both rounds was 54 with only 3 per cent aged between 18 to 35. Meanwhile, the average age for mentees was 37 across both rounds with 28 per cent aged between 18 to 35. Engagement with First Nations participants is low across both rounds with three per cent of participants identifying as First Nations in Round 1 and two per cent in Round 2. 24 per cent of participants in both rounds had engaged in the Drought Resilience Leaders Mentoring program, the earlier iteration of the HRCPD Initiative’s mentoring program. Participants across both rounds of the program represent a diversity of sectors, with representation across sectors mixed across mentors and mentees in both rounds.

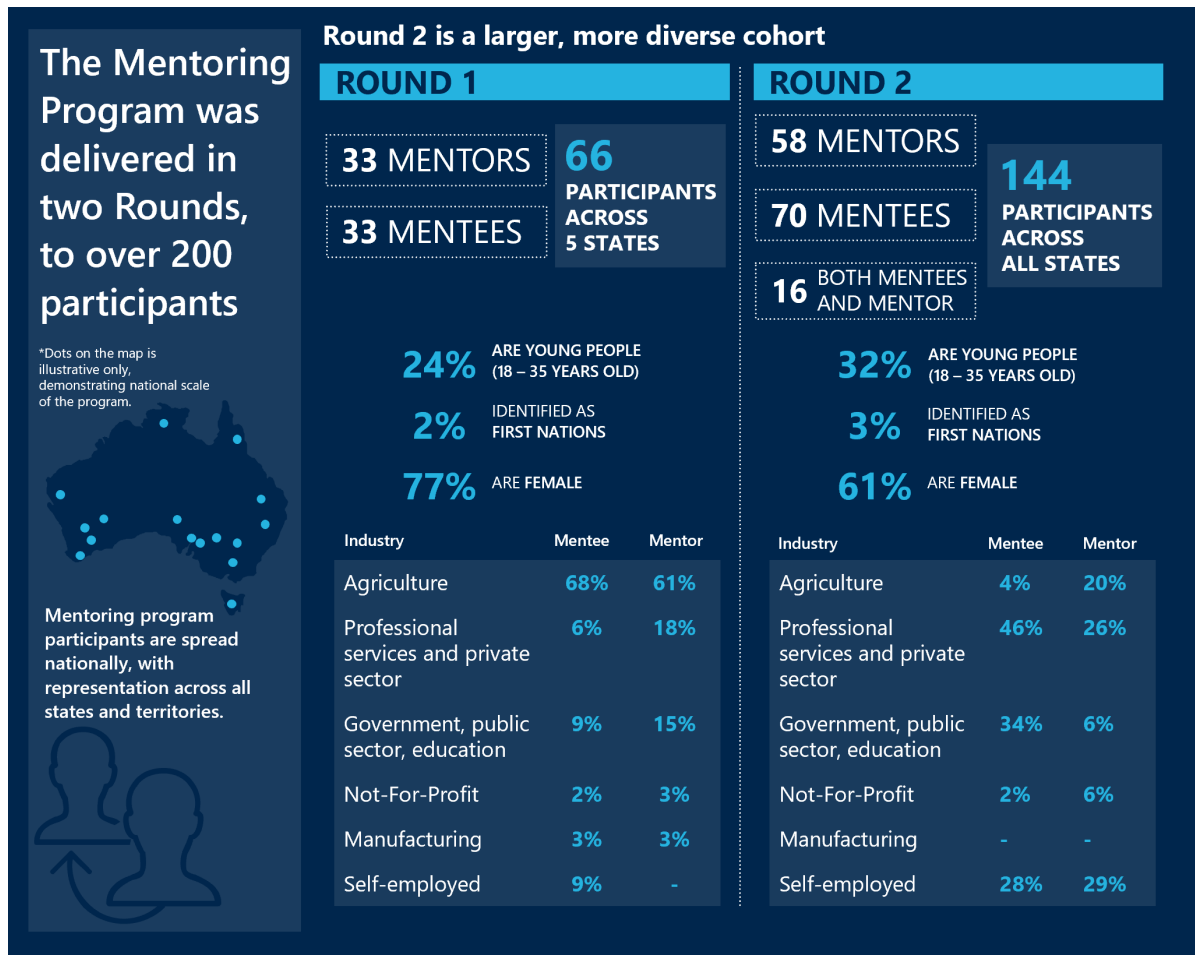
Participants completed questions on their experience with drought, community resilience and network membership at the application stage. They also highlighted their goals and objectives. Key insights from participant responses are outlined below:

- Mentees and mentors across both rounds had similar levels of experience with drought, community resilience and network membership.** Mentees in Round 1 and Round 2 reported the same level of experience with, or knowledge of, drought (avg = 3.7 out of 5). Mentors had more experience in Round 2 (avg = 4.2 out of 5) compared to Round 1 (avg = 3.8 out of 5). Meanwhile, participants in Round 2 had slightly less experience on average with community resilience (mentee = 3.3, mentor = 4.1) than Round 1 (mentee = 3.6, mentor = 4.2). Lastly, participants in Round 2 were members of fewer organisations and networks than Round 1 (Rd 1 = 58% mentees, 89% mentors; Rd 2 = 57% mentees, 74% mentors).
- Mentors and mentees in both rounds highlighted leadership development as the primary focus area.** Participants in Round 1 and Round 2 both expected the program to deliver the greatest impact to themselves personally, followed by their communities. Mentees in Round 1 and Round 2 both expressed a desire to learn new skills in the program to better assist their communities. Reciprocity was a common motivation for mentors in both rounds. Mentors in both rounds reported their

motivations for participating included 'giving back' to their communities and industries. Mentors also reported a desire to learn from mentees.

Figure 28 includes an overview of the geographic and demographic characteristics of mentoring program participants.

Figure 28 | Geographic and demographic characteristics of National Mentoring Program participants



8.3 The mentoring program is creating positive outcomes for participants

The evaluation has observed that the mentoring program is creating positive outcomes for participants as it relates to networks and leadership capability. Participants intend to realise benefits beyond the completion of the formal components of the mentoring program and are eager for support to realise this.

