# Future Drought Fund's

## Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative

**Evaluation: Final Report**

Prepared by
nous

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

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Future Drought Fund
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This artwork was developed by Marcus Lee Design to reflect Nous Group's Reconciliation Action Plan and our aspirations for respectful and productive engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities

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# 1 Executive Summary

**The Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought (HRCPD) Initiative (the Initiative) has led to regional communities that are better connected, more confident and more prepared for drought.** The Initiative was funded by the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund (FDF) with the aim to improve drought resilience in regional Australian communities. Across regional Australia, the Initiative has sparked a quiet transformation. In places shaped by climate and isolation, new networks have emerged, leadership has been activated, and local action has flourished to strengthen drought resilience. As one CIP participant highlighted, "No matter what's happening on your property…it's the community getting together that gets people through the drought."

The Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR) and the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF) partnered to deliver six elements. Through the FRRR led Community Impact Program (CIP) and Small Network Grants (SNG), communities delivered locally led projects that built practical preparedness and strengthened social cohesion. The ARLF led Leadership Activities and Mentoring equipped thousands with the confidence and tools to lead change. Through Drought Ready, a national learning network now connects over 1,400 members, enabling knowledge-sharing across regions.

The summative evaluation of the Initiative used a layered approach to deeply understand the context, delivery, and outcomes. The evaluation:

- drew upon a review of more than 200 documents, baseline assessments of regional drought resilience, and 28 regional workshops to establish context
- engaged delivery partners through 11 interviews and 20 monthly Operational Cluster sessions to contextualise delivery and impact
- gathered data from project leaders and community members across all Initiative elements, including over 350 final grant reports, more than 1,300 element survey responses, interviews with more than 100 individuals and national outcome panels that enabled collective sense-making of outcomes and impact.

The overriding conclusions from the evaluation are outlined further below.

**The Initiative redefined resilience as a shared, adaptive journey.** The Initiative did more than deliver projects, it reshaped how communities think about and act on drought resilience. No longer seen as a technical problem for agriculture experts, resilience became a living, local process rooted in relationships, culture and place. Participants reported newfound confidence, sharper problem-solving, and a readiness to lead complex change.

Leadership Activities and Drought Ready helped communities move beyond reactive fixes. Instead, people embraced long-term, adaptive thinking. They tested ideas, learnt from setbacks, and built

on each other's strengths. As one Changemaker[1] participant highlighted, "We're dealing with housing shortages, mental health, reconciliation, and climate change not just drought. These skills help us think through all of it." While these mindset shifts were most visible at the individual and organisational level, the seeds of broader community change are now taking root.

**The Initiative delivered meaningful outcomes across all five program elements:**

- **CIP and SNG funded 232 community-led projects**, reaching over 150 Local Government Areas (LGAs) and an estimated 57,336 participants. These projects improved social connection, built local capability, and catalysed practical preparedness.
- **Leadership Activities engaged more than 2,300 participants**, building adaptive capacity, inclusive leadership, and collaborative problem-solving. Participants reported increased confidence, deeper empathy, and a greater willingness to engage diverse voices.
- **Mentoring supported 156 relationships**, strengthening social capital and enabling peer learning across sectors and regions.
- **Drought Ready created a national platform** for learning and connection, with over 1,400 members sharing tools, resources and support.
- **Expertise Pool delivered value to 25 organisations** but had variable reach and visibility, highlighting the need for a diversity of accessible support models.

These efforts contributed to improved social cohesion, stronger local leadership, and more inclusive decision-making. While the scale and depth of impact varied by region, the evaluation found consistent evidence of progress against short- and intermediate-term outcomes.

**The Initiative delivered outcomes through an innovative model for community-led resilience.** Jointly delivered by FRRR and ARLF, the Initiative handed the reins to communities. Its devolved, partnership-based model empowered local people to shape every stage from design to delivery. FRRR and ARLF acted as enablers, not directors, supporting organisations to craft projects that reflected local risks, strengths and aspirations.

Leadership development was embedded throughout, with intentional support for groups traditionally underrepresented in resilience planning, including women, young people[2] and First Nations communities. This approach shifted power structures. One Aboriginal organisation reflected that, "we feel less disempowered in using our voices to protect water and be part of caring for Country." Overall, this approach built transferable skills and demonstrated that when communities are trusted to lead, they can mobilise networks, shift mindsets, and build resilience from the ground up.

**Delivery challenges highlight opportunities for improvement.** Despite its achievements, the evaluation identified challenges during the initiative:

[1] 'Changemaker participants' refer to individuals who took part in a program which was part of the ARLF leadership activities in the Initiative called Changemaker Workshops. This is explained in further detail in section 5.

[2] In the context of this evaluation, young people are defined as individuals aged between 18 and 35 years old

- Sustaining momentum from Leadership Activities remains a risk, particularly in regions without structured follow-up.
- The Expertise Pool had variable visibility and uptake.
- Barriers to participation due to timing, capacity or digital access, disaster impacts or regional contexts that affected some communities.
- Inclusion improved for First Nations, young people and migrant communities, though gains were uneven and equity gaps remain in places.
- Adhering to program timelines and administrative requirements such as evaluation reporting was burdensome for some, particularly smaller grantees.

FRRR and ARLF adapted in response. Across program delivery both organisations refined guidelines, timelines and support structures based on participant feedback.

**Future initiatives can build on this foundation.** With continued investment and leadership from FRRR, ARLF and community organisations, future programs should continue to:

- Invest in locally led action through flexible, place-based funding.
- Sustain momentum from Leadership Activities, particularly in regions without lightweight support structures in place for emerging leaders to maintain connection.
- Strengthen national networks to connect communities and share learning at scale.
- Adapt as they go, continue to listen, learn, and respond to feedback.

Future programs should also strengthen the following aspects:

- Keep processes simple and accessible to unlock innovation.
- Embed follow-up structures to sustain outcomes and seek new innovations.
- Design inclusive delivery models that reduce barriers and support equity.
- Integrate expert support through embedded, multi-modal approaches.

These lessons are not just recommendations - they are the foundation for building stronger, more resilient communities across regional Australia. Future programs that embed these principles will be better placed to deliver lasting, system-level drought preparedness and social resilience.

A high-level summary of the findings for the Initiative as a whole and each element is presented in Table 1 overleaf.

## Table 1 | Summary of key evaluation findings

### EVALUATION FINDINGS

#### EVALUATING THE INITIATIVE AS A WHOLE

**Achievements.** The Initiative achieved broad national reach, engaging organisations and individuals across 35 regions through innovative, partnership-based delivery and layered program design. Over two and a half years, it funded 232 projects, reached more than 61,000 people, and built a strong leadership and learning network. These achievements demonstrate the Initiative's ability to mobilise communities, foster collaboration, and lay the foundations for long-term systems change in drought preparedness and social resilience.

**Impacts.** The Initiative strengthened the foundations for drought resilience by building community capability, infrastructure, and networks. It catalysed a shift towards more inclusive, collaborative, and adaptive ways of working, empowering new leaders and embedding local ownership. Communities reframed drought resilience as a shared, locally led journey, broadening the definition of resilience to include social connection, wellbeing, and inclusion. These changes built the social capital – the networks, relationships and shared norms that enable collective action - that makes communities more prepared for drought. They reflect a move from reactive problem-solving to adaptive, systems-based approaches that are grounded in local relationships and knowledge.

**Recommendations.** The Initiative has established strong foundations for ongoing transformation in regional Australia. To maximise future impact, the next phase should intentionally link program elements, coordinate delivery for collective impact, embed place-based co-design, balance investments across social and human capital and both physical and digital infrastructure, support diverse leadership, and maintain flexible funding for local innovation.

#### EVALUATING THE COMMUNITY IMPACT GRANTS PROGRAM

**Achievements.** The CIP awarded $10.1 million to 121 organisations, supporting 164 projects across 30 regions in six states. Grants were allocated through a collaborative co-design process, ensuring funding addressed local priorities and needs. A diverse range of organisations delivered projects, with a strong focus on inclusion - one third of projects specifically benefited First Nations people and young people, supporting broad community engagement and participation.

**Impacts.** The CIP delivered practical value to regional communities by supporting locally led initiatives that strengthened drought resilience. CIP projects fostered social connection and belonging, built local capability and adaptive capacity, and laid the groundwork for enduring, community-led resilience. These outcomes highlight the importance of flexible, place-based investment in community organisations and networks.

**Recommendations.** To maximise future impact, CIP programs should continue to support locally led approaches, strengthen collaborative networks, embed First Nations knowledge and leadership, and invest in organisational capacity for sustained resilience. These design features will help ensure that community partners can lead, coordinate, and sustain long-term drought resilience, attract further investment, and embed inclusive, place-based strategies that respond to local needs.

#### EVALUATING THE COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP ACTIVITIES

**Achievements.** The Leadership Activities supported over 2,300 people in 121 remote, rural, and regional communities to develop leadership skills for drought resilience. Delivered nationally, these activities primarily targeted rural and remote areas, equipping community members to contribute to local resilience efforts.

**Impacts.** The Leadership Activities built adaptive capacity and strengthened social capital in remote, rural and regional communities. Participants gained practical tools and skills for adaptive leadership, systems thinking and collaborative problem-solving, which increased their confidence and ability to lead local initiatives. The program fostered strong, diverse networks, enabling deeper collaboration and collective action across sectors and regions. Many participants have already catalysed community-led initiatives, translating learning into tangible outcomes that strengthen resilience. Sustaining this momentum will require ongoing support and accessible mechanisms for follow-up, enabling participants to maintain connections and drive continued community change.

