Impact Insights from FRRR and ARLF

Future Drought Fund's Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative

Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Future Drought Fund

FRRR
Foundation for Rural Regional Renewal

Australian Rural Leadership Foundation

Acknowledgements

FRRR (Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal) and ARLF (Australian Rural Leadership Foundation) acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations across Australia, especially those where we work and fund organisations and activities. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the continuation of the custodial, cultural and educational practices of Australia's First Peoples.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that this report may contain the names and images of people who have passed away.

The delivery partners acknowledge and thank the volunteers who sat on the Program Advisory Committee; the FRRR Board; the ARLF Board; the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry staff; and the FRRR and ARLF who brought this program to life. We also acknowledge the considered input from Nous Group in shaping and undertaking the evaluation.

We also sincerely thank and acknowledge the extraordinary efforts of the volunteers and staff in the partnering community groups, all of whom played a key role in the overall success of this Initiative.

FRRR and ARLF received funding from the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund to deliver the Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative.

Contents

Executive summary

Established in 2019, the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund (FDF) recognises drought has significant and often interconnected economic, social and environmental impacts in agriculture-dependent communities. Significant evidence, which is backed up by the experience of both the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal (FRRR) and Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF), strongly demonstrates that strengthening social capital is beneficial in adapting to drought and the impacts of a changing climate.

Between 2023 and 2025, FRRR and ARLF partnered to deliver the **FDF Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative (HRCPDI),** part of FDF's Communities stream. Together, they delivered more than $29.6 million in support to enable accessible and tangible opportunities for agriculture-dependent remote, rural and regional communities to come together and strengthen social resilience, by focussing conversations and action towards how their community could be better prepared for drought.

This involved a range of complementary program elements including grants to support both larger co-designed and smaller one-off projects, as well as a series of tailored leadership development activities in 35 regions (including a national mentoring program, the development of an online network, the procurement of expert advice and evaluation, and specialist delivery of all these elements, over multiple rounds and across the country.

Building on previous community-focussed programs including the FDF funded Networks to Build Drought Resilience and Drought Resilient Leaders programs, **the five Initiative elements separately and cumulatively** played an important role in **continuing resilience building efforts.** The FRRR-led codesigned grant making processes increased local collaboration and ensured community-designed projects were fit for purpose and moved beyond, but built upon, the traditional granting approaches. Regular engagement by the delivery partners with the community partner lead organisations (CPLOs), coupled with financial support for these critical backbone organisations, enhanced their capacity to continue to play a leading role in ongoing resilience building efforts.

Participants in the ARLF-led Leadership Activities gained practical tools and skills for adaptive leadership, systems thinking and collaborative problem solving. Mentors and mentees in the National Mentoring Program enabled peer learning and broadened networks to contribute to greater community resilience, while the National Learning Network enabled knowledge sharing between the 1,000 plus members to strengthen the capability to respond to drought.

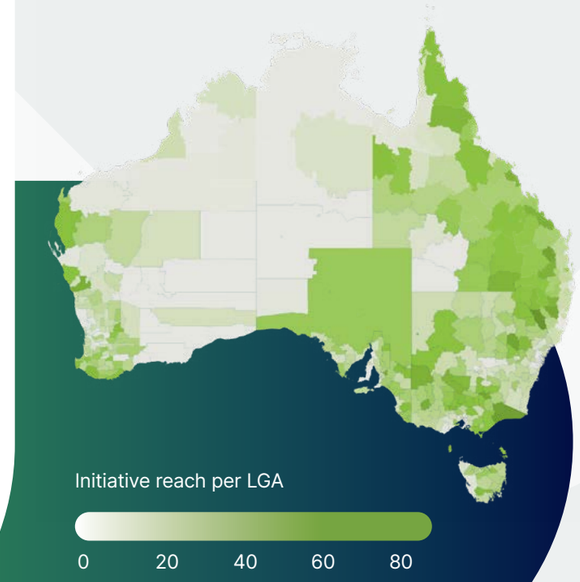
An in-depth two-and-a-half-year evaluation found that the **flexibility of the program,** coupled with a **targeted focus on engaging often underrepresented groups,** led to an **impressive boost in resilience** across the country.

It affirmed the belief that when communities lead and drive resilience building efforts, these efforts are sustained for longer, have ongoing positive impacts across the community and build local strengths that can adapt to a range of challenges.

The Initiative's success offers a blueprint for policy-makers and funders seeking to deliver system-level resilience in rural and regional communities.

The outcomes were tangible:

- Relevant, tailored place-based approaches strengthened drought preparedness;
- Communication, social connection and collaboration within and between communities grew;
- Local services, facilities, shared resources and infrastructure improved;
- More diverse groups of people and organisations were engaged;
- Volunteers and not-for-profit organisations became stronger and more skilled;
- Local leadership capacity was enhanced, and more people feel confident stepping up and shaping local drought preparedness initiatives; and
- New, expanded and more diverse networks were created.



The success of the Initiative adds to the evidence base about the value of investing in social capital, as a critical element when supporting communities to adapt to a drying and unpredictable climatic future. **It has reinforced the importance of social connectedness, community networks and investing in the practical skills, knowledge and community-wide awareness required to be better prepared for drought into the future.**

It is important that ongoing support is delivered with a patience that allows for outcomes to be realised over multiple years, enabling communities to continue their resilience building journey.

We thank the Australian Government and in particular the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF), for the opportunity to work together to deliver this Initiative. We acknowledge the enormous effort by everyone involved, especially the communities across Australia living the actual experience of climate change and droughts.