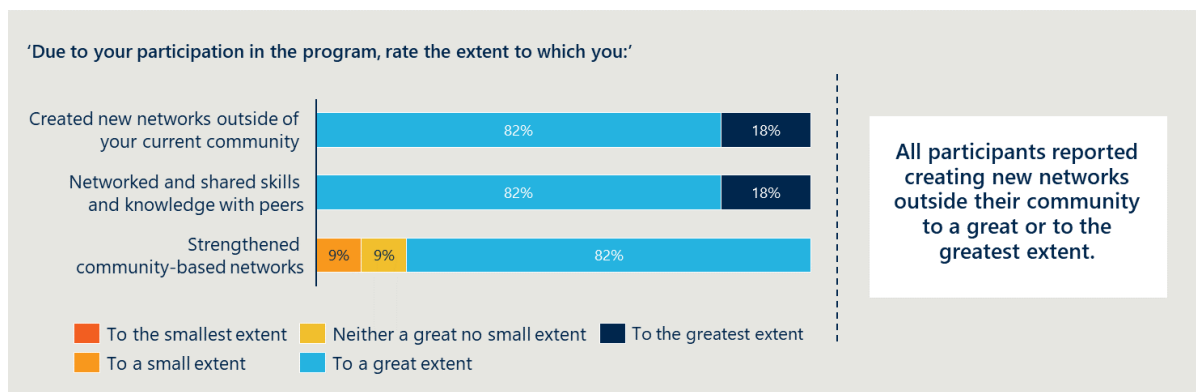
This Section provides detailed findings on the progress of the mentoring program towards its intended outcomes. Namely:

- Participants have broadened, diversified and strengthened their networks (PO1 & PO7)
- The mentoring program has strengthened participant leadership capacity and capability (PO6)
- Outcomes relating to drought preparedness are a secondary benefit for participants (PO4 & PO5)
- Participants intend to realise benefits beyond the completion of the mentoring program activities.

8.3.1 Participants have broadened, diversified and strengthened their networks

Participant’s professional and personal networks have expanded through their participation in the mentoring program. The national and online nature of the program meant that participants had a unique opportunity to transcend geographic barriers and connect with people from across the country. The national, online nature of the program was noted as a strength of the HRCPD Initiative mentoring program, when compared to other mentoring programs delivered in the isolation of a region, state or territory. All Round 1 (11 out of 11) survey respondents reported that the program enabled them to create new networks outside their current community to a great or to the greatest extent, as shown in Figure 29.

Figure 29 | Survey responses to networking outcomes



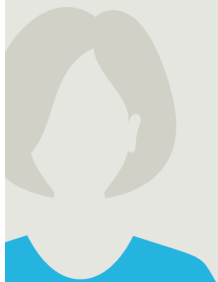
Source: Round one participant completion survey (April 2024), n = 11

The diversity of industries represented by participants also contributed to the diversification of participants’ networks. There were 11 professions represented in Round 1. Most Round 1 participants had an agriculture background. Round 2 was more diverse with 27 professions represented. Most Round 2 participants were employed in the private sector or self-employed. In interviews, two mentors reported that they had created new connections with people from other industries who they would not have otherwise interacted with. This was especially evident for agriculturally employed participants who welcomed an opportunity to build connections with participants outside the sector to learn about diverse responses and experiences of drought. One mentee with a background in agriculture reported appreciation for being matched with a mentor outside her field, noting the opportunity to broaden her network and the substantial learning gained from her mentor’s diverse experience.

Participants built strong and deep relationships through the program. This included relationships with their allocated mentor/mentee and with other participants of the program. The 12-month duration of the program nurtured strong connections between mentors and mentees. One mentor and two mentees specifically noted that the 12-month duration was important to build trust and rapport with their mentor or mentee. Stakeholders highlighted the role that the Mighty Networks platform played to enable relationship building between the broader participant cohort. One mentor noted using the participant directory on Mighty Networks to organise catchups with other mentors on a work-related interstate trip.

Figure 30 below highlights a case study of a participant that diversified her network through her mentor and created strong connections with other program participants.

Figure 30 | Case study on networking outcomes achieved through the mentoring program



The National Mentoring program has enabled participants to diversify their network and create strong connections outside their community. One woman who has participated in the program both as a mentee and mentor reflected on the program's effectiveness in expanding and diversifying her network. Although she had anticipated a focus on farm drought strategy, she reflected that the pairing with a mentor outside of agriculture provided unique benefits. The cross-sector match both enabled her to diversify her network and enriched her perspective due to her mentor's differing knowledge and experience. Beyond connecting with her mentor, she also noted connecting with other participants in the program, many of which she stays in regular contact with beyond the program.

8.3.2 The mentoring program has strengthened participant leadership capacity and capability

Leadership outcomes are among the primary benefits that participants reported. Over 90 per cent of Round 1 survey respondents reported that the program enabled them to strengthen their leadership capacity or capability and 81 per cent reported an improvement in their confidence to take on a leadership role in their community to a great or to the greatest extent. Outcomes relating to increased confidence to help others, increased self-confidence, improved communication skills and increased self-awareness were also commonly reported. Quotes that reinforce these themes are provided in Figure 31.