**Recommendations.** Future Leadership Activities will have greater impact if they are embedded in resilience frameworks, tailored to local context, and prioritised in under-served regions. Programs should connect leadership development

with clear activation pathways, such as grants and mentoring, and sustain engagement through ongoing alumni networks and local follow-up. These design features will help build long-term leadership capability, support local action, and maintain strong community connections.

### EVALUATING THE SMALL NETWORK GRANTS

**Achievements.** The SNG program complemented the CIP by providing smaller, accessible funding for locally led initiatives in communities often overlooked by larger programs. More than $2 million was invested across 74 projects, delivered in two streams: high-drought-risk LGAs and CIP regions without CIP funding. These projects enabled communities to address local priorities and strengthen drought resilience.

**Impacts.** The SNG program catalysed local networks and strengthened practical preparedness by enabling communities to lead locally designed initiatives. SNG projects built trust and inclusion through community events, improved access to skills, resources, and infrastructure, and broadened participation in drought resilience. Flexible funding supported diverse, tailored activities and helped establish new networks, fostering collaboration and social connection. The program improved access to practical supports and created lasting community assets, while events and training increased awareness, confidence, and skills for preparedness. SNGs also catalysed systemic change by expanding leadership among groups traditionally underrepresented in resilience planning, sparking optimism, and embedding adaptive practices. These outcomes highlight the value of small, accessible investments in building belonging, adaptive capacity, and ongoing, community-driven resilience in regional and remote communities.

**Recommendations.** To maximise future impact, the SNG should continue to complement larger programs, maintain simple application processes, and engage diverse organisations and cohorts. Programs should offer flexible funding for locally relevant initiatives, foster collaboration and shared learning among grantees, and strengthen organisational resilience to sustain local leadership. Ongoing investment and support will help sustain momentum, extend the reach of successful projects, and embed inclusive, community-driven resilience across regional and remote communities.

### EVALUATING THE EXPERTISE POOL

**Achievements.** The Expertise Pool was a national brokerage service that connected rural and regional not-for-profit organisations to a curated pool of 156 vetted experts, offering specialist advice across 67 areas including governance, strategy, and legal support. Delivered by the Social Impact Hub, the service included a free concierge to help organisations identify suitable support. The delivery model was refined over time to improve relevance and accessibility, resulting in new capacity-building resources and the onboarding of additional regional experts. While uptake was variable, the Expertise Pool provided targeted professional support and practical resources to strengthen organisational capacity in rural and remote communities.

**Impacts.** The Expertise Pool delivered practical value to 25 organisations, mainly through its responsive concierge service, which provided tailored advice and strategic guidance. However, uptake and impact remained limited due to operational barriers, funding constraints, and a preference for local expertise over national offerings. Many organisations lacked the capacity or resources to engage with the service, and timing misalignments reduced its integration into project delivery for early grant rounds. Despite these challenges, the concierge service and group webinars were valued for their accessible support, while most organisations benefited more from locally embedded, relationship-based capacity-building models delivered through other Initiative elements.

**Recommendations.** Future programs should embed capacity-building support early, deliver it flexibly, and tailor it to organisational readiness. Rather than relying solely on expert brokerage, programs should offer a multi-modal mix of supports – including peer learning, guided workshops, and just-in-time coaching – to better meet the needs of diverse organisations. Clear communication, co-design with delivery partners, and timely integration of expert support across the project lifecycle will help ensure that capacity-building options are accessible, relevant, and effectively utilised by rural and regional organisations.

### EVALUATING THE NATIONAL MENTORING PROGRAM

**Achievements.** The National Mentoring Program built national drought resilience capability by connecting established and emerging leaders from agricultural communities in rural Australia. Through a 12-month mentoring and learning program, participants expanded their networks, shared knowledge, and developed leadership, communication, and resilience skills to help rural communities prepare for and adapt to future drought and natural disasters.

**Impacts.** The National Mentoring Program strengthened leadership capability and confidence among mentees and mentors, facilitated strong connections and broadened participant networks, and catalysed participants to use their new skills and relationships to deliver broader benefits to their organisations, communities, and the agricultural sector. While drought-specific skills were enhanced to a lesser extent, the program supported more active leadership roles and collaborative projects, contributing to greater social resilience in agricultural communities.

**Recommendations.** Future National Mentoring Programs should be better integrated with other initiative elements, maintain effective learning and matching processes, and incorporate more drought and climate resilience content. Programs should also facilitate stronger local connections and collect longitudinal data to measure long-term impact. These design features will help maximise the program's contribution to building leadership capability, expanding networks, and supporting social resilience in agricultural communities.

### EVALUATING THE NATIONAL LEARNING NETWORK

**Achievements.** Drought Ready is a national impact network connecting more than 1,400 members across regional, rural, and remote Australia. Delivered primarily through an online Facebook group, and supported by events, resources, and chat groups, the network enables individuals and organisations to connect, support each other, and share learning to strengthen drought resilience.

**Impacts.** Drought Ready is creating positive outcomes for communities by connecting 1,421 members nationally through its impact network. The network enabled members to build new, more diverse and deeper connections, strengthen their capability to prepare for and respond to drought, and catalysed mindset shifts that help turn reflection into action. These success factors highlight the value of Drought Ready in supporting learning, collaboration and resilience across regional, rural and remote Australia.

**Recommendations.** Drought Ready merits continued investment as strategic infrastructure for resilience-building, with its impact dependent on how it evolves and integrates with related programs. To maximise future impact, Drought Ready should clarify its purpose and value proposition, strengthen integration with other resilience initiatives, maintain a decentralised but consistently moderated model, and enhance content governance for accessibility and member value. Sustained funding and thoughtful design will help the network scale, deepen engagement, and continue to drive community-led action and learning across regional, rural, and remote Australia.

# 2 Background and context of the evaluation

The Initiative was a multi-year investment funded by the Australian Government through the FDF. 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 five themes outlined in the FDF Investment Strategy for 2024-2028: Partnering for Local Solutions, Partnering for First Nations Initiatives, Building Knowledge, Skills and Capability, Innovating for Transformation, and Measuring Progress and Knowledge Sharing. The Initiative funded under the current Partnering for Local Solutions investment theme and the Better Prepared Communities investment theme of the previous FDF Investment Strategy. Further information on the background and context of the Initiative and the evaluation is provided below.

## 2.1 The Initiative was a $29.6 million Future Drought Fund investment in building social resilience to drought

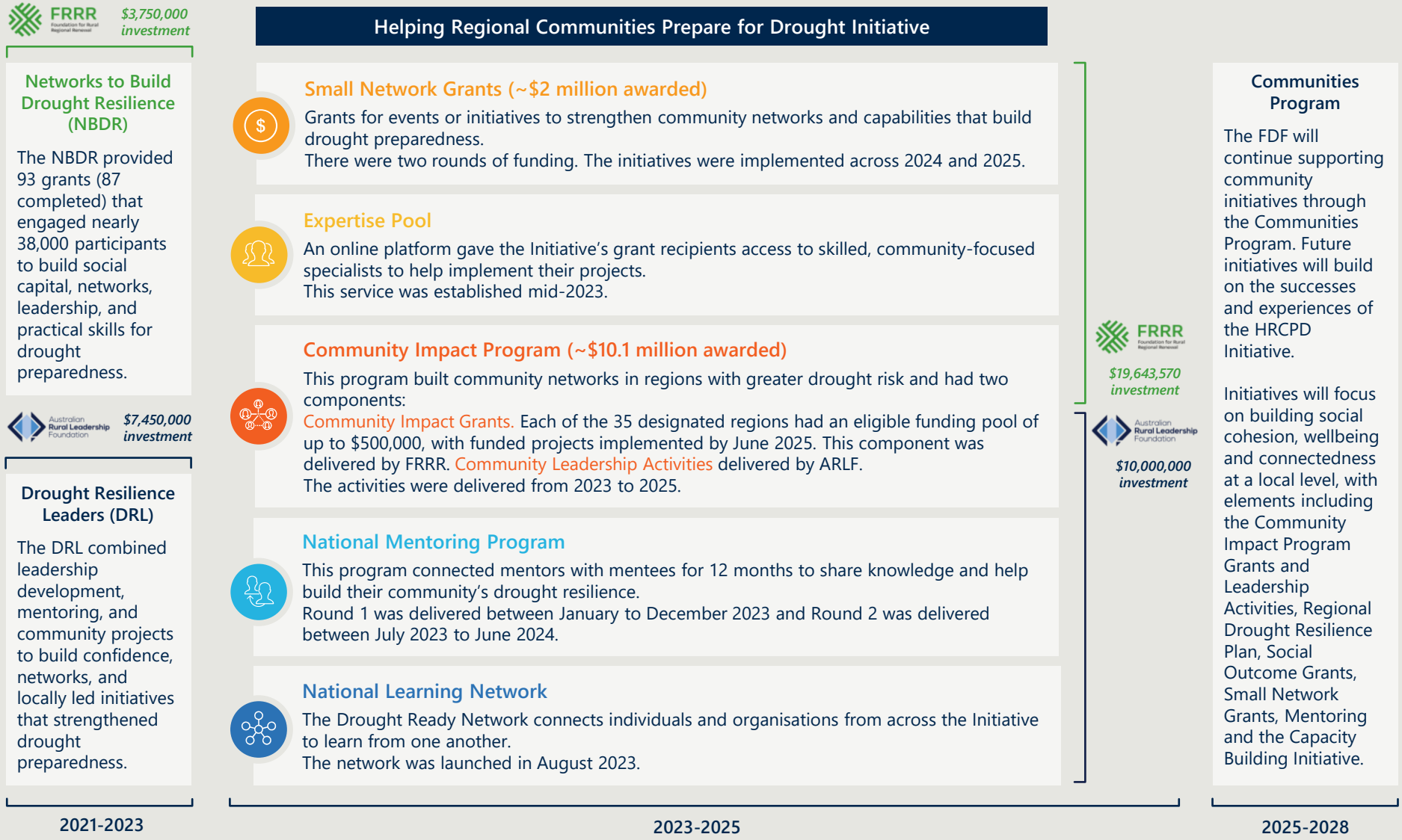
The Initiative aimed to build social resilience and community capacity to prepare for and respond to the impacts of climate change and drought, and to enhance the public good in agriculture-dependent communities. The Initiative extended and integrated the Networks to Build Drought Resilience Program and the Drought Resilience Leaders Program, delivered in 2021-2022. The Initiative was delivered by the FRRR and the ARLF.