At a glance

Grants Awarded
$12.1M

Organisations
193

Participants
61,000+

In-kind Contribution
>$5M

239 Community-led projects awarded across 236 LGAs
(80% of all remote, rural, regional LGAs)

226,000+ people likely to benefit ongoing

Total value of projects funded - $18.6M

Networks	Events	Development & Learning	Training	Infrastructure
130	121	77	43	26

Community Impact Grants
$10.1M - 164 projects

33% First Nations
16% young people
16% rural women - 4% diverse groups
25% in remote / very remote areas

Small Network Grants
$2M - 75 projects

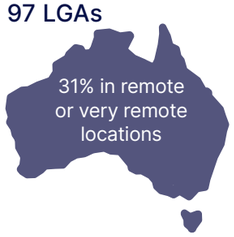
15% First Nations
19% young people
66% rural women - 0.6% diverse groups
43% in remote / very remote areas

Leadership Activities

133 activities
2,300 participants

8% First Nations
15% young people
82% women

121 locations
97 LGAs



Mentoring

156 participants - 104 LGAs

75% from regional or remote aeas
1% First Nations
32% young people
66% rural women

91% satisfied or highly satisfied with mentor/mentee

Expertise Pool

156 experts vetted
28 concierge sessions facilitated

Drought Ready Network

1,421 people from **335 LGAs**

15% young people
78% rural women

Program overview

The HRCPDI Initiative comprised five distinct but connected elements:

1. **Community Impact Program** (CIP): In 35 regions identified as having higher sensitivity to drought impacts, up to $500,000 was available to support grants for co-designed community-led projects, to fund leadership development activities and to support a local community partner lead organisation (CPLO) to coordinate activity across the region.
2. **Small Network Grants** (SNG): Grants of up to $25,000 were offered to community organisations to build stronger connections and networks outside the 35 CIP regions.

   Both CIP and SNG grants could fund projects that strengthened networks, delivered events, ran training, enhance small-scale infrastructure or offered development and learning opportunities.
3. **National Mentoring Program:** A 12-month learning program connected mentors to individuals eager to contribute to their community's drought resilience. Through a series of structured, supported activities and professional development, individuals were supported to contribute to their community's drought resilience.
4. **National Learning Network:** Delivered primarily through a Facebook group and supplemented by events, resources and chat groups, the Network, known as Drought Ready, connected individuals and organisations participating in HRCPDI (or previous foundational programs), enabling them to continue learning from each other and sharing experiences in building drought preparedness. Other FDF stakeholders were also invited to join.
5. **National Expertise Pool:** This online platform, delivered by Social Impact Hub, was underpinned by a concierge-style delivery model that allowed community organisations to access a free service to discuss their needs and refer them to specialist expertise to activate drought resilience activities. Experts were vetted to ensure they understood rural contexts and had proven experience in working with community groups.

Nous Group was engaged to assess the impact of this multi-pronged approach to strengthening social resilience and drought preparedness across Australia. They developed an **evaluation approach,** implemented over two-and-a-half years, to generate and share credible insights and lessons. It sought to measure the extent to which the Initiative enabled remote, rural and regional communities to prepare for future drought through strengthened social resilience, local capacity and capability building. The approach was designed with communities and included varied opportunities to participate in the evaluation, as well as learning opportunities to support communities to both define, and measure their outcomes at a local level.

A Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) plan was developed that outlined a comprehensive approach to learning the short, medium and long-term impact of the Initiative. Emerging findings were shared in real time, allowing delivery partners to adapt and improve as the Initiative progressed. Read the detailed evaluation report.

A shared commitment to social resilience

Drought is an inevitability of life in Australia. Recognising this fact, in 2019 the Australian Government established the Future Drought Fund (FDF), with a view to supporting farmers and communities to equip themselves to adapt and respond more effectively. Different streams of funding focus on the 'triple bottom line' – mitigating the environmental, economic and social impacts of drought.

There is increasing evidence that sustained and locally determined investment in people and grassroots, not-for-profit organisations is essential to meet the future challenges of a changing and less predictable climate, alongside overlaid disasters and other disruptions.

Since 2020, FRRR and ARLF have been involved in FDF program design and delivery, working closely with DAFF. FRRR delivered one of the foundational FDF programs, Networks to Build Drought Resilience (NBDR), which ran from May 2021 to December 2022. NBDR was designed to build community capacity by strengthening social and community networking, support, engagement and wellbeing. It offered three tiers of grants to not-for-profit organisations, awarding $4.5 million through 93 grants, engaging 37,841 people.

Simultaneously, ARLF delivered a series of Drought Resilience Leadership workshops, as well as a Mentoring program, valued at $7.45 million and benefitting 224 people. FRRR also partnered with ARLF to deliver the Community Extension Grant component of the program, which delivered 64 projects.

Our partnership continued with the design and delivery of the **Future Drought Fund's Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought (HRCPD) Initiative,** which ran from August 2022 to September 2025.

The HRCPD Initiative was designed to continue to build resilience in relation to the social impacts of drought. The $29.6 million investment was intended to strengthen and improve the ability of agriculture-dependent communities to adapt, reorganise or transform - primarily through local not-for-profit organisations - in response to changing temperature, increasing variability and scarcity of rainfall and changing seasons, for improved environmental, economic and social wellbeing. Specifically, it was aimed at:

- Building enduring resilience to the impacts of climate change and drought;
- Enhancing the public good in agricultural dependent communities; and
- Building community capacity by strengthening social and community networking support, engagement, wellbeing and individual leadership.

Leveraging insights from feedback and learnings from the NBDR and the Drought Resilient Leaders programs, four key aspects were identified as crucial in the design of the program:

1. **Locally-led:** Local community organisations would come together to make decisions about the activities that would best fit local priorities, garnering local buy-in through the process.
2. **A layered, integrated approach:** Multiple program elements – grants, leadership development activities, mentoring, peer-learning and expert advice – would allow communities to access a range of support, building capability and resilience over time.
3. **Active inclusion:** In the design of locally-led initiatives, communities would be expected to actively consider how to engage often underrepresented groups, including First Nations' peoples, young people, rural women and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.
4. **Focus on social resilience:** With strong social connections, local leadership and local networks identified as critical for long-term drought resilience, the Initiative's investments would emphasise building relationships and community leadership, alongside practical supports.

Good governance

To coordinate delivery of the Initiative, the partners established an operational focused Internal Advisory Group (IAG). Membership included representatives from DAFF, ARLF and FRRR and its operation was guided by agreed Terms of Reference. The IAG worked in conjunction with the Program Advisory Committee (PAC). The PAC provided both program oversight and made funding recommendations to the FRRR Board. The PAC comprised sector stakeholders, as well as representatives from ARLF and DAFF.

Once the projects were underway, FRRR and ARLF staff checked in with grantees at least quarterly. This ensured any emerging issues could be addressed promptly. Of the 239 projects, only twelve needed extensions for delivery, mostly due to flooding impacts.