Figure 31 | Leadership themes from interviews and survey responses

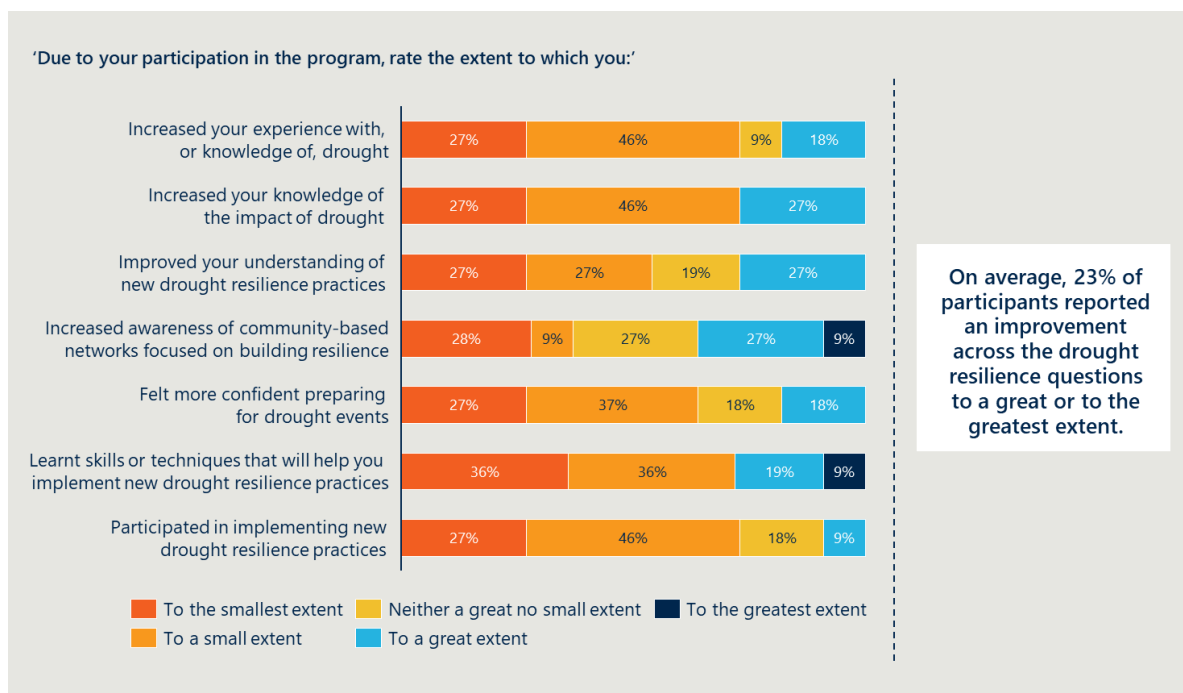
	Increased confidence to help others		Communication skills	
Mentors	<i>Confidence to put study into action.</i>	<i>Growing confidence in how to help people grow.</i>	<i>I am much bolder to ask questions and listen more carefully.</i>	<i>...I have learned that sometimes rather than dishing out advice it is more useful in the long-term to just ask more questions or listen that little bit longer..</i>
	Increased self-confidence		Increased self-awareness	
Mentees	<i>I was made to feel empowered, confident and ready to advocate for and represent the interests of rural women.</i>	<i>Personal development and continuing to develop greater leadership abilities which will flow into broader community interactions.</i>	<i>Growth in my leadership, understanding of myself and understanding of how to work with others.</i>	<i>It has given me a greater understanding of my personality and how it impacts my professional and personal relationships.</i>

Source: Participant interviews and round one participant completion survey (April 2024), n = 11

8.3.3 Outcomes relating to drought preparedness are a secondary benefit for participants

The mentoring program was strategically designed to support network building and leadership development without an exclusive focus on drought-related issues. For example, drought was not a theme of the learning sessions conducted across both rounds of the program. As a result, the achievement of drought related outcomes was rated to a lesser extent by participants than leadership development outcomes. As shown in Figure 32, on average only 23 per cent of Round 1 participants reported that the mentoring program enabled them to increase their experience, knowledge, understanding, awareness, confidence or skills, techniques and practices as it related to different aspects of drought preparedness.

Figure 32 | Survey responses to drought questions



Source: Round one participant completion survey (April 2024), n = 11

8.3.4 Participants intend to realise benefits beyond the completion of the mentoring program activities

Participants of the mentoring program intend to take action to sustain their new connections and apply their new skills and capabilities. Participants highlighted some consistent actions:

- **Maintain regular contact with their mentee/mentor.** Four mentors and two mentees said that they have continued their mentoring relationship beyond the program and stay in regular contact. One round two mentee reflected positively on her mentor during the program graduation noting that they will keep in contact as they have become close friends through the program.
- **Pursue new leadership programs.** One mentor reported that his mentee pursued opportunities in rural leadership because of his improved confidence from the mentoring program. One mentee has gone on to complete a CIP Leadership activity within their region following their experience in the mentoring program, noting that he enjoyed the ability to apply the content from the NMP in practice.
- **Support the growth and development of other community members.** Four out of eleven survey respondents in the Round 1 completion survey reported that they wanted to support other community members. They hoped that sharing the knowledge they gained from the program could help others gain confidence and encourage them to take on leadership positions. One mentor said, "I would like to give young farmers and business people the confidence to hear their own voice. Often, they know what they want to achieve but lack in confidence."

It is expected that over time more participants will take action using the networks and capability they developed through the mentoring program. The evaluation will consider the broader benefits of the program to participant's organisations and communities as part of the final evaluation report.

8.4 The design and delivery of the mentoring program was effective

The evaluation has observed that the mentoring program was appropriately designed to meet the needs of participants. The delivery of both rounds of the program has also been mostly effective. These insights are explored further below.

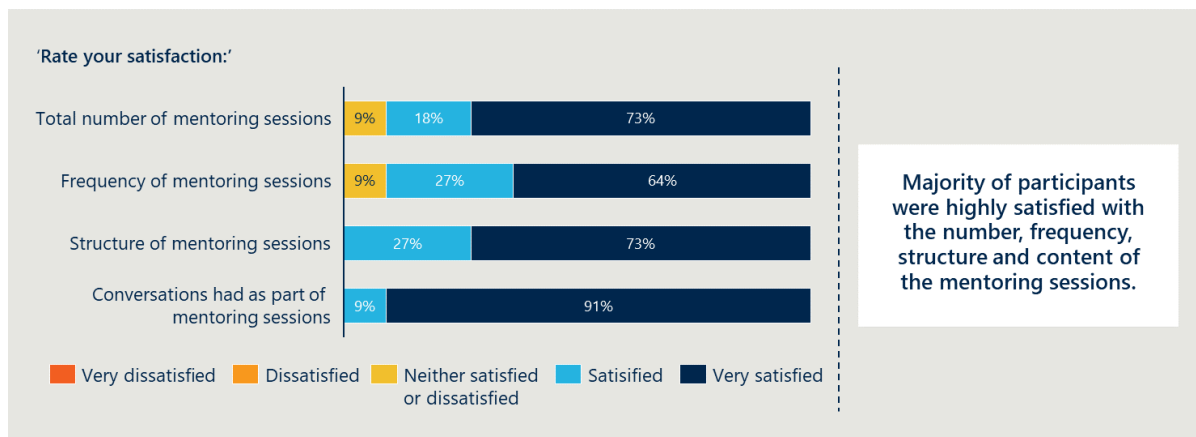
8.4.1 The mentoring program was appropriately designed to meet the program objectives

The program design built on the design of the Stage 1, Drought Resilience Leaders Mentoring program. ARLF implemented several design updates to the HRCPD Initiative mentoring program to reflect Stage 1 participant feedback and the broader focus on regional communities, not just the agriculture sector. ARLF implemented seven design changes:

- **Broadened the eligibility to include** those individuals from agricultural communities, aligned to the HRCPD Initiative's broader focus on community resilience to drought.
- **Staggered the program across two rounds** to enable early learnings from Round 1 to inform Round 2.
- **Extended the program to run over twelve months**, rather than six, to provide more time for participants to build relationships and to improve program flexibility.
- **Continued delivering learning sessions** based on positive feedback from Stage 1. There were 12 learning sessions in each round.
- **Increased flexibility for completing program activities** in broad periods throughout the program rather than set times.
- **Broadened the focus of the learning content beyond agriculture** to also include more general leadership capability.
- **Assigned program resources to elements that would add the most value for participants.** For example, mentor payments were discontinued and ARLF instead used this budget to recruit high quality facilitators with diverse experience.
- **Introduced a mentor coach** to provide support to mentors and to enable a consistent program experience for mentees.