The five program elements of the Initiative are described below:

- **The Community Impact Program** empowered community members and not-for-profit organisations in remote, rural and regional Australia to enhance drought preparedness by providing grants for locally led projects and delivering leadership activities tailored to build local capability and resilience.
- **The Small Network Grants** extended the reach of the Initiative by providing targeted funding to smaller or previously unfunded communities, enabling simple initiatives that strengthened connectedness and social capital to support drought resilience.
- **The Expertise Pool** offered community organisations access to a national network of experts, supporting CIP and SNG grantees to deliver address capability or capacity gaps.
- **The National Mentoring Program** connected diverse and experienced mentors with mentees from agriculture-dependent communities, building leadership capacity and broadening networks to strengthen community resilience to drought.
- **The National Learning Network,** known as Drought Ready, is an online platform that connects individuals and organisations committed to drought resilience, enabling members to share knowledge, resources and support to build social resilience across regional Australia.

Together, these elements aimed to build local leadership, strengthen networks, and support community-led action to prepare for drought. Figure 1 below includes a summary of the five elements in the context of past and future FDF investments.

## Figure 1 | Overview of past, current and future FDF investments and the elements of the HRCPD Initiative



## 2.2 Nous evaluated the impact of the Initiative and its elements using an innovative, participatory methodology

Nous delivered the evaluation between February 2023 and September 2025 across three stages:

- **Stage 1 (February – June 2023): Evaluation planning** to collaboratively develop the monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) plan.
- **Stage 2 (July 2023 – July 2024): Data collection and analysis** to deliver a Mid-Term Evaluation report assessing implementation progress, early outcomes, and opportunities for improved delivery.
- **Stage 3 (August 2024 – September 2025): Data collection and analysis** to deliver the Final Evaluation report evaluating achievement of short-term outcomes and overall impact.

There were four defining features about the evaluation approach:

1. **A program theory and logic linked the intended outputs for each Initiative element to the short-term, intermediate and long-term outcomes of the program** (see Appendix A.1). KEQs guided the evaluation that were centred on five domains; appropriateness, strategic alignment, efficiency, effectiveness and impact (see Appendix A.3). Cumulatively, these KEQs answered the question of: *To what extent has the Initiative enabled rural, regional and remote communities to prepare for future droughts through strengthened social resilience, local capacity and capability building?*
2. **A participatory approach underpinned a robust evaluation methodology.** Co-designed with delivery partners and stakeholders, the approach captured both quantitative and qualitative outcomes and generated real-time insights through regional working sessions, collaborative outcomes reporting and transparent reporting of emerging insights (see more detail in Appendix A.4).
3. **Seven short-term and five intermediate outcomes provided a consistent basis to measure the progress and impact**. These outcomes are overviewed at the beginning of each individual element section (Section 4-9) and in more detail in Appendix A.5.
4. **A mixed methods approach enabled credible and context-rich insights.** By triangulating qualitative and quantitative data, we captured both measurable outcomes and lived experience. Primary data collection included program reports, surveys, interviews, and observations. Nous reviewed materials from FRRR and ARLF, conducted interviews with stakeholders, and observed activities across CIP elements. We also undertook regional deep dives in 15 CIP regions to assess place-based impacts and developed narrative baselines to support contribution analysis. Further detail on the approach is provided in Appendix A.6.

Figure 2 overleaf provides a summary of data collection activities that informed this evaluation report.

## Figure 2 | Summary of data collection activities

**The evaluation undertook a robust and comprehensive approach to data collection:**

**To develop a baseline understanding of the regions and understand the place-based impact of the HRCPD Initiative, including:**

- Review of over 200 documents to understand how the five HRCPD Initiative elements were delivered and their impact on drought resilience.
- Baseline assessment of regions to explore regional drought resilience before and after the HRCPD Initiative.
- 28 regional working sessions with 82 CIP grantee organisations to understand drought context and evaluation capability.

**Engagements to understand program delivery and impact**

- Eight interviews with ARLF and FRRR delivery leads informed understanding of program delivery and emerging outcomes for each element.
- Three interviews with DAFF program leads and advisors informed broader contextual understanding and strategic recommendations.
- 20 monthly Operational Cluster sessions provided governance and strategic direction for the evaluation.
- National outcome panels engaged over 90 participants across the five elements, including dedicated panels on First Nations and youth engagement

**Additional data collection activities were undertaken for each HRCPD Initiative element:**

### CIP - Grants

**20** Virtual interviews with CIP organisations

**290** Final and interim project grant reports analysed

**35** Co-design surveys analysed

### CIP - Leadership activities

**9** Virtual engagements with Changemaker and Leadership Action Initiative participants

**1133** Activity completion survey responses analysed

### Small Network Grants (SNG)

**6** Virtual interviews with SNG organisations

**62** Activity completion survey responses analysed

Regional deep dive consultations covered 35 regions and explored the place-based impacts and community benefits of the Initiative. This included over 72 interviews with community members including Traditional Owners, local leaders, and youth representatives. Conversations took place around kitchen tables with a cup of tea, over lunch at the pub, in local offices, and out on country, reflecting the informal, grounded nature of the engagement.

### Expertise pool

**18** Virtual and Deep Dive engagements with interested & participating organisations

**1** Interview with the Social Impact Hub, the delivery partner

**13** Completed EOIs for the Expertise Pool analysed

### National Mentoring Program

**16** Virtual engagement with mentors and/or mentees

**2** Graduation sessions with more than 47 mentors and mentees

**115** Activity commencement and completion survey responses analysed

### National Learning Network (Drought Ready)

**16** Virtual engagements with nine Drought Ready members & the Working Group

**59** Survey responses to a member survey analysed

Facebook platform insights data analysed

## 2.3 Limitations were anticipated and mitigated to support credible findings

Nous identified and addressed several limitations during the evaluation to protect the integrity and usefulness of the findings. While some constraints remained, the Evaluation produced credible, triangulated insights that offer a strong foundation for future program design and delivery.

Three key limitations, and the mitigation strategies applied, are outlined below:

- **Triangulation strengthened the credibility of self-reported data**. To offset reliance on self-reporting, Nous required grantees to submit evidence supporting their reported outcomes and assessed its quality using a structured framework. Evidence quality varied between organisations, with equal spread against a three-point rating of 'fair', 'good' and 'excellent'. These reports were triangulated with interviews, observations and document reviews to build a more comprehensive picture of program impact. Further detail is provided in Appendix A.
- **Qualitative data compensated for sampling bias and data gaps.** Where survey and interview uptake was low, particularly for the Expertise Pool and National Mentoring Program, Nous drew on qualitative data to fill gaps and balance perspectives. In some cases, data was disproportionately provided by highly engaged participants, introducing a risk of sampling bias. Community-led delivery partners also had limited capacity for systematic data collection. To address this, Nous placed greater weight on qualitative evidence and adjusted evaluation timelines to accommodate delays.
- **Contextual analysis enabled meaningful comparison across diverse regions**. To account for variability in local implementation, Nous conducted deep dives in 15 CIP regions and facilitated outcomes panels to ensure findings reflected regional contexts. The Initiative's flexible design allowed communities to tailor activities to local needs, which enhanced relevance but made cross-region comparisons complex. These mitigation strategies supported nuanced interpretation of place-based impacts.

## 2.4 The evaluation report is structured by the Initiative elements and assesses performance against intended outcomes

This report is structured to support both high-level understanding and deep insight into the Initiative and its impact. Readers should start with Section 3, which provides a cumulative assessment of the Initiative's overall outcomes and impacts. Sections 4-9 evaluate each of the Initiative elements in detail, providing insight on their outcomes and impact. Readers can approach these sections in any order. Section 10 provides an overriding conclusion for the evaluation.

The evaluation applied a consistent five-level rating scale to assess the extent to which each element achieved its intended short-term and intermediate-term outcome. The beginning of each Initiative element chapter includes a table assessing that element against each outcome. A description of the short-term outcomes ratings is provided below in Table 2 and intermediate-term outcomes ratings in Table 3.

### Table 2 | Short-term outcomes ratings descriptions

| RATING | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| **Nothing happened** | No evidence that this outcome emerged; possible signs that there were barriers or opposition to this outcome emerging. |
| **Limited** | Outcome started to emerge in a limited way; it was observed in some of the relevant cases or to a limited extent across a wide range of cases. |
| **Developing** | Outcome showed some signs of maturity; it emerged across a wide range of relevant cases; and became embedded/sustained. |
| **Realised** | Outcome was at the final target level; it happened regularly/consistently and well, across all relevant cases. |
| **Exceeded** | Outcome reached a level beyond expectations; it reached a wider group than intended or is at a very high level of quality/maturity. |

### Table 3 | Intermediate-term outcomes ratings descriptions

| RATING | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| **No contribution** | No observable influence on the outcome/did not contribute. |
| **Little contribution** | Played a small or supporting role in the outcome, contribution was limited in scope or reach. Contribution might be present, but not substantial. |
| **Some contribution** | Helped achieve the outcome alongside other factors, played a meaningful role but not central. |
| **Major contribution** | Played a substantial role in achieved the outcome, contribution was influential and sustained. |
| **Transformative contribution** | Played a pivotal role in achieving the outcome, contribution was catalytic and system shaping. |

# 3 Evaluating the Initiative

This Section synthesises evaluation findings across the program elements to assess the Initiative's contribution to system-level change. It steps beyond individual activities to explore how the Initiative collectively:

- Achieved impressive reach in strengthening preparedness and social resilience to drought across regional Australia
- Enhanced the foundations for drought resilience, shifted behaviours, and reframed mindsets
- Set strong foundations for ongoing transformation aligned with the Future Drought Fund's long-term ambition.