Outcomes and impacts

The Initiative achieved impressive reach to strengthen preparedness and social resilience to drought across Australia. The combination of different elements enhanced the foundations for drought resilience, shifted behaviours and reframed mindsets. Communities strengthened capability, infrastructure and networks; became more inclusive, collaborative and adaptive in their ways of working; and reframed drought resilience as a shared locally-led journey.

Diverse groups were empowered through connection, capability and leadership. Grants, networks and activities proactively engaged young people, First Nations communities, migrants and more rural women. Many projects provided safe spaces for conversations that elevated mental health, cultural identity and intergenerational learning. Events, community-led training and infrastructure enhanced knowledge sharing and practical resilience. These investments equipped people with the confidence and capabilities to contribute to drought resilience and local leadership.

Nous Group's evaluation found that HRCPDI has created:

- Relevant, tailored place-based approaches that have strengthened drought preparedness;
- Better communication, social connection and collaboration within and between communities;
- Improved local services, facilities, shared resources and infrastructure;
- Engaged and diverse people and organisations;
- Stronger and more skilled volunteers and not-for-profit organisations;
- Stronger local leadership capacity; and
- New, expended and more diverse networks.

Importantly, the evaluation found the initiative contributes to the national and international evidence base for what works to build social resilience and preparedness for drought. The Initiative's focus on social infrastructure, social networks, belonging and social cohesion has delivered measurable improvements in adaptive capacity across diverse rural and remote contexts.

These findings reinforce that investing in social capital, inclusive leadership, and place-based solutions is effective in strengthening preparedness for drought and other climate-related challenges.

Enabling communities to lead, adapt and collaborate in ways that reflected local strengths and priorities supported inclusive, context-driven resilience building. The approach also created the conditions for integration across Initiative elements and with broader policy and planning frameworks, demonstrating how strategic design and locally embedded delivery can support cumulative impact.

Overall, through flexible, place-based investment, the Initiative has set strong foundations for ongoing transformation by mobilising communities, building capability, strengthening networks and catalysing inclusive, locally-led resilience efforts. New leaders are driving action; cross-sector networks are forming and drought is increasingly understood as a social challenge that requires collective response.

Through the devolved, partnership-based delivery model, the Initiative enabled hundreds of locally-led projects, reached thousands of participants, established new networks and delivered practical support to strengthen drought preparedness and social resilience in remote, rural and regional communities nationwide.

Outcomes in the community

As part of the extensive evaluation design and reflecting the long-term aims of the FDF, a range of short, medium and long-term outcomes were defined by FRRR, ARLF and local organisations delivering projects on the ground. These user-informed outcomes were embedded in all evaluation and impact documentation, including final project reports and participant surveys. This section highlights specific outcomes through voices of local communities.

1

Improved communication, social connection and collaboration within and between communities to support drought preparedness

This was by far the most common short-term outcome, with 77% of grant reports nominating it as one of their two most impactful project outcomes. Network-building, inclusive events and shared experiences bridged sector and regional gaps, strengthening trust, ongoing engagement, increased community connection and social cohesion. Funding locally designed events and activities created safe, inclusive spaces for connection and collaboration. A variety of leadership development activities, including mentoring, built both capacity and confidence. These activities reduced isolation, fostered intergenerational and cross-sector relationships, and helped communities feel more connected and ready to support one another during future droughts.

Mallee Sustainable Farming

VIC $65,920

Spotlighting and celebrating locals

Mallee Sustainable Farming strengthened the network of organisations across the Mildura region to help build community resilience and better prepare for drought. The Mallee Matters project was about bringing people and stories together, celebrating local achievements and demonstrating what is possible when regional communities work together to create a drought-resilient future.

"It was a good process to come together and to develop a greater appreciation of what the particular needs are within the rural communities and what people's view of the world is and what their definition of community resilience is and what their priorities were to help build that as well.

"It's a bit like setting up a new football team and you bring in players from a dozen different clubs or organisations and at the end of the day, we're all kicking goals together as well and we're able to sort of build up that element of trust and trust in one another and the organisations as well."

Dr Jay Cummins, Mallee Sustainable Farming

Gascoyne Catchment Group

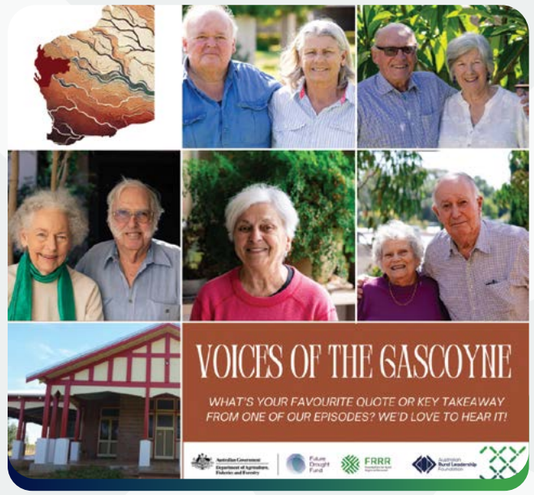
WA $205,000

Sharing local stories strengthen connections

Nine practical workshops, conversations and targeted events were held as part of the Connections Across the Gascoyne project in WA, along with producing a podcast featuring pastoralist couples and a fridge magnet designed by locals with a list of local supports. As a result, people have stronger community connections and a better understanding of the risks posed by drought and climate change.

"Anyone who survived the pastoral industry prior to 24-hour power and air conditioning is resilient in my mind. People who have seen flood and drought, they survived, they managed pastoral businesses through the war and before washing machines were a thing and before fridges. To be able to collect that history but have that available all the time to listen to - well it wouldn't have happened without the FRRR funding."

Krystie Bremer, Executive Officer, Gascoyne Catchments Group



2

Improved access to and use of services, resources, infrastructure and facilities by communities that support drought preparedness

Funded projects improved access to services and infrastructure by revitalising community spaces, embedding support roles and centralising information. These investments increased engagement and strengthened coordination, especially in remote regions. Organisations also strengthened internal capacity, governance and profile, positioning them strongly to support their communities going forward.