Nearly all Round 1 survey respondents were very satisfied or satisfied with program design elements. The overall structure of the program, including the number of, frequency, structure and focus of the mentoring sessions, was received positively by most participants (see Figure 33).

Figure 33 | Participant satisfaction with the mentoring sessions

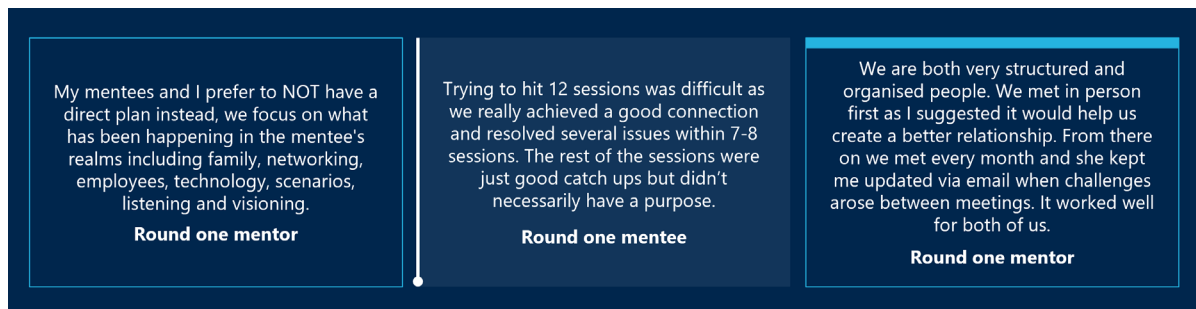


Source: Round one participant completion survey (April 2024), n = 11

Six participants cited the program flexibility as a strength of the program’s design. These participants all highlighted the lengthened timeframe of 12-months and the reduced prescription for mentor/mentee sessions as positive changes. Round 1 participants reported in their completion survey that the flexibility within the program enabled them to adapt delivery to suit their own and their mentees needs.

Two participants engaged by the evaluation provided ideas for how the program design could be further strengthened. One mentor noted that while the online delivery enabled wide and diverse connection, there may be value in incorporating face-to-face elements in the program to further strengthen participant relationships. One mentee also suggested that there is an opportunity to explore how the program could adapt to better attract young participants. For example, the mentee suggested that a more discipline-specific program and explicit opportunities for professional and career development may appeal more to young people. Feedback from Round 1 completion surveys is summarised below in Figure 34.

Figure 34 | Participant feedback from the Round 1 completion survey



Source: Round 1 participant completion survey (April 2024), n = 11

The learning sessions were an important component of the mentoring program. ARLF designed the learning sessions to supplement the mentoring sessions, intending to strengthen leadership skills and facilitate personal development. The sessions cover a broad range of topics related to communication, leadership, wellbeing and a First Nations focused session. Outcome panel participants confirmed that the selection of topics was appropriate in meeting the objectives of the learning sessions. Over 70 per cent of participants rated the learning sessions a seven or higher out of ten (with ten indicating the highest satisfaction). Participants identified two opportunities to strengthen the learning sessions:

- **Increase the diversity of content and participants.** One First Nations participant noted that the learning session content was at times 'western focused' and not suited to Indigenous producers. They recommended that ARLF consider increasing First Nations representation in the program as one way

to address the perceived lack of cultural safety. For example, leveraging a First Nations facilitator or Industry representative to participate in the learning sessions where available and appropriate.

- **Introduce a more prominent focus on social resilience and drought.** Broad feedback from interviews and surveys indicated that the learning content could have a clearer link to social resilience and drought. This is further confirmed through the low number of participants reporting outcomes related to drought preparedness. Two mentors noted that they were motivated to apply to the program due to the focus on drought and they would have preferred more drought focused topics.

8.4.2 The delivery of both rounds has been efficient and effective

An effective matching process enabled a positive experience for most mentors and mentees. Since the Stage 1 program, ARLF improved the mentor/mentee matching process. Instead of matching primarily on participant discipline or sector, ARLF matched mentees and mentors based on their objectives for the program. This meant that ARLF considered additional data, such as the participant goals discussed in an informal interview and other application responses, as well as the usual sectoral and demographic data. To further bolster this process, ARLF also recruited 'reserve' mentors and mentees to provide alternative options when participants were unhappy with their match or if they needed to withdraw from the program. In the small number of instances when mentees found the match was not right, it was due to a lack of overlapping experiences. For example, one mentee noted that they felt they could benefit more from a mentor with more practical farming experience. Consequently, overall participant satisfaction with the matching methodology was high, with 82 per cent of participants from both rounds reporting that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their mentor or mentee.

“Matching was so good it actually surprised me. At one point, I wasn't feeling great, and she had her own lived experiences from that”

Round one mentee

Figure 35 | Survey data on matching satisfaction and program experience



Source: Round 1 participant completion survey (April 2024), n = 11.

Support mechanism helped participants get the most out of the program. Participant feedback on the program support mechanisms across both rounds was overwhelmingly positive. Participants emphasised the conducive and secure environment that the ARLF program delivery lead, mentoring coach and the communities of practice fostered. Each of these mechanisms is outlined further below:

- **The ARLF program delivery lead offered substantial support to both mentors and mentees.** Participants highlighted the delivery lead's responsiveness and the high quality of assistance they received. Active and encouraging engagement in response to participant queries characterised the support. One mentee noted that, "If you reach out, [ARLF] are always there. When someone asks a question, they are positively championed."
- **The mentoring coach effectively supported mentors in managing their partnerships.** Participant feedback indicated a high level of satisfaction with the support the mentoring coach provided them, such as with navigating the Mighty Networks platform or accessing program resource. Feedback noted that the mentoring coach was accessible and communicated in a culturally sensitive way, which

was particularly beneficial to First Nations participants. One First Nations mentor said, “The mentor coach was brilliant and used down to earth language. She was able to explain a lot of stuff to Indigenous people”.