The analysis draws on two systems change frameworks, the Waters of Systems Change and the Three Horizons model to interpret how the Initiative contributed to deeper, more durable change across communities, institutions, and mindsets.

## 3.1 The Initiative achieved impressive reach to strengthen preparedness and social resilience to drought across Australia

**The Initiative had an ambitious scope.** It aimed to engage organisations and individuals across 35 regions through five discrete elements over just two and a half years. To deliver this, the Initiative adopted several innovative design features:

- A devolved, partnership-based delivery model that empowered FRRR and ARLF to lead community-based engagement
- Participatory grant-making and community-led delivery through the CIP and SNG
- Complementary program elements to extend cumulative impact
- National-scale leadership and learning infrastructure, including the Drought Ready network, mentoring program, and expertise pool.

**The magnitude of the Initiative's reach is significant.** Over two and a half years, the Initiative:

- Funded 193 organisations to deliver 232 projects across 7 states and territories, including 158 CIP projects across 157 LGAs and 74 SNG projects across 79 LGAs.
- Reached 57,336 individuals through all grant projects, including 47,528 through the CIP and 9,808 through the SNG.
- Directly engaged over 2,300 participants of the Leadership Activities and 156 mentees and mentors through the National Mentoring Program.
- Grew the Drought Ready network to 1,421 members, including 946 Changemaker workshop participants and 127 participants from other FDF programs.

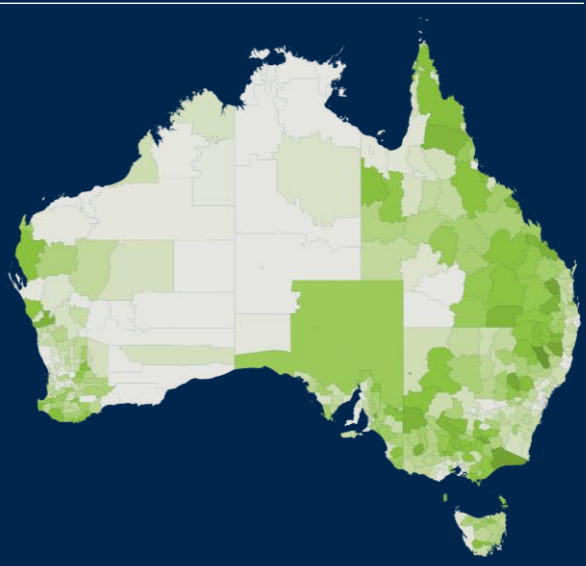
These outputs reflect the Initiative's ability to mobilise a wide range of actors, build momentum across regions, and lay the groundwork for broader systems change. Figure 3 overleaf provides an overview of the total outputs of the Initiative.

Figure 3 | Outputs of the Initiative overall

## The Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative achieved impressive reach to strengthen preparedness and social resilience to drought across Australia

### Initiative summary

- $29.6 million investment
- over 61,000 participants reached, across
- 438 Local Government Areas
- 232 locally-led projects funded that,
- Strengthened networks, supported events, delivered infrastructure and enabled training and learning




*Source: Program data provided by FRRR and ARLF.*

**THE INITIATIVE WAS MADE UP OF 5 ELEMENTS THAT DELIVERED THE FOLLOWING...**

### Community Impact Program Grants

158 projects were delivered across 157 LGAs by 121 organisations who received $9.83 million in funding. The projects reached an estimated 47,528 participants.

### Community Leadership Activities

Delivered 133 leadership sessions across 121 locations to over 2,300 participants, including 4 Community Leadership Programs, 1 Emerging Leadership Program, 1 TRAIL program, 1 Leadership Action Initiative, 125 Changemaker workshops and 1 National Changemaker Summit.

### Small Network Grants

74 projects were delivered across 79 LGAs by 72 organisations who received $2 million in funding. The projects reached an estimated 9,808 participants.

### National Mentoring Program

Delivered in 2 rounds, engaging 156 participants as mentors and/or mentees across 104 LGAs: Round 1 engaged 59 participants and Round 2 engaged 97 participants.

### Drought Ready Network

Grew to over 1,421 members across 335 LGAs, representing 15 different sectors. It facilitated links to other elements and programs with 84% of members engaged in other HRCPD elements, 67% were Changemaker participants and 9% had participated in other FDF programs.

### Expertise Pool

Included 156 vetted experts, 90 professional impact networks and 58 referral partners representing 67+ areas of expertise. 25 HRCPD organisations engaged the free concierge service and 12 HRCPD organisations engaged with experts.

*Source: Final grant report data provided by FRRR.*

## 3.2 The Initiative enhanced the foundations for drought resilience, shifted behaviours and reframed mindsets

The FDF ultimately aims to achieve transformative change across regional Australia. To assess the Initiative's contribution to this ambition, Nous applied two complementary systems change frameworks:

- **The Waters of Systems Change**, which identifies six levers of change across explicit (policies, practices, resource flows), semi-explicit (relationships, power dynamics), and implicit (mental models) levels. This framework helped identify where the Initiative achieved change and where deeper or sustained effort is needed.
- **The Three Horizons model**, which explores how current efforts (Horizon 1) intersect with emerging innovations (Horizon 2) and long-term transformational goals (Horizon 3). This model helped position the Initiative's activities within a broader change trajectory.

Figure 4 overleaf maps the Initiative's contributions across the two systems change frameworks. It shows how activities across explicit, semi-explicit and implicit levels of change strengthened current systems (H1), seeded innovation (H2), and laid the groundwork for transformation (H3).

This mapping informed the analysis that follows, which is structured around three overarching insights into how the Initiative contributed to systems change:

- communities built the practical foundations of resilience by strengthening capability, infrastructure and networks
- communities shifted towards more inclusive, collaborative and adaptive ways of working
- communities reframed drought resilience as a shared, locally led journey.

This section also explores how the Initiative supported grants, networks and activities that engaged young people and First Nations communities in local drought resilience. The Initiative recognised the unique experiences and vital role that these cohorts play in long-term, place-based resilience. The evaluation found that the Initiative strengthened whole-of-community resilience by empowering these diverse cohorts through connection, capability and leadership.

The remainder of this section explores these contributions in detail. The element sections that follow provide additional detail and evidence to support the overarching findings in this section.

## Figure 4 | How the Initiative Contributed to Systems Change

| | | HORIZON 1<br>Strengthening the now | HORIZON 2<br>Seeding innovation | HORIZON 3<br>Transforming the future |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Section 3.2.1** | | | | |
| **EXPLICIT**<br>▸ Practice<br>▸ Policies<br>▸ Resource flows | **Communities built the practical foundations of resilience by strengthening capability, infrastructure and networks** | • 88% of CIP projects from towns <10,000<br>• 41 remote communities accessed leadership training<br>• 1,421 members joined Drought Ready<br>• 15 SNG infrastructure projects reached 1,757 people | • Small grants enabled rapid, locally led responses<br>• Co-funding leveraged for infrastructure upgrades<br>• Digital tools (e.g. weather platforms, service directories) developed through grants | • Drought Ready positioned as national infrastructure<br>• Leadership tools embedded in community planning and governance<br>• Digital assets continue to support coordination |
| **Section 3.2.2** | | | | |
| **SEMI-EXPLICIT**<br>▸ Relationships<br>▸ Power dynamics | **Communities shifted towards more inclusive, collaborative and adaptive ways of working** | • 946 Changemaker participants formed networks in Drought Ready<br>• CPLOs convened cross-sector partnerships<br>• Events brought together diverse groups (e.g. farmers, First Nations, youth) | • Inclusive co-design and Outcomes Panels shifted power to communities<br>• Mentoring program connected diverse leaders<br>• Regional alumni events sustained momentum | • Communities leading cross-sector collaborations<br>• Local networks driving joint planning and investment<br>• Leadership reframed as shared and relational |
| **Section 3.2.3** | | | | |
| **IMPLICIT**<br>▸ Mental models | **Communities reframed resilience through three transformative mindset shifts** | • Participants reported increased confidence and agency<br>• Resilience seen as more than technical preparedness<br>• 218 Changemakers committed to inclusive decision-making | • Communities reframed drought as a shared, local journey<br>• First Nations leadership embedded in resilience efforts<br>• Youth and CALD voices elevated in planning | • Mindset shift toward long-term, adaptive, inclusive resilience<br>• Success redefined as collaboration and mutual support<br>• Resilience seen as cultural, social and systemic |

### 3.2.1 Communities built the practical foundations of resilience by strengthening capability, infrastructure and networks

The Initiative laid strong foundations for future drought resilience by equipping communities with the capabilities, assets and relationships needed to respond to complex challenges. These foundations span three distinct but complementary domains:

- Knowledge and skills to lead and adapt
- Physical, digital and intellectual infrastructure to support coordination and learning
- Cross-sector networks to sustain collaboration and momentum

#### Communities built practical knowledge and preparedness skills

The Initiative strengthened community preparedness by building practical knowledge and skills across a wide range of topics from climate literacy and land management to adaptive leadership and systems thinking. These efforts were delivered through a layered model that included grant-funded training, leadership development, and peer learning platforms.