District Council of Orroroo Carrieton

SA $20,000

Church hall upgrade boosts local economy

District Council of Orroroo Carrieton addressed a critical childcare gap in this remote and drought-affected community through social infrastructure investment. A lack of local childcare was directly impacting families' ability to earn off-farm income. Community feedback highlighted that "available money for upgrades to community facilities is non-existent," underscoring the importance of external investment in sustaining rural communities.

The District Council of Orroroo Carrieton used grant funding to upgrade the local church hall, which enabled the Hall to support Family Day Care accreditation. The project enabled the community to progress towards a viable childcare solution. The upgrade supported local employment and provided a morale boost during a period of significant hardship.

Dawson Catchment Coordinating Association

QLD $140,000

Strengthening a trusted backbone organisation

Funding enabled appointment of a part-time Regional Coordinator for the Dawson Catchment Coordinating Association (DCCA). The role was central to expanding DCCA's visibility, strengthening its operational capacity and deepening its engagement with the community. The Coordinator became a trusted connector, supporting other organisations with project delivery and operational advice. This positioned DCCA as a regional hub for coordination and resilience.

The organisation is appointing a professional board to guide its next phase of growth and has built new relationships with local First Nations communities like Woorabinda, where the Coordinator helped facilitate service delivery and local engagement. As one team member reflected, "It's the first time we've been able to pay someone who's already doing amazing things and help them do that for others."

Funding also enabled DCCA to fully equip their Theodore Community Room. The Room "is not only well-utilised but has become a critical enabler of local capacity-building and drought preparedness."

3

A greater diversity of community members and organisations contribute to drought preparedness activities

Funded projects improved access to services. Projects engaged underrepresented groups, including First Nations communities, migrants, youth and seniors. These efforts broadened participation and strengthened inclusion across sectors and regions. Although depth of engagement varied, the activities consistently created space for diverse voices in resilience efforts. spaces, embedding support roles and centralising information. These investments increased engagement and strengthened coordination, especially in remote regions. Organisations also strengthened internal capacity, governance and profile, positioning them strongly to support their communities going forward.

Mentoring leads to community program

One young mentee highlighted the program's significant role enhancing her confidence and expanding her network. 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 which have formed a community of practice that she can lean on for support. She shared her plans to implement a leadership program for young women in rural areas, leveraging the skills and confidence gained from the program.

Source: Nous interview

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development Migrant Youth Support

VIC $50,000

Migrant youth become resilience ambassadors

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development worked with WDA Migrant Settlement Services to engage migrant youth in Horsham and Nhill. Around 25 co-designed, place-based activities and 40 youth group meetings connected young people to the local environment, in a culturally-relevant, community-led manner. More than 20 local partner groups were also involved.

The activities were designed to give young migrant youth the opportunity to explore and learn, build social connections and foster a sense of belonging that could be drawn upon in future droughts. Interestingly, along the way, they discovered that there is no word for drought in the Karen language.

"It's so important for us to be able to have a group to share our experiences and build connections with other people and places. And we can take those experiences home with us and share what we have learned with our families."

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development

4

Increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies by communities, volunteers and not-for-profit organisations to prepare for and adapt to drought

Participants gained practical knowledge through workshops, training, peer learning and tailored activities, which helped to build adaptive leadership and systems thinking skills in particular. This built strong awareness, knowledge and understanding of drought strategies. The program successfully equipped communities to apply new knowledge to local challenges.

Not For Profit HQ | QLD | $50,000

Building capacity of local NFPs

An innovative model of “health check”, developed by Not for Profit HQ, helped community groups across Australia become more organisationally robust and ready for challenging times of drought. The NFP House report cards and governance mentoring are now being considered as a template by the Australian Government to help NFPs ensure their governance is compliant and fit for purpose, so they can serve their communities for decades to come.

“You’re assessing in times of non-disaster - peace we say - because disaster could be drought, it could be a pandemic, it could be famine, it could be a huge mental health crisis. It could be a range of things. It’s how you define disaster. So it’s saying - you get yourself sustainable enough that nothing can rock you. You might not be thriving in disaster, but you’re surviving in order to thrive outside of disaster.”

Bernadette Ariens, Project Coordinator, NFP House

The ripple effect of collaboration

Building lasting impact is not about doing more, but about doing it together.

Kalen Sowter’s introduction to changemaking came in the wake of the 2014 Dungog floods in NSW, which saw her town isolated and overwhelmed. Kalen jumped in to help, feeding people, coordinating donations and creating connections. Instead of focusing on the problems, Kalen and her community began to ask: What do we already have? What could be possible? “We put the issue at the centre, not ourselves. And then we built around that.”

This mindset shift became a catalyst for lasting change and Kalen has gone on to do more in her community, creating spaces for connection, capability and courage. To enhance her capacity further, she joined a changemaker workshop.

“I didn’t expect the Changemaker Workshop to be as powerful as it was. But we left with more than ideas, we left with a community.”

5

Increased implementation and improved effectiveness of place-based practices by communities to build and enhance resilience to drought

Locally-designed projects embedded locally relevant practices such as biocultural land management, fire planning and infrastructure-led coordination. Communities shifted from short-term delivery to enduring, place-based resilience efforts. These shifts were sustained through regional delivery models, shared spaces and long-term planning.

Town Team Movement | WA | $65,000

Reframing drought

In the remote towns of WA, the Wheatbelt Rising program helped locals reframe drought not just as an agricultural issue, but as a whole-of-community challenge. Through creative, community-led events and place-based activation, ranging from twilight markets to flower arranging workshops, the initiative brought people together, strengthened leadership and built lasting connections in a region deeply affected by climate extremes.

“Reframing drought as something that affects families, friendships and mental wellbeing - not just farms - was a game changer for our communities. Farmers were no longer the only ones at the table. Young people, artists, parents, club members, CRC staff and new volunteers all got involved. The benefits went beyond the expected. A network of FRRR-funded organisations began sharing insights and support, building a sense of regional solidarity. And the pride in local resourcefulness - being able to step back and let communities lead - was palpable.”