- **Communities of practice for mentees and mentors provided forums for participants to exchange strategies to strengthen mentoring relationships.** ARLF program leads reported that mentees have used these sessions to share tips and notes with each other. Most of the mentors specifically mentioned the mentor community of practice as a strength of the program. One mentor noted that they were a good opportunity to provide program feedback, “The mentor-only sessions are brilliant because you can say anything you like.”

Overall, participant satisfaction with these support structures suggests that they played a positive role in supporting the program's success.

8.5 There are three opportunities to improve the program

There are opportunities for ARLF to enhance the design and delivery of the mentoring program based on participant feedback and Evaluation findings. These recommendations are outlined in Table 20 below.

Table 20 | Design and delivery recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS	SUPPORT FINDINGS
Future initiative design	
<p>1. Adapt future programs to reflect participant feedback</p> <p>Participants have reflected positively on the design changes adopted by ARLF based on feedback from Stage 1. ARLF can consider incorporating feedback from this program to future programs. Participants have provided the following suggestions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate reverse mentoring. • Expand the program duration. • Incorporate face-to-face interaction. 	See Section 8.4.2
<p>2. Continue the strengths of the current program</p> <p>Program participants have provided positive feedback on elements of the mentoring program that ARLF can consider retaining in future programs. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retain the flexible program structure. This flexibility allows participants to effectively their mentoring sessions alongside their existing commitments. • Maintain the communities of practice sessions. These sessions are valuable for maintaining open lines of communication for feedback and for allowing participants to connect and share knowledge. • Continue the cross-sector and cross-region matching. Participants have highlighted the substantial benefits of such diverse pairings. 	See Section 8.3.1 and 8.4.1
<p>3. Share learnings with other similar programs</p> <p>ARLF could capitalise on the distinctive national and cross-sectoral approach of the National Mentoring program by sharing its learnings with other similar initiatives.</p>	See Section 8.4.2



9 Evaluating the National Learning Network

The National Learning Network (known as 'Drought Ready') is a national network to help individuals and communities connect, support and learn from each other to help their communities to adapt and prepare for drought. Drought Ready targets individuals who have participated in programs funded by the FDF.

Drought Ready is delivered through an online platform (Facebook). Facebook enables ARLF, individuals and organisations to share knowledge and stories on experiences of drought and to communicate drought resilience and networking events.

This Section describes the evaluation findings relating to the National Learning Network, referred to as *Drought Ready*.

Specifically, the evaluation found that:





- Drought Ready is progressing towards its intended outcomes (Section 9.1).
- The Drought Ready platform hosts a growing number of members from all states and territories (Section 9.2).
- Outcomes for platform members are emerging (Section 9.3).
- The design of Drought Ready is aligned with regional community needs (Section 9.4).
- There are two opportunities to improve Drought Ready (Section 9.5).

9.1 Drought Ready is progressing towards its intended outcomes

The MEL Plan expected that Drought Ready would contribute to six of the seven outcomes identified for the HRCPD initiative. Noting that the platform has only been operating for ten months, the achievement of outcomes is still emerging, and most outcomes have been observed to a limited extent. Assessment against the intended outcomes of Drought Read is shown below in Table 21.

Table 21 | Assessment of progress against the intended National Learning Network outcomes

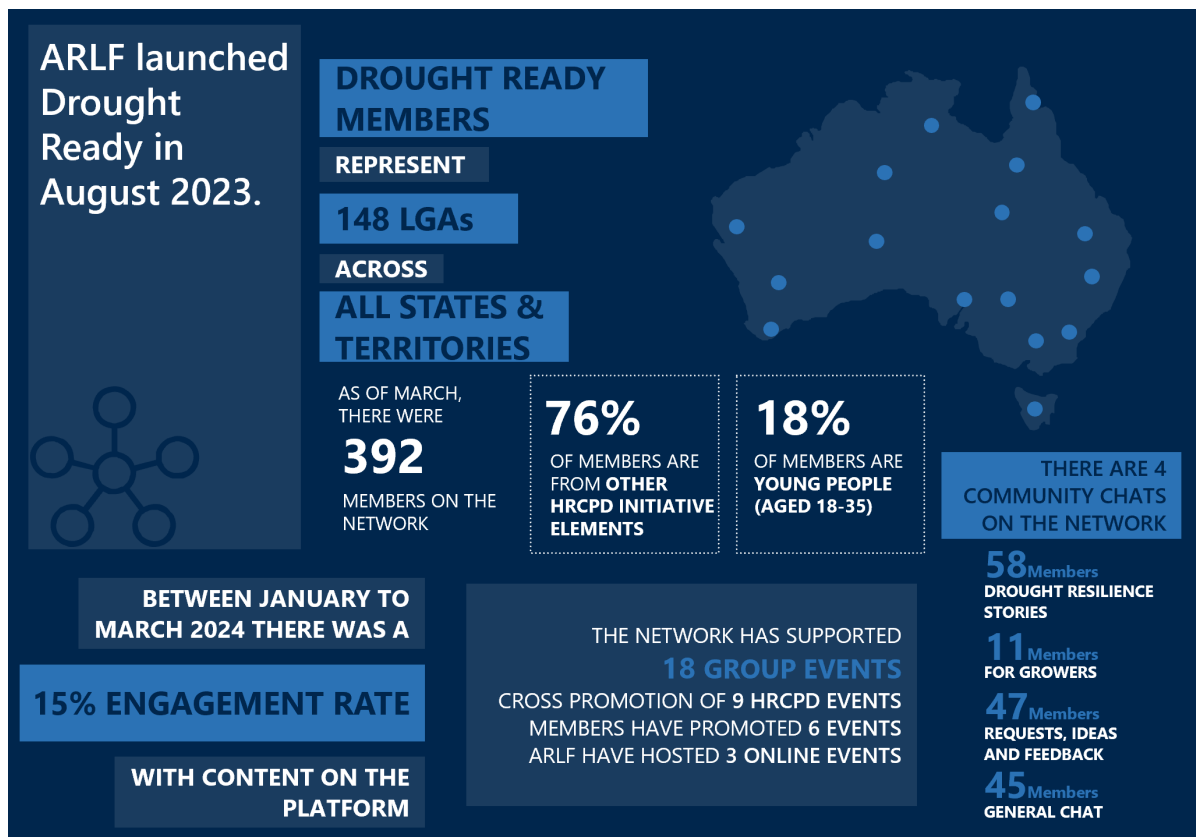
OUTCOME	ASSESSMENT	RATIONALE
Communication, social connection and collaboration.	 Developing	The program provided participants with several channels of communication and opportunities to collaborate and connect with each other. Many participants reported building strong connections with their mentor/mentee and improving communication with their community (see Section 7.3.1).
Services, resources, infrastructure and facilities.	 Developing	Members and ARLF moderators are sharing resources and services related to drought on the network (see Section 8.3.2).