Participants reported increased confidence, stronger problem-solving skills, and a greater ability to lead change in complex environments. For example:

- 25 per cent of Changemaker participants surveyed highlighted the tools and frameworks introduced during the program in their end-of-program survey responses (406 of 1,632 responses)
- 6 of 11 interviewed participants said these tools helped them think more systemically and approach challenges with greater clarity.

Tools, such as the Iceberg Model and Three Horizons, were applied to real, locally relevant challenges, helping participants shift from reactive problem-solving to long-term, adaptive thinking.

Grant-funded projects strengthened practical skills for resilience, ranging from sustainable land management and water-saving food production to culturally informed fire management led by Noongar community members. These projects not only built practical skills but also provided participants an opportunity to connect and build social resilience.

These examples reflect a broader shift in how communities are preparing for drought and other complex challenges. Rather than relying solely on external expertise, communities are building their own knowledge base, strengthening local leadership, and embedding adaptive practices that can evolve over time. These practical, place-based, and people-led foundations are essential for long-term resilience.

#### Communities invested in shared assets and resources that support resilience

The Initiative enabled communities to invest in physical, digital and intellectual assets that will continue to support resilience long after the funding period. These shared resources ranging from upgraded community halls to enduring digital platforms have become anchors for connection, learning and coordination.

These investments are delivering long-term value. While 15 SNG infrastructure projects reached 1,757 people during delivery, their anticipated ongoing reach exceeds 30,000, a sixteen-fold increase.

Digital infrastructure also played a critical role. The Drought Ready platform, with over 1,400 members across 335 LGAs, provides a national infrastructure for peer learning and collaboration. Several grant projects developed digital tools and knowledge assets, such as weather data platforms and service directories, that continue to support decision-making and coordination.

Leadership activities further contributed to this legacy by equipping individuals with frameworks and resources like the Iceberg Model and Three Horizons that guide ongoing leadership practice. These intellectual assets are being applied in community planning, governance and advocacy, reinforcing the Initiative's long-term impact.

Together, these physical, digital and intellectual resources represent a legacy. They bridge the present with the future, enabling communities to continue building resilience in ways that are locally relevant, inclusive and sustainable. Critically, they provide individuals and communities with the confidence to build ongoing social resilience to drought.

### Networks across sectors and geographies became more connected and collaborative

The Initiative strengthened the connective tissue of regional Australia. It achieved this by enabling new relationships, deepening existing ones, and embedding collaboration into the way communities work. These formal and informal, local and national networks are now playing a critical role in sustaining momentum and coordinating future resilience efforts.

Leadership Activities and grant-funded projects catalysed new relationships across sectors, geographies and demographics. Many of these evolved into informal peer groups and alumni networks that continue to share knowledge and support each other. Surveyed members reported adding an average of nine new connections through the platform, with one participant noting: "I made connections through Drought Ready, and it has helped me at the infancy of my career."

These connections were not only numerous but diverse. Projects intentionally brought together groups who don't typically interact such as farmers, First Nations communities, service providers, and young people, creating inclusive spaces for dialogue and collaboration. For instance, in the Northern Tablelands of NSW, Southern New England Landcare Inc used events to connect tomato growers, transport operators and aviation businesses, strengthening networks that would not have formed otherwise.

The Initiative also enabled the formation of formal partnerships and place-based networks. Community Partner Lead Organisations (CPLOs), funded through the CIP, played a key role in convening delivery partners and local organisations in all 30 regions. Their network-building capacity provided regions with strengthened relationships, organisational knowledge and ongoing collaboration that will outlast the program. CPLOs achieved this through regular networking meetings, events, forums, trainings, On-Country visits and in some cases formal cross-sector networks that have supported joint funding applications and collaborative resilience initiatives.

These examples demonstrate that the Initiative did more than connect individuals, it embedded collaboration into the operating systems of regional communities. These networks are now acting as platforms for shared learning, coordinated action and sustained resilience-building.

While the Initiative enabled communities to build foundational capabilities and assets, the scale and sustainability of these investments varied. Some infrastructure projects faced delays due to procurement or volunteer capacity constraints. Meanwhile, not all digital tools developed through grants were maintained or widely adopted. In several regions, network-building was concentrated around a few highly engaged individuals or organisations, raising questions about long-term durability. The evaluation notes however that not all network initiatives were intended for wider adoption and that many had only been created at the time of the evaluation, with potential longer-term impacts yet to be realised. These variations suggest a need for future programs to provide implementation support relative to organisational capacity, encourage shared ownership of assets, and invest in mechanisms that embed networks beyond individual champions.

### 3.2.2 Communities shifted towards more inclusive, collaborative and adaptive ways of working

The Initiative catalysed a shift in how communities lead, collaborate and adapt. It challenged assumptions about who holds knowledge and power, created space for new leaders to emerge, and embedded more inclusive and adaptive ways of working. These shifts are reshaping how communities approach resilience not as a technical task, but as a shared, relational and evolving process. These insights are explored in more detail below.

#### Leadership emerged locally, including among groups traditionally underrepresented in resilience planning

The Initiative helped redefine leadership from a formal role to a shared, relational practice grounded in local action. A greater sense of confidence was the most frequently reported change across leadership activity participants. In the Changemaker program, 81 per cent of surveyed participants said they felt more empowered to lead community initiatives, and 222 described increased confidence in their end-of-program reflections. Targeted programs for women, young people and First Nations participants supported new leaders to emerge in local organisations.

Participants translated this confidence into action, initiating projects, joining committees, and advocating for community needs. In Broken Hill, far west NSW, governance training helped local leaders adopt more strategic approaches to engagement and decision-making. In Bruce Rock, in WA's eastern Wheatbelt, project teams overcame logistical challenges to deliver infrastructure and build leadership capacity for future initiatives.

#### Flexible resources enabled communities to lead locally relevant, place-based solutions

The Initiative broadened participation and shifted mindsets about who contributes to resilience. Projects intentionally engaged First Nations people, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, women and young community members aged 18 to 35 – many of whom had not previously seen themselves as leaders. For example, participants across elements:

- Advocated for, protected and enhanced the inclusion of First Nations cultural knowledge into drought preparedness activities.
- Upskilled and empowered CALD communities to participate in drought preparedness through culturally-specific and multi-lingual activities and resources.
- Elevated women as leaders in drought preparedness and broader activities through leadership programs, trainings, networks and events.
- Equipped young people (aged 18-35) with the confidence and skills to step into broader leadership roles and affect change in their communities through mentoring, leadership development, new networks and broader involvement with drought resilience initiatives.
- Supported children and young people (aged under 18) to build awareness of drought resilience, contribute ideas, and develop early skills through school-based projects, events and intergenerational activities.

Across the Initiative, participants reported a stronger commitment to engaging diverse voices in decision-making. In the Changemaker program alone, 218 participants said they intended to seek out diverse perspectives and include others more actively in their work.

### Communities adopted more adaptive, locally led ways of working

The Initiative supported communities to lead locally relevant, place-based solutions. Grants, coaching and peer networks gave communities the flexibility to respond to local priorities. This enabled experimentation, learning and iteration, hallmarks of adaptive practice.

Several communities applied a staged approach and applied lessons from involvement in the NBDR program during delivery in HRCPD. This demonstrated a shift from one-off delivery to continuous improvement. For example:

- Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) in VIC delivered two regional activities centred on growth, adoption, production and profitability during NBDR. BCG used the learnings from these events and grant funding during HRCPD to scale the impact of their young farmer network.
- Southern Cross University provided Agricultural Innovation and Research Eyre Peninsula (AIR EP) in SA with greater visibility and understanding of its networks through an NBDR-funded network mapping tool. AIR EP leveraged these learnings to effectively deliver as CPLO of the Eyre Peninsula during HRCPDI.

These examples reflect a broader shift: communities are no longer waiting for external solutions. They are testing, learning and leading change on their own terms. Past programs like NBDR and DRL demonstrated the value of locally led adaptation, strong networks, and collaborative leadership. The Initiative extended these proven models to deepen impact and support stronger alignment between social resilience programs and the intended outcomes of the FDF and other government drought initiatives. This has enabled communities to achieve more sustainable, inclusive, and adaptive drought resilience across regions.

While these shifts are promising, they were not evenly distributed. Access to leadership development and adaptive resources varied across regions, and some cohorts particularly in remote areas faced barriers to sustained engagement (for example, see section 5.4). Continued

investment in inclusive design, local coordination and follow-up support will be critical to maintain momentum.

### 3.2.3 Communities reframed resilience through three transformative mindset shifts

The Initiative catalysed a series of mindset shifts that changed how communities understand, lead and sustain resilience. These shifts built on and moved beyond the practical foundations (Section 3.2.1) and relational outcomes (Section 3.2.2). The three mindset shifts reframed drought resilience from:

- Top-down, reactive practice to locally led adaptive practice
- Individual, producer-focused action to whole-of-community agency
- Technical resilience to relational and cultural resilience

Each shift is explored below.

#### From top-down, reactive practice to locally led adaptive practice

Communities moved away from reactive problem solving and externally driven solutions, toward adaptive, locally led approaches. Resilience was increasingly understood not as a fixed goal, but as a dynamic process of connecting, learning, adapting and thriving.

Leadership programs, mentoring and peer networks exposed participants to tools and frameworks that supported reflection, iteration and systems thinking. The Iceberg Model and Horizons of Change helped participants explore root causes and plan for long-term impact. Drought Ready reinforced this shift. Members described the platform as a "keep learning, keep growing" space that helped them reflect, adapt and lead beyond the life of the program.