Alyce Smith, Place Activation & Collaboration Enabler, Wheatbelt Town Team Movement

6

Strengthened individual leadership capacity and capability to support community and drought resilience

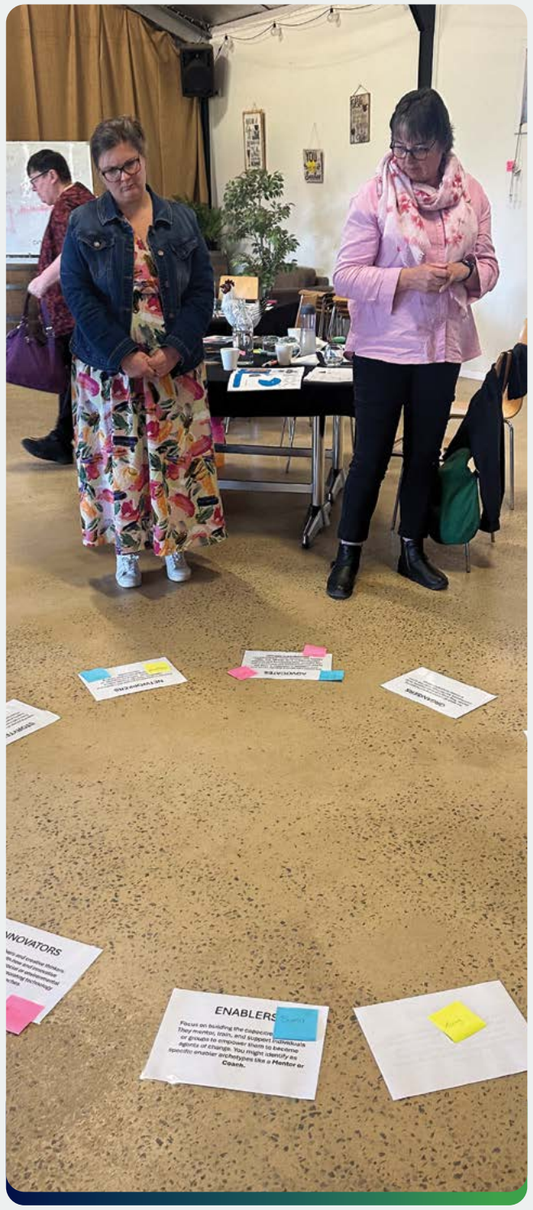
Leadership development was a strong feature of the Initiative. Participants built confidence, skills and networks through mentoring, structured programs and hands-on delivery. The combination of training, mentoring and collaboration on project delivery built the confidence of both established and emerging leaders, and organisations, to coordinate local action. People have taken on leadership roles and initiated new resilience efforts.

Changemaker Workshop inspires new perspective

Willana Morris has a long history of supporting vulnerable families in Mount Isa, QLD. But after two decades working in child protection, she made the leap to prevention and early intervention. The Changemaker Workshop arrived just as she was finding her feet in this new space.

As the group explored Adaptive Leadership and the Experiential Learning Cycle, something shifted. Willana began connecting the dots between big issues like housing, workforce challenges and public perception. She saw how the systems intersected and how they might be reshaped through collaboration and community leadership.

"It was like I was working inside a system I couldn't unlock. Changemaker helped me step back, see the bigger picture and realise we could create new systems. That was my epiphany. I wasn't the only one trying to make change. We each held a piece of the puzzle. And together, we could reimagine what Mount Isa could be," Willana said.



7

Community-based networks that strengthen drought resilience are expanded, diversified or created

CIP projects, including leadership activities, and SNG projects created and strengthened community-based networks that support increased drought resilience. These networks enabled collaboration, knowledge sharing and long-term coordination. CPLOs played a key role in formalising these networks, which are continuing beyond the life of the grants, such as Birchip's Young Farmer Network. There is also evidence of new connections within communities – e.g. ag-focussed organisations engaging with other community organisations already providing services to offer support via wellbeing and connection activities to address stress and fatigue.

The program delivery also facilitated new connections, especially through mentoring; the national changemakers summit; the Drought Ready network; learning circles; quarterly webinars; Nous engagement and updates; and connections facilitated by FRRR, ARLF, CPLOs and local facilitators.

Loxton District Chamber of Commerce

SA $88,000

New connections, new outlets

The Loxton District Chamber of Commerce has continued to grow, while other Chambers have shut down. They put their success down to listening to the needs of local businesses by establishing a Business Hub, reviewing their governance to ensure it was fit for purpose and developing The Collective. The latter is a space for microbusinesses on the main street, enabling local artisans to sell their wares, generating valuable cash flow.

"A lot of the artisans are wives of primary producers or partners who have got real jobs in the real world, but were amazing creatives selling things at markets, but that's really labour intensive. So, to give them an opportunity to sell and get a second income or regular income without that labour, it was a no brainer for us. By putting The Collective in the main street, it's created more of a buzz because we don't like empty shops."

Sonya Altschwager, Business and Events Manger, Loxton District Chamber of Commerce

Emerging leaders

The Mallee region in Victoria hosted an ARLF Emerging Leadership Program. It brought together 18-30 year-old participants to develop their network, community and personal resilience.

These comments make it clear that the program made an impact:

Building connected communities: "I've committed to improving connectedness by uniting young people with volunteering organisations."

Leading with empathy and awareness: "I've stopped making quick assessments and started understanding the paradigms that shape people."

Communicating with confidence: "This program has added confidence within me, especially in speaking with my peers."

Looking towards the longer term

The evaluation found clearly measurable progress toward all intermediate outcomes, with a significant increase in the reach and activities of local leaders, mentors, networks and organisations focused on action to increase drought resilience. There was also significant change in the networks and resources to support local responses to drought.

The activities also showed some contribution toward fostering inclusion and belonging and strengthening connection. For example, Australian Migrant Resource Centre's reported their project "strengthened communication and collaboration between multicultural and broader community groups, establishing new connections that support resilience in times of drought."

Awareness of and attitudes toward drought preparedness at community levels also began to improve, with some individuals increasing their knowledge and confidence through tailored learning activities and events. The Initiative laid strong foundations but ongoing investment will be needed to sustain this change.

In terms of strengthening adaptive capacity and empowering communities to respond to drought, there was some progress made, thanks to building leadership, embedding support roles and creating coordination platforms. This laid a strong foundation for ongoing development. This evaluation also contributes to the national and international evidence base for what works to build social resilience and preparedness for drought. The findings reinforce that investing in social capital, inclusive leadership, and place-based solutions is effective in strengthening preparedness for drought and other climate-related challenges.