OUTCOME	ASSESSMENT	RATIONALE
Diversity of community members and organisations.	 Limited	Membership is made up of individuals from a range of sectors and backgrounds however, most members are female. Stakeholders have also reported low levels of First Nations content and participation on the platform.
Awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies.	 Limited	Members and ARLF are sharing knowledge on strategies to prepare for and adapt to drought. Some members have reported an increase in knowledge of strategies to prepare for drought (see Section 8.3.3).
Leadership capacity and capability.	 Limited	ARLF are promoting the CIP leadership activities and other leadership events such the Leadership Circles. The impact of these events has not yet been reported (see Section 8.3.3).
Community-based networks.	 Limited	The network is providing members with networking opportunities through online events and chats (see Section 8.3.1)

9.2 The Drought Ready platform hosts a growing number of members from all states and territories

Drought Ready is in its early stages of delivery. The platform was launched in August 2023. Engagement and membership on the platform have continued to grow. The evaluation has considered participant membership and engagement data until March 2024. As of March 2024, the network had accumulated 392 members. The number of members has continued to grow with 600 members on the platform as of June 2024. Figure 36 below provides a summary of membership activity and engagement on the platform since its launch.

Figure 36 | Output summary of the Drought Ready network



9.3 Outcomes for platform members are emerging

Drought Ready, still in the initial stages of deployment, is beginning to deliver outcomes for its members. The platform serves as a tool for individuals to establish connections and enables the exchange of resources and information. The Evaluation has observed that:

- Drought Ready is supporting individuals to build new connections (PO1 & PO7)
- The platform is facilitating information and knowledge sharing (PO2 & PO4)
- Drought Ready is supporting individuals to strengthen their community leadership (PO6)

Each of these findings is explored in turn below.

9.3.1 Drought Ready is supporting individuals to build new connections

The platform effectively facilitates the creation of new connections among members engaged in drought resilience activities. Leveraging its online infrastructure, the Drought Ready platform enables connection and relationship building beyond geographical, sectoral and demographic boundaries. Platform member feedback highlights the value of engaging with a network of peers with similar focus areas. Six out of ten surveyed members reported more robust community networks as an outcome of their involvement on the platform. The platform's features such as chats, forums, and webinars assist members to connect based on common interests and professional backgrounds. One interviewed member reported connecting with another member through the online webinar due to their shared interest on the topic. There are chats based on specific streams where members have connected on shared interests. For example, the 'For Growers' chat (which has 11 members) is specifically for agricultural professionals and the 'Drought

Resilience Stories' chat (which has 58 members) is for members that are delivering drought resilience projects.

The formation of new, national connections is benefiting all members of the Platform. This is especially true for those in remote locations or in small communities who would otherwise have limited opportunities to expand their network. Over 15 per cent of Drought Ready Network members are from remote or very remote communities. As outlined in 4.3.1, CIP program participants highlighted the importance of social connections to counter the social isolation that members of a remote community face. The Drought Ready network is one way in which the HRCPD Initiative fosters new social connections. One CIP participant reiterated this when they highlighted that the platform allowed them to overcome the difficulty of attending in-person events to network with likeminded individuals online.

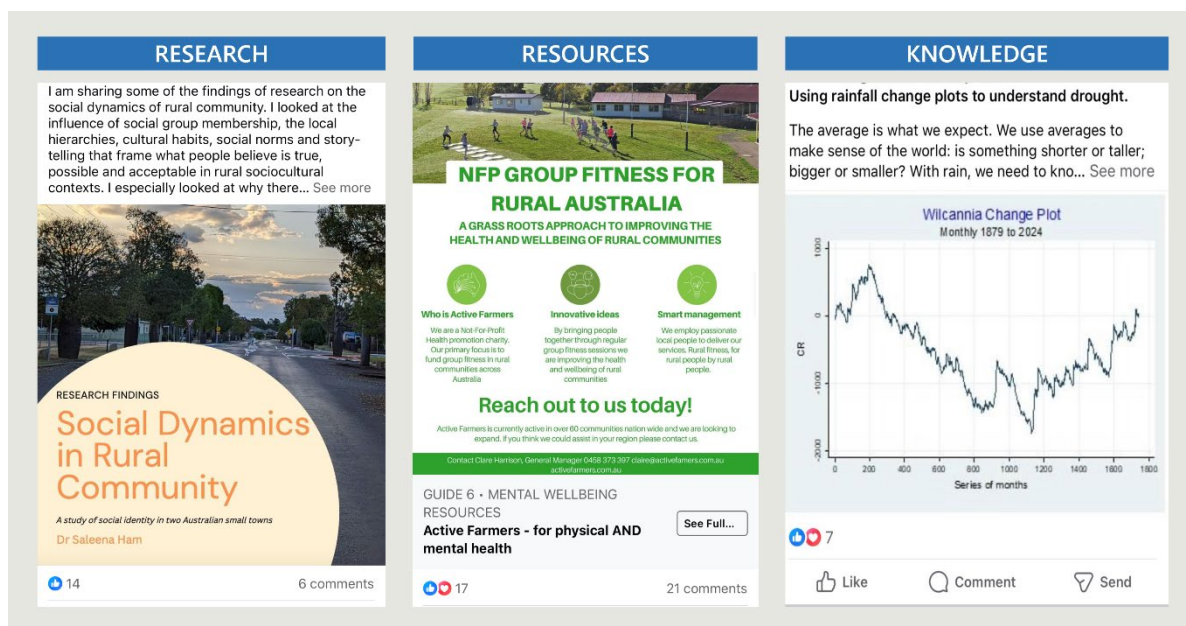
9.3.2 The platform is facilitating information and resource sharing

The Drought Ready platform is successfully enabling ARLF, FRRR and members to share information and knowledge across the network. Three broad categories of information and knowledge has been shared so far:

- **Members are increasingly sharing news articles and other resources related to community resilience, drought preparedness and networking.** Different posts have shared research on community resilience, online wellbeing resources for rural business owners and knowledge on using rainfall plots to understand drought, to name just a few. Various posts have also shared both physical and virtual events happening across Australia.
- **The network facilitates member participation in webinars and online events that share knowledge related to drought resilience.** An expert in Rural Sociology has delivered webinars with topics ranging from social dynamics to conflict resolution in drought. During the session, attendees are encouraged to introduce themselves, ask questions and openly discuss the topic. There has been a range of seven to 16 attendees at the live webinars however, the recordings have been viewed over 100 times.
- **The network serves as a channel for promoting ARLF and FRRR activities centred on drought resilience.** The Platform has been a valuable communication mechanism for ARLF and FRRR to promote information and resources, including relevant HRCPD Initiative webinars, upcoming CIP Leadership activities and the Expertise Pool. Posts promoting the CIP leadership activities have also prompted members to inquire about the sessions in their region. While these posts are useful for members to stay on track with upcoming events, ARLF program leads and network members have expressed concerns of the network becoming a 'notice board' rather than a place for people to connect and collaborate.