This shift reflects a broader trend in policy and practice toward systems thinking and place-based approaches. The Initiative demonstrated that when communities are given the tools to influence the broader system and trusted to lead, they respond with innovation, coordination and sustained action. Participants described moving from responding to immediate needs to leading change on their own terms testing ideas, learning from setbacks and building on local strengths.

#### From individual, producer-focused action to whole-of-community agency

Leadership was reframed from a formal role to a shared, relational practice. The Initiative challenged the assumption that drought resilience is the domain of primary producers alone. Instead, it positioned resilience as a whole-of-community effort, involving diverse contributors across sectors and cohorts.

In some regions, delivery partners transitioned from short-term implementers to strategic collaborators. Producer-focused organisations broadened their scope to include leadership development, wellbeing and social cohesion. At the same time, Changemaker participants highlighted increased focus on inclusive leadership practices such as listening, avoiding assumptions and involving others in decision-making.

Critically, the Initiative validated lived experience and encouraged participants to see themselves and others as capable of contributing to community resilience. This shift unlocked latent capability across regions and supported distributed leadership.

#### From technical resilience to relational and cultural resilience

Resilience was broadened beyond infrastructure and preparedness plans to include social connection, cultural identity and inclusive engagement. Projects intentionally engaged First Nations, CALD and young people, groups often excluded from traditional resilience planning. Leadership activities created space for dialogue, empathy and shared learning, helping participants recognise that resilience is built through relationships as much as resources. Many projects provided safe spaces for conversations that elevated mental health, cultural identity and intergenerational learning.

This reframing also reshaped who is seen as a contributor to resilience. Arts organisations, cultural groups and community services were increasingly recognised for their role in fostering belonging, wellbeing and local leadership. Flexible grants and open recruitment enabled diverse participation, while cross-sector collaboration brought together organisations that had not previously worked together.

Importantly, this shift was not limited to communities. The Initiative contributed to a broader mindset change in government program design, reinforcing the value of relational and cultural resilience alongside technical preparedness. By elevating these dimensions, the Initiative helped bridge the gap between community practice and policy priorities.

While these three mindset shifts were observed across regions, they remain in the early stages of embedding. The evaluation found that most elements contributed meaningfully to intermediate outcomes and longer-term change, but these shifts are still emerging. Their depth and durability will depend on continued investment, inclusive design and mechanisms that support communities to sustain and scale locally led resilience.

### 3.2.4 The Initiative strengthened resilience by empowering diverse cohorts through connection, capability, and leadership

First Nations people and young people in rural and remote communities experience uniquely deep impacts during drought, including heightened social isolation, reduced access to essential services, and challenges to cultural identity or future opportunities. These cohorts are often more vulnerable to barriers in participation and resilience-building, due to factors such as remoteness, disadvantage, and the disruption of traditional roles or pathways.

The Initiative prioritised First Nations and young people aged 18 to 35 because their knowledge, leadership, and networks are vital for effective, locally relevant, and sustainable drought preparedness across entire communities. The findings below reflect the lived experiences and priorities of both groups, validated through national outcome panel sessions with participants and delivery organisations.

### The Initiative strengthened resilience for First Nations communities through connection, capacity building, and leadership.

**The Initiative strengthened social cohesion and inclusion by building connections between First Nations and non-Indigenous organisations.** Culturally safe, on-Country activities brought Elders, youth, and families together to build trust. For example, the Jawoyn Association's ceremony at Leilyn in NT supported healing for both Jawoyn and non-Indigenous participants. Projects formed new partnerships, like DJAARA's workshops with landholders, which encouraged collaboration. These efforts helped break down barriers and build shared goals for drought resilience.

**Events, community-led training, and infrastructure enhanced knowledge sharing and practical resilience.** Events provided hands-on training in cultural land management and fire management for Indigenous rangers. Mentoring and leadership programs built confidence and skills in First Nations leaders and volunteers. Infrastructure upgrades, such as reconnecting the Ranch Billabong to the Wimmera River in VIC, enabled greater engagement and long-term resilience. Together, these activities gave First Nations communities practical tools and stronger capacity to prepare for drought.

**The Initiative elevated First Nations leadership and self-determination.** Projects were co-designed and led by First Nations people, embedding cultural authority and decision-making. The Woorabinda Rangers and Youth Development project in Fitzroy Capricornia QLD created new employment and training opportunities for local youth, with Elders leading cultural burning and land management activities. These efforts increased the visibility and influence of First Nations leadership in resilience planning and community care.

### Youth networks, skills development, and leadership empowered young people in drought resilience.

**The Initiative cultivated stronger connections and networks between youth and other cohorts.** Youth formed new and strengthened existing connections through formal networks and events. For example, Birchip Cropping Group's Young Farmer Network in SA built trust and collaboration among young farmers. The Community Café and changemaker workshops helped young people expand their circles and share knowledge. These efforts fostered belonging and ongoing collaboration.

**The Initiative equipped young people with the confidence and capabilities to contribute to drought resilience and local leadership.** Training initiatives and leadership activities enabled young people to build skills and knowledge relevant to drought resilience. Young participants gained confidence to take action and lead, with one noting, "the biggest thing I took away was the confidence to be able to communicate with people... I have the knowledge to be able to lead change." Transferable skills, such as communication and problem solving, supported adaptive leadership and community decision-making.

**Young participants are stepping into leadership roles and taking action towards local change.** The Initiative opened pathways for youth to engage in community life and strengthen local organisations. Projects encouraged new volunteers and supported succession planning. For example, a mentee organised a leadership program for young rural women, and others united young people with volunteering organisations. These actions reflect a growing sense of agency and commitment to community resilience.

## 3.3 Delivery enabled inclusive, adaptive and locally relevant resilience-building, and laid the groundwork for integration

The Initiative's delivery mechanisms were central to its success. By enabling communities to lead, adapt and collaborate in ways that reflected local strengths and priorities, the Initiative supported inclusive and context-driven resilience-building. These mechanisms 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. These insights are explored across the following sections:

- locally led, well-supported delivery was critical for inclusive, adaptive, and context-driven resilience building
- foundations for integration were established, with potential to deepen alignment.

### 3.3.1 Locally led, well-supported delivery was critical for inclusive, adaptive, and context-driven resilience building

The Initiative demonstrated that locally led, well-supported delivery is essential for building inclusive, adaptive and context-driven resilience. The Initiative's delivery model enabled communities to lead, adapt and collaborate in ways that reflected their unique strengths, challenges and priorities. Four key enablers of this approach were

- **Empowered local leadership enabled responsive, inclusive delivery.** The devolved grant model gave diverse organisations the autonomy to design and lead contextually relevant initiatives. This flexibility enabled activities such as the CIP, SNG and Changemaker workshops to evolve in response to community feedback. It also fostered inclusion particularly of cohorts traditionally underrepresented in resilience planning by enabling delivery partners to tailor engagement to local needs and relationships. Funded CPLOs played an important role supporting local-led capacity building and regional coordination.
- **Flexible support structures enabled broad reach, despite capacity constraints.** While resourcing supported wide delivery, many organisations operated with limited operational funding and volunteer fatigue. ARLF and FRRR successfully managed extensive portfolios with minimal administrative support, demonstrating strong commitment and delivery capability. CPLOs helped offset these pressures at the regional level, offering practical support to delivery partners and sustaining local networks.
- **Strong national governance supported broad reach and diverse engagement.** FRRR and ARLF's leadership enabled delivery across a wide geographic footprint, engaging a broad mix of communities and organisations. CPLOs played a pivotal role in local coordination, helping bridge national strategy with regional delivery. Their contributions reflected a range of strengths, shaped by varying levels of role clarity, funding and experience highlighting opportunities to further support and standardise this critical function.
- **Collaborative MEL governance enabled adaptive implementation and real-time learning.** The MEL approach was intentionally adaptive and collaborative, evolving in response to stakeholder feedback, emerging findings and shifting community needs. Nous worked closely with ARLF

and FRRR to co-design and refine MEL tools, methods and lines of inquiry throughout the Initiative. Changes to program logic templates, data collection tools and engagement timelines reflected a shared commitment to relevance and responsiveness. This governance model embedded learning at every stage and strengthened both program delivery and evaluation practice.

Together, local leadership, flexible support, national coordination and collaborative MEL governance created the conditions for inclusive, adaptive and context-driven resilience-building. They also laid the groundwork for deeper integration across Initiative elements and alignment with broader policy and planning frameworks. The following section explores how these foundations can be strengthened to support long-term, system-wide impact.