Arid Lands Environment Centre | NT | $50,000

Coordinator enhances food security

Arid Lands Environment Centre Inc in the NT used grant funding to engage a Project Manager, enabling initiatives to strengthen the capacity, capability and coordination of two community gardens. The aim was to manage them holistically to drive broader impact for a community facing climate insecurity in an arid zone and an increased susceptibility to drought.

Having an active and connected network of people sharing knowledge about food insecurity means they are less susceptible to these extreme weather events. Additional benefits of the project included a better ongoing relationship with the local council, which now pays the organisation to run community workshops.

"It was also about additional community engagement and learning opportunities for people to learn about gardening and food production, reducing the reliance on supermarkets. Two summers before, we had a lot of rain. There was a lot of rain above us and below us and washed out the Stuart Highway twice. So, we were cut off. There was six weeks where you just didn't know what you were going to be able to get from Woolies or Coles because it was just really unpredictable."

Erika Hamilton, Business Manager, Arid Lands Environment Centre.

Birchip Cropping Group | VIC | $32,960

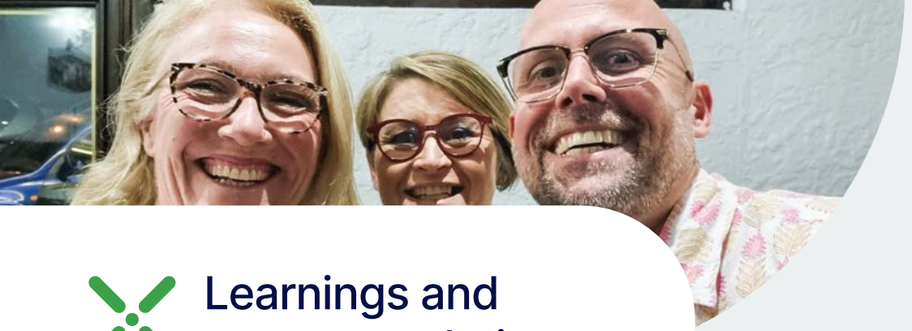
Young Farmer Network

The Birchip Cropping Group reinvigorated the Young Farmer Network in the Mallee, VIC through practical drought resilience workshops and a gala event, featuring guest speakers and networking opportunities, which attracted hundreds of farmers from surrounding districts. Now, rather than being daunted by the prospect of drought, they feel more ready to call on the community and their mates for assistance when faced with the inevitable dry spell.

The medium- and long-term effects of the injection of confidence in the community, with a noticeable shift in awareness about the importance of drought preparedness, are already visible.

"It's the fact that those stronger networks were formed, so the people that met at the Ball or in the workshops are still in touch offering each other support. And we've had some of those newer leaders step forward. Then I think probably also just that cultural shift. The fact that resilience is now seen as something a bit more holistic. It's not necessarily just about the agronomy or the finances, but about all those networks, the wellbeing, the community strength. That mindset shift is really important for both young farmers and I guess older farmers in terms of building a foundation for weathering future droughts."

Grace Hosking, Senior Manager, Birchip Cropping Group



Learnings and recommendations

FRRR and ARLF offer the following learnings and recommendations, drawing on the formal evaluation, as well as our own experiences as delivery partners. The observations that follow note what was effective and should be continued in future programs.

- **Place-based, community-led approaches to drought preparedness are effective:** Prioritise flexible funding models that allow communities to define their own preparedness and resilience building priorities in response to drought and drying conditions. Regional delivery models elevated trusted local organisations and enabled peer learning, helping communities align efforts and reduce duplication. Invest in local coordination roles to support planning, engagement and continuity.
- **Flexibility in approaches to building drought resilience:** The 35 regions varied greatly in cultural, economic, environmental and social contexts, and in drought sensitivity. Some had little experience or capacity to work together; others had faced compounding disaster events where relationships and networks played a key role in social preparedness. Success lay in tailoring programs to reflect each region's distinct needs, values and challenges. This includes flexibility in participant numbers, cultural norms and community priorities.
  - **Retaining support for small-scale infrastructure projects:** There was considerable evidence of the value of funding projects of this nature as an enabler of community connection and cohesion.
  - **Funding events, wellbeing programs or economic stimulation initiatives:** These activities serve to strengthen social capital and resilience.
  - **Investing in social and professional networks:** Investing in events and workshops yields long-lasting community-wide wellbeing and social connection outcomes, mitigating future in-drought issues such as social isolation and decreased mental health.
- **Strengthen the visibility of and access to opportunities in under-served regions:** Prioritise delivery in regions with limited prior access to focussed preparedness and resilience building support. Map geographic and demographic gaps to inform targeted outreach and partner with local organisations to build trust.
- **Co-design was a critical element of the program's success:** The collaborative approach to granting was well-received and enabled community to work together to find local solutions to local issues. This was in addition to the value of offering simple and more traditional granting programs for small and vital projects. Involving community groups in the design of the evaluation also increased ownership and trust.
- **Strengthen social networks and collaborative partnerships:** Fund initiatives that build and maintain cross-sector networks. Prioritise activities that build and sustain community networks and shared spaces.
- **Engage diverse organisations and groups and design engagement processes to support inclusion:** Prioritise underrepresented groups - e.g. First Nations people, young people, rural women and culturally diverse communities - in program and project funding criteria and fund projects led by organisations with strong community ties. Embed culturally safe engagement processes from the outset.