Figure 37 includes examples of each form of information and knowledge sharing.

Figure 37 | Post shared by members related to community resilience



Source: Drought Ready Facebook page

9.3.3 Drought Ready is supporting individuals to strengthen their knowledge and capabilities

There is emerging evidence that the information and resources shared across the Drought Ready network is strengthening the knowledge and capabilities of members. This includes improving their understanding of drought management and community leadership.

Four members engaged through evaluation interviews commented on the value and usefulness of the content shared on the platform. The members found it valuable to see what activities other communities are delivering, engage with lessons learnt from other regions, and increase their understanding of best practices. These members noted that they experienced tangible knowledge and capability related benefits from the information and resources they access through the network. A CPLO in Queensland commented on the convenience of being able to learn about other events, organisations and projects around Australia in one place.

Members have also found the webinars valuable. In one interview a member reflected on how they have transferred insights gained from the Social Dynamics webinar into their professional life, cultivating a newfound engagement with the subject. The 25 members who have shared or liked posts related to the webinar reinforces the usefulness of the content.

9.4 The design of Drought Ready aligns with regional community needs

This Section provides findings on the design and implementation of the Drought Ready platform, namely:

- The network was effectively co-designed to meet the needs of communities
- The network design aligns with best practice Impact Networks
- The momentum of other HRCPD Initiative elements has supported member recruitment

- The facilitation and curation of platform content has supported member engagement
- The sustainability of the platform will require continued adaptation.

9.4.1 Drought Ready was effectively co-designed to meet community needs

ARLF applied a co-design process to design the Drought Ready platform so that the platform reflected the needs of its intended users. The co-design process used a collaborative working group structure with ten participants from diverse backgrounds across regional Australia. The working group included representation from each state, one First Nations participant and a cross-section of industries. The group met four times across a two-month period to participate in ARLF facilitated sessions, aiming to collectively agree on the design of the platform.

The Evaluation engaged two working group members. Both noted that this co-design process was highly successful and reported that the process enabled them to provide their diverse views and to contribute valuable feedback on Platform design. They attributed the success of the co-design process to two factors:

- **ARLF's facilitation** – Each design session followed a specific theme. The meeting agendas included clear decisions to make by the end of the session. Members also noted that the facilitators created a relaxed and comfortable environment. These strategies enabled structured and collaborative decision making and kept members engaged throughout the sessions.
- **The diversity of Working group members** - Network members confirmed that the group's diversity enabled unique and various perspectives to inform the network design. They were confident that the diversity of views considered in the initial design of the platform had contributed to the increasing member growth and engagement.

9.4.2 The design of the platform aligns with best practice Impact Networks

The design of the Drought Ready platform was also guided by the foundational elements of effective Impact Networks as characterised by David Ehrlichman³². The core aims of Impact Networks are to bring people together to:







- build relationships across boundaries
- leverage existing work, skills, and motivations of the group
- make progress amid unpredictable conditions.

The Evaluation has assessed that the design and functionality of the Drought Ready network aligns with the best practice Impact Network principles³³. The principles reflect effective practices to implement Impact Networks. Table 22 presents the list of principles, what effective practice looks like and the Drought Ready design features and functionality that aligns with the principle.

³² David Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks*, 2021.

³³ David Ehrlichman, David Sawyer & Jane Wei-Skillern, *Five Steps to Building an Effective Impact Network*, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 11 November 2015 (accessed 28 June 2024)

Table 22 | Assessment of the theory of Impact Networks applied to the Drought Ready platform

Impact Networks principles	Application	Assessment	Drought Ready design features and functionality
Clarify purpose	Clarifying the initial purpose is critical to encourage membership. The purpose should be continually evolving.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose and rules of the group defined at the landing page that new members must agree to before joining. • A feedback mechanism and an ongoing working group of network members to ensure the network is evolving to meet member needs.
Convene the right people	The 'right' people include everyone impacted by the issue. Create a space where they can interact, think, talk and collaborate in new ways.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective methods for recruiting to the platform through other ARLF events and channels to ensure the network is reaching its intended participants of the program. • Chats and groups focused on topics aligned on drought preparation to foster communication and connection between members with similar interests.
Cultivate trust	Create trust between members and with the group.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ARLF 'moderator' and admin team maintain a safe environment and ensure the quality of the shared content meets community expectations. • The creation of 'Leadership circles' in a smaller group to facilitate deeper connection and trust.
Coordinate actions	Identify and coordinate work that is happening so members can leverage resources and collaborate on goals.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The promotion of other HRCPI elements to increase awareness of available resources and upcoming events. • Created templates to encourage the sharing of projects so that members are aware of ongoing drought preparedness efforts.
Collaborate generously	Encourage collaboration between members.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help guides provide members with a structure to follow in their engagement and collaboration with other members.
 design features are meeting principle.			

9.4.3 The momentum of other HRCPI Initiative elements has supported member recruitment

The pool of potential members to recruit from has steadily grown since the Drought Ready network was launched in August 2023. At launch, FRRR had completed one tranche of CIP grants, ARLF had yet to begin leadership activities and Round 2 of the mentoring program had just begun. Since the launch, potential members now include all CIP delivery organisations and CPLOs, participants of CIP projects, Round 1 and Round 2 mentoring participants, and participants of the CIP leadership activities.