### 3.3.2 Foundations for integration were established, with potential to deepen alignment

The Initiative laid early foundations for integration across program elements and with broader resilience efforts. It also demonstrated how strategic design, sequencing and locally embedded delivery can support cumulative impact. Three key enablers of integration were:

- **Strategic design and sequencing required further refinements to support cumulative impact.** The Initiative's layered design combining grants, leadership development, mentoring and networks meant some participants could build capability over time and apply learning across contexts. Participants leveraged SNG funding to extend momentum from Changemaker workshops, translating leadership insights into tangible community projects. Responding to community needs (e.g. the 2022 floods), CIP grants were extended by six months which delayed the delivery of the Leadership Activities. While appropriate, this reduced the ability of individuals to translate ideas developed from leadership activities into SNG funded projects. The Drought Ready platform sustained relationships and learning beyond individual activities, helping alumni lead local initiatives and deepen systems thinking. And early mentoring participants lacked access to Drought Ready and other follow-on activities since they completed their program in the very early stages of the Initiative. At the National Changemaker Summit, participants identified sequencing and follow-up support as critical enablers of sustained action.
- **Locally embedded models enabled informal integration and cross-program learning.** While formal integration mechanisms were limited, delivery partners and participants created informal pathways to connect across Initiative elements and with other programs. In the Murraylands and Riverland SA, the CPLO convened a regional alumni event that brought together Changemaker participants and graduates of a separate state-funded leadership program. Several organisations used CIP and SNG funding to deliver tailored training that addressed the same needs the Expertise Pool was designed to meet such as governance, strategic planning and volunteer management. FRRR and ARLF hosted quarterly webinars to facilitate cross-program learning and share insights across CIP and SNG organisations.
- **Early alignment with policy and planning frameworks created future opportunities.** Some projects built on earlier FDF investments (e.g. NBDR and DRL), demonstrating continuity and a

growing base of local knowledge. For instance, 26 CIP and SNG organisations followed on from NBDR. Delivery partners expressed interest in aligning with regional planning and policy frameworks, such as the Regional Drought Resilience Plans (RDRPs), but lacked structured mechanisms to do so. The experience of the HRCPD Initiative and its predecessor programs demonstrates that stronger alignment between social resilience programs and the intended outcomes of the FDF, other Australian Government initiatives, and state and territory drought strategies is best achieved through layered, community-led approaches. The evaluation found that embedding leadership development and community-led resilience within broader strategies such as RDRPs would amplify impact and support long-term sustainability.

Together, these integration enablers, strategic design, embedded delivery and early alignment demonstrated the potential for cumulative impact. The following section explores how future programs can build on these foundations to maximise long-term transformation.

## 3.4 The Initiative has set strong foundations for ongoing transformation across regional Australia

The Initiative laid strong foundations for long-term transformation in regional Australia. It mobilised communities, built capability, strengthened networks and catalysed inclusive, locally led resilience efforts. These outcomes reflect a shift from reactive problem-solving to adaptive, systems-based approaches grounded in relationships, culture and place.

The following design features draw on what was delivered through HRCPDI and recommend refinements to maximise future impact.

### 3.4.1 Six design features can support ongoing transformation

To build on the Initiative's momentum, future programs should retain effective mechanisms, refine design features where needed, and embed principles that support inclusive, locally led resilience. The six design features below reflect both implementation lessons and forward-looking recommendations at the whole-of-Initiative level. Element specific recommendations are provided in each element chapter.

1. **Strengthen complementarity across program elements**

HRCPDI demonstrated the value of layered design combining grants, leadership development, mentoring and networks. Future programs should strengthen links between sub-elements to enable participants to build cumulative capability. Sequencing activities and aligning content will help sustain engagement and amplify outcomes.

2. **Coordinate distributed delivery for collective impact**

National coordination supported broad reach and diverse engagement. Future programs should retain this structure while improving alignment across sub-programs. Shared frameworks, aligned timelines and clear communication channels will enable system-wide learning and strategic coordination across the FDF.

3. **Embed place-based co-design for relevance and uptake**

HRCPDI delivery partners adapted activities to local needs, but some program elements were predesigned without community input. Future programs should embed co-design from the outset, ensuring regional stakeholders shape priorities, mechanisms and delivery. This will improve relevance, inclusion and uptake.

4. **Balance investment across capability, relationships and infrastructure**

The Initiative recognised the importance of social infrastructure such as leadership, networks and trust alongside physical and digital assets. Future programs should maintain a balanced approach across all three domains, while ensuring flexibility for communities to set their own priorities.

5. **Embed inclusion and support diverse leadership**

The Initiative created pathways for groups traditionally underrepresented in resilience planning to lead, including First Nations, CALD, youth and women. Future programs should retain this focus and strengthen mechanisms that support diverse leadership, including tailored engagement, mentoring and co-designed activities.

6. **Fund local innovation through flexible, small-scale investments**

Low-barrier funding streams enabled experimentation and grassroots activation. Future programs should continue to offer small grants as part of broader program ecosystems, supporting local innovation and sustaining momentum.

These design features reflect the lessons of the Initiative and provide a blueprint for future investment. Programs that embed these principles, while allowing communities to shape delivery, will be better placed to deliver lasting, system-level change across regional Australia.

# 4 Evaluating the Community Impact Program Grants

The CIP grants aimed to empower community members and not-for-profit organisations in remote, rural, and regional Australia to initiate local actions that enhanced drought preparedness.

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

- CIP grants delivered near $10m to 158 projects across Australia.
- The CIP grants realised all seven intended short-term outcomes.
- The CIP strengthened locally led drought resilience.
- To build lasting resilience, future programs must continue to support organisations to lead, collaborate and adapt.

## 4.1 CIP grants delivered near $10m to 158 projects across Australia

The CIP grants delivered funding to a wide range of agriculturally dependent communities across rural and regional Australia. In total, the CIP awarded $10,110,639 to 121 organisations to deliver 164 projects. As of June 2025, six projects had withdrawn their grants, resulting in 158 active grants valued at $9,829,129.

CIP grants were awarded across 30 regions in six states, with funding distributed in four tranches to align with community capacity and readiness for the co-design process. Funding for the CIP grants was collaboratively allocated to each region and across projects using a facilitated co-design process. This approach brought together local stakeholders to identify priorities and ensure that funding addressed the specific needs of each community. Each region also received dedicated coordination funding for CPLOs, which were intended to support project delivery, foster collaboration, and strengthen local networks.

A diverse range of organisations delivered CIP projects, including Landcare groups, First Nations organisations, natural resource management (NRM) bodies, regional development agencies, women's groups, and arts organisations. The grants also had a strong focus on inclusion, with 33 per cent of projects designed to benefit First Nations people and young people, ensuring these groups were actively engaged as both participants and beneficiaries.

An overview of what was delivered through the CIP grants is shown overleaf in Figure 5. A summary of the outcomes achieved and most significant change is shown in Figure 6.

Figure 5 | Community Impact Program Grants output summary

## CIP grants supported a diversity of projects across breadth of locations

**158 PROJECTS**

**ACROSS**

**30 REGIONS**

**OVER**

**6 STATES**

Including with...

- **16** Landcare organisations
- **6** Natural Resources Management organisations
- **3** Arts organisations
- **9** First Nations organisations
- **4** Women's organisations

Focused on a diversity of community members...

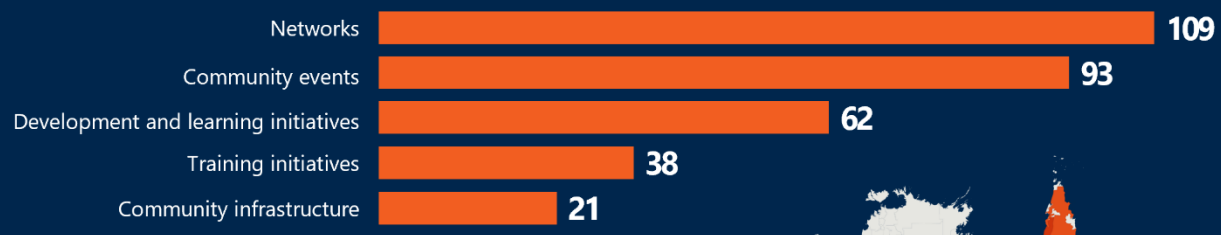
- **33%** of projects involve the engagement and participation of First Nations people
- **16%** of projects are directly focused on young people (18-35 years)
- **16%** of projects are directly focused on rural women
- **4%** of projects engage CALD communities

PROJECTS REACHED **47,528** PEOPLE DURING THEIR DELIVERY.

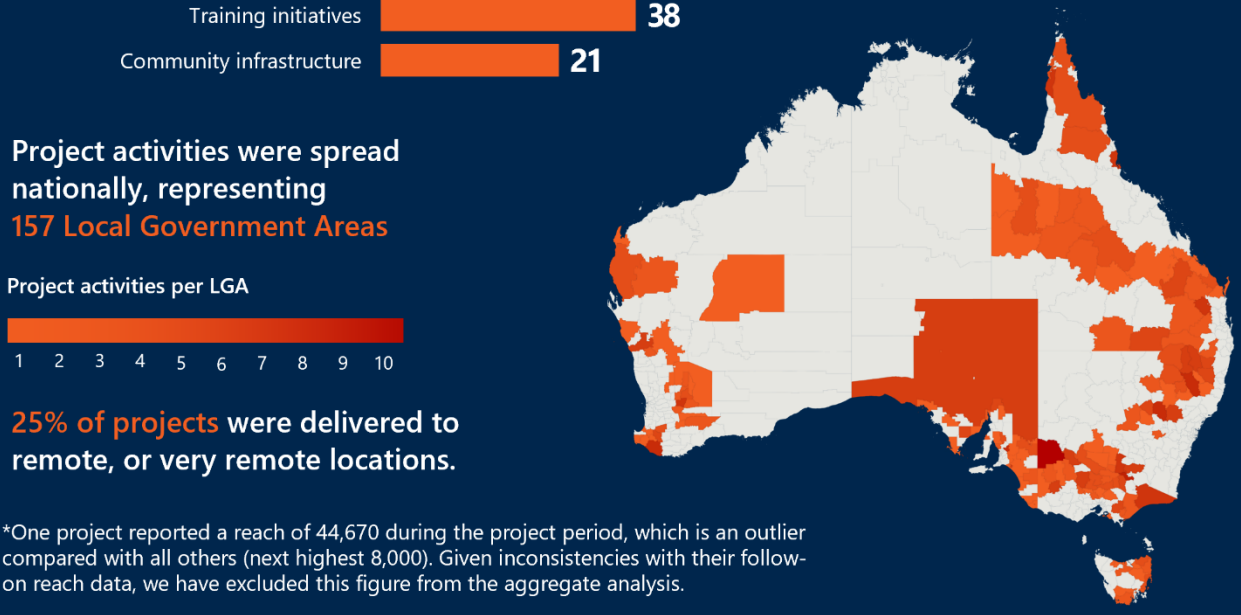
PROJECTS ARE EXPECTED TO REACH **156,306** PEOPLE ONGOING.