- **Build the capacity of community organisations to lead and sustain resilience efforts:** Include dedicated funding for organisational development (e.g. staffing, systems, training, mentoring and governance development etc), recognising that organisations are only able to contribute if they are resourced to do so. Co-design support options with delivery partners and offer a mix of peer learning, webinars, online tools and facilitated workshops. Embed expert support early and across the project lifecycle.
- **Embed leadership development into resilience frameworks:** Position leadership development as a core part of national and state-level resilience strategies, not as an optional add-on. Integration and allocation of sustained funding will support long-term capability.
- **Tailor programs to local context and readiness:** Continue to offer flexible, community-led formats that reflect the diversity of regional and remote communities. Grants and activities reflected differing local contexts and regional needs. For example, some regions had experienced multiple disaster events or other significant disruptions and, in some cases, fatigue at a community level due to an influx of programs or funding relating to recovery.
- **Connect participants for shared learning:** Facilitate opportunities for grantees to share insights, collaborate and sustain connections beyond the life of the program. The quarterly webinars delivered by the partners showcased regional initiatives and allowed groups to create connections and learn from one another. In some places, these national activities were supplemented with regionally-focussed activities, further strengthening connections.
- **Take a holistic approach to program design and activation:** Combining multi-level grants (large and small), leadership activities, mentoring and operational support helped scaffold ongoing engagement and capacity building across diverse communities. Maintain simple application processes, as lower barriers can engage smaller and less-resourced organisations. Sequence activities carefully to ensure individual and organisations can optimise the benefits – e.g. leadership and mentoring activities, to follow identification of major community initiatives. Providing clear pathways will help turn ideas into action, sustain engagement and amplify outcomes.
- **Close collaboration between the delivery partners (as well as with DAFF and Nous):** Regular dialogue avoided duplication and ensured 'no surprises'. Continued focus on clear communication, being open and transparent is critical to mitigating risk and building trust. Continue joint planning and shared governance between delivery partners to sustain collaboration and learning.

- **Involve those with lived experience in the design and ongoing development of the program, where it makes sense:** The participatory nature of the program, including engaging CPLOs and other partners in open discussions, inviting and sharing input, built confidence and enhanced program delivery. For example, the design of the mentoring program involved consultation with people who had participated in similar programs, as well as input from those new to the process.
- **Resource the program delivery partners appropriately:** In addition to administration and program management, staff actively supported and connected CPLOs, facilitators and community groups. The time team members spent on the ground and on the phone helped build confidence, manage emerging risks and to facilitate connections.
- **Build on and invest in previous FDF-funded projects, especially in community:** Twenty-seven organisations funded through HRCPDI had received Networks to Build Drought Resilience grants, while several individuals had participated in Drought Resilient Leaders programs. Participants emphasised the need for follow-up support to activate and sustain ideas sparked by the program.

Grow or evolve

Based on the delivery partners' experience, the following elements are noted as areas to grow or evolve in the iteration of efforts to build social resilience.

- **Strengthen the understanding of and connections between FDF delivery partners:** FDF programs are delivered by many partners across the country, often overlapping in regions, potentially creating confusion for communities. Ensuring clarity of program and delivery partners' roles and consistency in their remit, specifically for Drought Hubs and Regional Drought Resilience Plans at a national, state and local level, reduces potential duplication and ensures that everyone is clear about the purpose, scope and interaction of programs funded by FDF. This understanding and clarity is critical to a genuine place-based approach across the entire program. Further strengthening coordination of the various activities and potentially connecting elements like evaluation, would enhance overall impact.

- **Allow more time for co-design:** Navigating community dynamics is complex, often driven by the legacy of past experiences (especially with external funding). There is significant opportunity to build on and link to work previously done in regions to avoid reinventing the wheel. Compressed lead times in the early tranches led to varied depth and accuracy in proposed activities, outcomes and alignment to CIP priorities. This also resulted in significant additional engagement by FRRR with CPLOs to refine and validate projects.
- **Invest in local resourcing to enable connections and help shape and drive relevant projects:** Some CPLOs found burden of time, workload and resourcing constraints an issue, especially in supporting the co-design and submission phases. In addition, recognise that there may be significant staff turnover in CPLOs. It's important to allow for additional support from delivery partners to re-engage the organisation and upskill new people.

Stories of impact

The following pages provide a snapshot of the impacts of this work in community.

You can read more detail about most of these stories either on the FRRR website of by listening to ARLF's podcast series.

You can also watch these five short videos to hear directly from some of the community groups, as well as from FRRR and ARLF about the impacts.

Read more
Listen
Watch

Red Earth Community Foundation

QLD $51,388

Tailored First Nations community leadership program

A specially tailored leadership program for emerging community leaders in Cherbourg, QLD has already had tangible effects. It's hoped the program will continue annually to keep building community capacity and provide knowledge and skills to overcome local challenges caused by drought, inequity and historic injustice.

"That kind of long-term impact is exponential. Who knows where that could go? Because it's activating leaders for Cherbourg from within Cherbourg to solve community challenges and take hold and activate community opportunities rather than things being delivered to Cherbourg or for Cherbourg from external sources, which is what has happened historically. As opposed to the long-term benefit of leadership being activated from within community by mob for mob, as our facilitators would say. That is the benefit that I can't wait to see unfold."

Amanda Woodward, Project Manager, Red Earth Community Foundation

Gippsland Agricultural Group | VIC | $184,968

Building and embedding capacity

As the CPLO, Gippsland Agricultural Group (GAG) Inc worked closely with The Wellington and East Gippsland Shires (EGS), ensuring a broad, long-term approaching to building drought resilience in the region. It also intentionally aligned itself with existing bushfire recovery-funded leadership and community resilience programs, to strengthen connections with local networks and build ongoing capacity.

This included partnering with EGS's Agribusiness Leadership program. GAG engaged graduates in the overarching implementation of the initiatives across the region, leading to several new community-led initiatives and enhancing social connectedness. These new leaders stepped into facilitation planning and workshop delivery roles, bringing an intergenerational and inclusive approach that enriched local capacity.

Projects the group coordinated also built the organisation's capacity, including a facilitator who coordinated learning activities and collated and shared recent research. Coupled with enhancing and formalising communication, these projects built on GAG's previous momentum and helped enhance social connectedness and drought preparedness. Participating in HRCPDI deepened their understanding of local organisations activating social support mechanisms and strengthened community relationships and networks.

"The organisational review in particular has been a powerful tool. It has refreshed our board and staff and reengaged our members in volunteering and contributing to the group realising its vision.

"We are continually building our capacity as a relevant regional organisation and have appreciated help from the FRRR team on this journey."

Gippsland Agricultural Group

Holbrook Landcare Group

NSW | $19,980

Resilience stories and training create new support networks

In the Upper Murray and Riverina, Holbrook Landcare Network and a Local Health Advisory Committee combined to deliver mental health and resilience training. The Resilience Project reached people in the community who would normally resist mental health messages and create ongoing community support networks that would otherwise not have emerged.