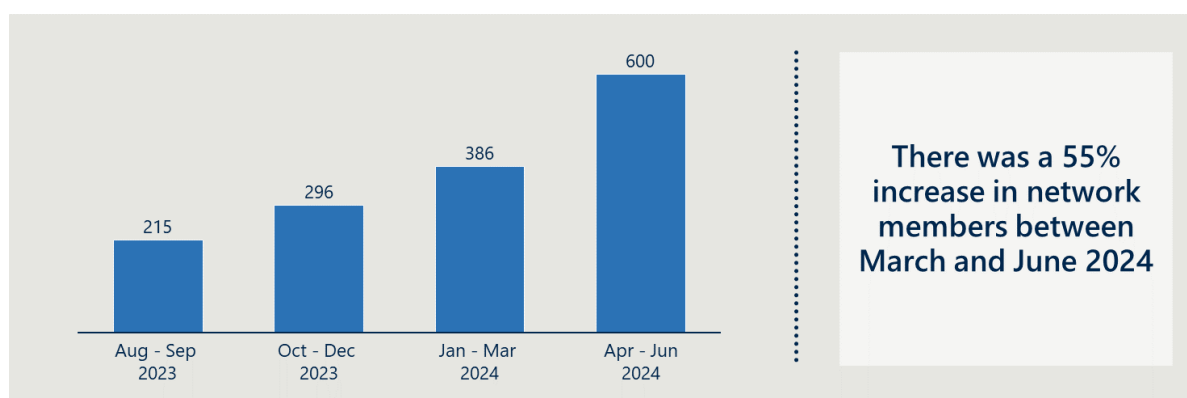
Nous observations during regional evaluation working sessions from August 2023 to February 2024 indicated that HRCPI Initiative participants had mixed but growing awareness of the platform. A key source of growth has been the leadership activities. The increase in leadership activities from February 2024 has provided ARLF with a captive audience to promote the network. For example, ARLF has

highlighted the platform at the end of each leadership activity. Furthermore, ARLF has started to expand marketing of the platform to all funded CIP organisations and other HRCPD Initiative participants. This is timely as only six of 30 CIP organisations engaged in deep dives were aware of the Drought Ready Platform. Five were members on the platform. The network’s uptake among HRCPD Initiative participants has since grown, with CIP leadership and grant participants representing 21 per cent and 14 per cent of membership respectively.

There is a growing membership group of non-HRCPD Initiative stakeholders joining the platform. ARLF and DAFF agreed to extend access to the network to all FDF funded programs in early 2024. The broader membership has been a strong contributor to the growth of the network. Of the 215 members that indicated an affiliation to a specific FDF program, 24 percent were non-HRCPD Initiative stakeholders. ARLF reported that they are confident that the growing membership base will be a strength of the platform and support the effectiveness of the network.

The success of the Drought Ready Network in engaging this pool of potential members is reflected in the steady increase in members since the launch. On average, the network has added 43 new members each month. Recently, the network has recently experienced exponential growth in membership with a 55 per cent increase in members between March and June this year. Figure 38 below presents the growth in membership from August 2023 to June 2024.

Figure 38 | Growth in network members between August 2023 to June 2024



Source: Platform member insights data provided by ARLF

9.4.4 The facilitation and curation of platform content has supported member engagement

ARLF has played an active role to facilitate and curate the platform. For example, ARLF has hosted webinars, created topic-based and Q&A forums, and encouraged posts from regional stakeholders. Two platform members reported that the regular frequency and broad range of topics in ARLF’s curated content has maintained their engagement with the network as there is always something that will be of interest to them. One interviewed member expressed the importance of having a real person as a moderator. They stated that having a moderator with a strong understanding of rural and regional Australia enabled the platform to maintain a genuine and authentic feel. ARLF delivery leads shared insights into what content they have learnt to be the most effective at building member engagement:

- **Drought content that appeals to a national audience and the diversity of experiences.** This includes content not specific to agriculture like tips for small rural businesses, art and murals and general wellbeing guides.

- **Weekly posts that encourage members to share and communicate with each other on a regular basis.** One example of this is the Sunday Shares posts. These posts encourage members to share anything such as their business, event or project, or to ask for help and recommendations. One member reported that these regular posts help keep the network front of mind.
- **Member introduction posts that encourage new members to introduce themselves.** The posts happen weekly and include the new members background, interests and motivation for joining. These posts facilitate connections between members with shared interests and backgrounds.

Platform members feel that ongoing facilitation on the platform is critical for its success. ARLF expect that the effort to facilitate content on the platform will increase as membership grows. Four working group members expressed concerns for the sustainability of the network without ARLF facilitation.

9.4.5 The sustainability of the platform will require continued adaptation

ARLF continue to evolve the network to respond to participant preferences. To ensure that the network continues to meet members' needs, ARLF have created a skills-based working group to guide the ongoing improvement of the network. The working group has a diverse membership and includes active users of the network. ARLF has also continually incorporated feedback from members, such as:

- **Introducing a weekly 'Wednesday Wins' post for members to share more personalised content like stories or shared experiences of success.** ARLF started these weekly posts in response to member feedback for more opportunities to celebrate successes from across the network. This has led to some members creating detailed posts to share their accomplishments.
- **Developing a centralised point for resources so members can easily access resources shared on the network.** In response to member feedback, ARLF has started to categorise mental wellbeing resources so members can access them on the Guides Section of the group.

The continued adaptation of the Platform is also critical aspect of the Impact Network theory. As per best practice guidance, Impact networks should continually evolve. Impact Network theory also emphasises the importance of increasing network resilience to withstand disruption. One approach is to decentralise connections by removing the 'dominant hub' so the network is not dependent on any one person or organisation. In the case of the Drought Ready platform, this means supporting the networks within the platform so that they are not solely reliant on the support ARLF provides. Continued adaptation and decentralisation of platform will be vital to the sustainability and ongoing impact of Drought Ready beyond the program funding.

9.5 There are two opportunities to improve Drought Ready

There are opportunities for ARLF to enhance the design and delivery of the Drought Ready platform based on participant feedback and Evaluation findings. These recommendations are outlined in Table 23 below.

Table 23 | Design and delivery recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS	SUPPORT FINDINGS
Current initiative delivery	
<p>1. Prepare for the long-term sustainability of the platform</p> <p>Working group members have expressed concerns on the long-term sustainability of the platform. ARLF can consider strategies to ensure the network maintains its momentum and engagement levels beyond the program. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define the moderator role beyond the funding cycle to ensure members received ongoing guidance and feedback. • Decentralise connections by fostering self-organisation and strong relationships between members. For example, promoting regional events or encouraging interest-based groups on the platform. <p>2. Strengthen member engagement through personalised and curated content</p> <p>ARLF can consider the following approaches:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to encourage sharing of personal content. Members have noted a preference for personalised content about people’s stories and experiences. • Create a central library for resources and files. ARLF have started to create a library for mental health resources on the network. They can consider extending that to other resources and categorising them so they can be readily accessed. 	<p>See Section 9.4.5</p> <p>See Section 9.4.4</p>



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