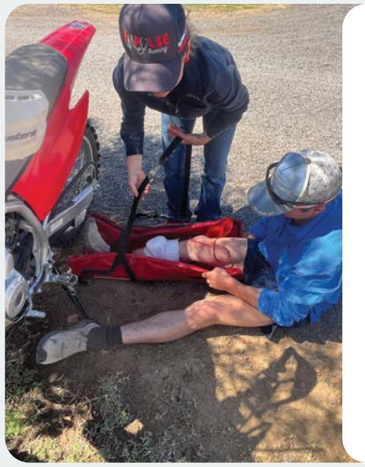
"The fact is that we have started that conversation and it's not so taboo anymore. It's a game changer. It's been a great platform and a benchmark for our community to have the events that we did. And even though we are still experiencing suicides and dreadful events like that happening, it's more out there now.

"And so, in our little way, we empowered all these other people and they're just going gangbusters. I'm so proud to see them take on these leadership roles and having the confidence in the community to do that."

Rachael Daniel, Coordinator, Holbrook Landcare Network

"Attending the HRCPD quarterly webinars and Nous updates have been a wealth of information. As our region was one of the last to receive funding, it has been valuable receiving presentations from other Lead Organisations and hearing how they are working with delivery partners, types of activities and events being delivered across their region, the number of projects under their "banner" and the challenges they have faced throughout their project."

Agricultural Innovation & Research Eyre Peninsula Incorporated



GroWQ Association | QLD | $20,000

A safer, more ready community

GroWQ delivered hands-on first aid workshops across eight Central Western Queensland towns, training 188 people. The workshops were held both in classrooms and on local properties, simulating real-life scenarios participants might face.

"We are immensely proud to have empowered our community with skills that build confidence and safety, especially in remote areas where every minute counts. ... This isn't just about first aid. It's about preparing our communities to face whatever comes next—together."

Pru Button, General Manager, GroWQ Association Inc

Spring Bay Suicide Prevention Network | TAS | $7,425

Taking control and supporting one-another

The Spring Bay Suicide Prevention network facilitated Accidental Counsellor Training with Lifeline Tasmania to give their community more confidence in having difficult conversations with people struggling with climate challenges and the ever-present threat of drought.
Follow-up training and regular newsletter are sustaining the connections and support. The sessions built a better foundation of supportive communication skills and local support services to turn to in times of drought or extreme events.

"We often feel forgotten here. Our medical services are not good. We are struggling with keeping GPs. So you can feel like we lose services, like banks close up or shops close up. But to have that support coming into our area was really just wonderful and greatly appreciated."

Cheryl Weily, President, The Spring Bay Suicide Prevention Network

Embracing curiosity to create connection

Local café owner Max Fonte joined the Alice Springs Changemaker workshop. Max was already an avid listener and had shaped his business based on what the community wanted, especially those who were newly arrived migrants.

The Workshop helped him reflect more intentionally on the role his business plays in community life. It also connected him with like-minded locals and gave him language for what he was already living - that change is possible when we trust relationships, honour stories and let ourselves follow the thread of curiosity.

"I realised I didn't need a whole new path to make an impact. I already had a platform, I just needed to see it that way."

His newest venture aims to create even more pathways for connection and employment, particularly for migrants and newcomers to Alice Springs.

Contact Incorporated | NSW | $49,969

Regular events build strong foundations

Contact Inc facilitated another series of Rural Connect events in remote far-west New South Wales, tailored to the needs of each region They did something similar with support from Networks to build Drought Resilience funding. Once again, these events brought families together to learn valuable skills such as first-aid, and strengthen connections.

"I fully believe that preparing for drought, it's about the people, it's another layer beyond the land and the water. It's about all those other things that we need to do to support people.

"That sense that you can have a really positive and happy experience and all come together is the start of resilience. It was palpable that people just simply wanted to be together and have a sense of belonging and connections again with their community and with each other."

Sue Kingwill, CEO, Contact Inc

Changemaker Workshop inspires local action

A community leader in regional Western Australia attended a Changemaker workshop, where she collaborated with community members to explore the need for more green spaces to support health and wellbeing. The session prompted reflection on what it means to lead change and gave her the confidence to act. She then accessed a grant to bring her initiative to life. The project connected two parks with a shaded walkway and introduced water-efficient gardens. These changes supported drought resilience, improved biodiversity and encouraged residents to grow their own food. The Changemaker workshop helped the participant build confidence and clarify her vision, while the grants provided the practical support needed to deliver for her community.

LISTEN to more podcasts from changemakers

Listen Here

Looking ahead

The impact from this Initiative has confirmed the value of investing in social resilience as part of strengthening drought preparedness. It also reinforced the importance of co-design and in embracing and facilitating community-led projects. It has brought communities together, built confidence and created strong foundations.

However, it will be critical to continue to invest in social capital to sustain the transformation that has begun to be embedded through the various streams of this Initiative. Future programs should continue to support a breadth of projects that align to local priorities and reflect the differences and unique circumstances of Australia's remote, rural and regional communities.

The Federal Government, through the FDF Communities stream, is well-placed to play an ongoing, active role in resourcing this critical investment in social capital. This mechanism is one of the few national programs that has the requisite scale, breadth and depth to enable social resilience to be built in concert and coordination with other levers to drive healthy systems and sustainable futures when times get tough.

The Initiative's success offers a blueprint for policy-makers and funders seeking to deliver system-level resilience in rural and regional communities. Continuing investment in social outcomes will proactively enable an emphasis on the importance of social connectedness, community networks, deep social bonds, and the practical skills, knowledge and community-wide awareness required to be better prepared for drought into the future.

Photography

Cover

Community Impact Program- Mallee Region
First People of the Millewa-Mallee Aboriginal Corporation
Mildura, VIC
Photography: Radiant Media

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Photography: Rebecca Parkhouse

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Photography: Radiant Media

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Connections Across the Gascoyne Project and Photography: Gascoyne Catchment Group, WA

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SA Future Farmers
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BCG Young Farmer Network
Photography: Radiant Media
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FRRR and ARLF staff with local community facilitator during a co-design session

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FRRR and ARLF staff

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Photo 1:
ARLF leadership training session
Photo 2:
FRRR staff (centre) with sector colleagues at the SA Drought Hub

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ARLF supplied
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Report written by JAW Communications
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