For every one person reached during a project, an additional ~3 people are expected to benefit from the outcomes achieved by that project.

Networks was the most commonly selected output




Project activities were spread nationally, representing 157 Local Government Areas




25% of projects were delivered to remote, or very remote locations.

*One project reported a reach of 44,670 during the project period, which is an outlier compared with all others (next highest 8,000). Given inconsistencies with their follow-on reach data, we have excluded this figure from the aggregate analysis.

*Source: CIP program data provided by FRRR, CIP final grant report data provided by FRRR.*

Figure 6 | Outcomes chosen by CIP grant participants in final grant reports

## The most common outcomes reported by grantees:

| | |
|---|---|
| Improved communication, social connection and collaboration within and between communities to support drought preparedness. (PO1) | • 77% of grant reports indicated PO1 as one of their two project outcomes (n=137).<br>• 56% of organisations selected PO1 as their first outcome while 21% selected it as their second (n=137).<br>• 26% of organisations selected PO1 as one of their third outcomes (multiselect, n=137). |
| Community-based networks that strengthen drought resilience are expanded, diversified or created. (PO7) | • 42% of grant reports indicated PO7 as one of their two project outcomes (n=137).<br>• 6% of organisations selected PO7 as their first outcome while 36% selected it as their second (n=137).<br>• 33% of organisations selected PO7 as one of their third outcomes (multiselect, n=137). |
| Increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies by communities, volunteers and not-for-profit organisations to prepare for and adapt to drought. (PO4) | • 26% of grant reports indicated PO4 as one of their two project outcomes (n=137).<br>• 12% organisations selected PO4 as their first outcome while 14% selected it as their second (n=137).<br>• 23% of organisations selected PO4 as one of their third outcomes (multiselect, n=137). |

## The most significant change reported by grantees was:

**55%**
Community connection and social cohesion

**42%**
Capacity for delivery and coordination

**41%**
Resilience and preparedness for challenges

*Source: CIP deep dive interview data collected by Nous (n = 24) and CIP Final Grant reports (n=147).*

## The most common intermediate and long-term outcomes reported by grantees were:

**58%**
improved social cohesion and belonging
that supports an ability to prepare for drought

**55%**
developed effective networks and resources
that support local responses to drought

**53%**
increased reach and activities of community leaders and members
driving action on drought

*Source: CIP final grant report data provided by FRRR (n = 137)*

## The CIP grants realised all seven intended short-term outcomes

The CIP made a substantial contribution to strengthening drought resilience in regional communities, fully realising all seven of its intended short-term outcomes. The program's emphasis on locally led initiatives, flexible funding, and coordinated regional delivery was central to this achievement. CIP projects not only delivered immediate benefits but also laid the groundwork for sustained community-led resilience. While intermediate outcomes are still emerging, early signs of broader impact are evident across regions, with many networks, practices and leadership efforts continuing beyond the life of the grants.

Table 4 presents the final assessment of achievement against the intended short-term outcomes.

Table 4 | Summary of assessment against the intended CIP grant short-term outcomes

| SHORT-TERM OUTCOME | ASSESSMENT | RATIONALE |
|---|---|---|
| **PO1: Improved communication, social connection and collaboration within and between communities to support drought preparedness.** | **Realised** | CIP projects strengthened communication, connection and collaboration across communities. Network-building, inclusive events and shared experiences bridged sector and regional gaps, building trust and ongoing engagement (see Section 4.3.1). |
| **PO2: Improved access to and use of services, resources, infrastructure and facilities by communities that support drought preparedness.** | **Realised** | 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. (see Section 4.3.2). |
| **PO3: A greater diversity of community members and organisations contribute to drought preparedness activities.** | **Realised** | CIP projects engaged groups traditionally underrepresented in resilience planning, including First Nations communities, migrant youth and seniors. These efforts broadened participation and strengthened inclusion across sectors and regions. Although depth of engagement varied, the program consistently created space for diverse voices in resilience efforts (see Section 4.3.1). |
| **PO4: Increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies by communities, volunteers and not-for-profit organisations to prepare for and adapt to drought.** | **Realised** | Participants gained practical knowledge through workshops, trainings, peer learning and tailored activities. These built strong awareness, knowledge and understanding of drought strategies. The program successfully equipped communities to apply new knowledge to local challenges (see Section 4.3.2). |
| **PO5: Increased implementation and improved effectiveness of place-based practices by communities to build and enhance resilience to drought.** | **Realised** | CIP projects embedded locally relevant practices such as biocultural land management, fire planning and infrastructure-led coordination. These were sustained through regional delivery models, shared spaces and long-term planning. Communities shifted from short-term delivery to enduring, place-based resilience efforts (see Sections 4.3.2 and 4.3.3). |
| **PO6: Strengthened individual leadership capacity and capability to support community and drought resilience.** | **Realised** | Leadership development was a strong feature of the program. Participants built confidence, skills, and networks through mentoring, structured programs, and hands-on delivery. These activities enabled |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | individuals to take on leadership roles and initiate new resilience efforts (see Section 4.3.2). |
| **PO7: Community-based networks that strengthen drought resilience are expanded, diversified or created.** | **Realised** | CIP projects created and strengthened community-based networks that support 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 (see Section 4.3.1). |

The CIP is making measurable progress toward the Initiative's intermediate outcomes. Evidence from across regions shows a major contribution to expanding the reach and activities of local leaders and organisations and the effectiveness of networks and resources. CIP grant projects made some contribution to improved awareness, cohesion, adaptive capacity and network effectiveness, though these shifts are still emerging and vary by region. These outcomes are expected to strengthen over time with continued investment, local leadership, and implementation of the recommended design features outlined in Section 4.4.

Table 5 presents the final assessment of progress against the intended intermediate outcomes.

Table 5 | Summary of assessment against the Initiative intermediate outcomes

| INTERMEDIATE OUTCOME | ASSESSMENT | RATIONALE |
|---|---|---|
| **RC1: There is an increase in the reach and activities of community leaders, mentors, networks and organisations driving action on drought resilience.** | **Major contribution** | CIP projects expanded the reach of local leaders and organisations. They supported leadership development, formal networks and regional coordination. CPLOs and delivery partners convened diverse stakeholders and sustained engagement beyond the grants to build drought preparedness (see Sections 4.3.2 and 4.3.3). |
| **RC2: There is a change in awareness of and attitudes to drought preparedness at the community level.** | **Some contribution** | CIP projects built individual knowledge and confidence for drought preparedness through tailored learning activities and events. Participants reported greater awareness and preparedness, with broader community shifts still emerging. The program laid strong foundations, and sustained change will need continued investment (see Section 4.3.2). |
| **IO1: Communities experience improved cohesion and belonging that supports an ability to prepare for drought.** | **Some contribution** | CIP projects fostered inclusion and belonging through shared experiences, culturally safe events and cross-sector engagement. Many participants felt more connected and valued. Cohesion improved in several regions, though it was not universal or deeply embedded (see Section 4.3.1). |
| **IO2: Communities have strong adaptive capacity and are empowered to respond to drought.** | **Some contribution** | CIP projects strengthened drought resilience by building leadership, embedding support roles and creating coordination platforms. Participants gained confidence and skills to lead local efforts. Empowerment is still developing and varies across regions (see Sections 4.3.2 and 4.3.3). |
| **IO3: Communities have effective networks and resources that support local responses to drought.** | **Major contribution** | CIP projects created and strengthened networks that support drought resilience. These networks enabled collaboration, peer learning and resource sharing, with some continuing beyond the grants. Network maturity and resources were effective in many regions, and access remains varied (see Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.3). |

The following sections provides detail on the specific outcomes and impact that CIP grants have made to strengthening drought preparedness and social resilience.

## 4.2 The CIP strengthened locally led drought resilience

The CIP delivered practical value to regional communities by supporting locally led initiatives that strengthened drought resilience. CIP projects:

- strengthened social connection, networks and belonging, creating inclusive spaces for collaboration, trust-building and wellbeing
- built local capability and adaptive capacity, equipping organisations and individuals with the skills, knowledge and confidence to lead resilience efforts
- laid foundations for enduring, community-led resilience, helping organisations and regions transition from short-term delivery to long-term leadership and coordination.

These outcomes highlight the importance of flexible, place-based investment in community organisations and networks. The following outlines the key mechanisms through which CIP achieved these outcomes and explores the implications for future drought resilience efforts across regional Australia.

### 4.2.1 The CIP strengthened social connection, networks and belonging

CIP projects strengthened local drought preparedness by fostering connection, inclusion and collaboration through networks, shared experiences and culturally inclusive design. These approaches were strongly associated with improved communication, social connection and collaboration, selected as a top outcome by 105 of 137 projects. They have laid the foundations for long-term, community-led resilience. Three key mechanisms supported this outcome:

- Formalised networks and coordination enabled knowledge sharing and enduring collaboration across sectors and regions.
- Inclusive events and shared experiences brought diverse groups together, fostering trust, wellbeing and cross-sector engagement.
- Targeted inclusion and cultural leadership deepened belonging, particularly among groups traditionally underrepresented in resilience planning, including First Nations communities.

Together, these approaches helped communities feel more connected, valued and empowered to work together in preparing for drought and other challenges. The following findings explore these mechanisms in more detail.

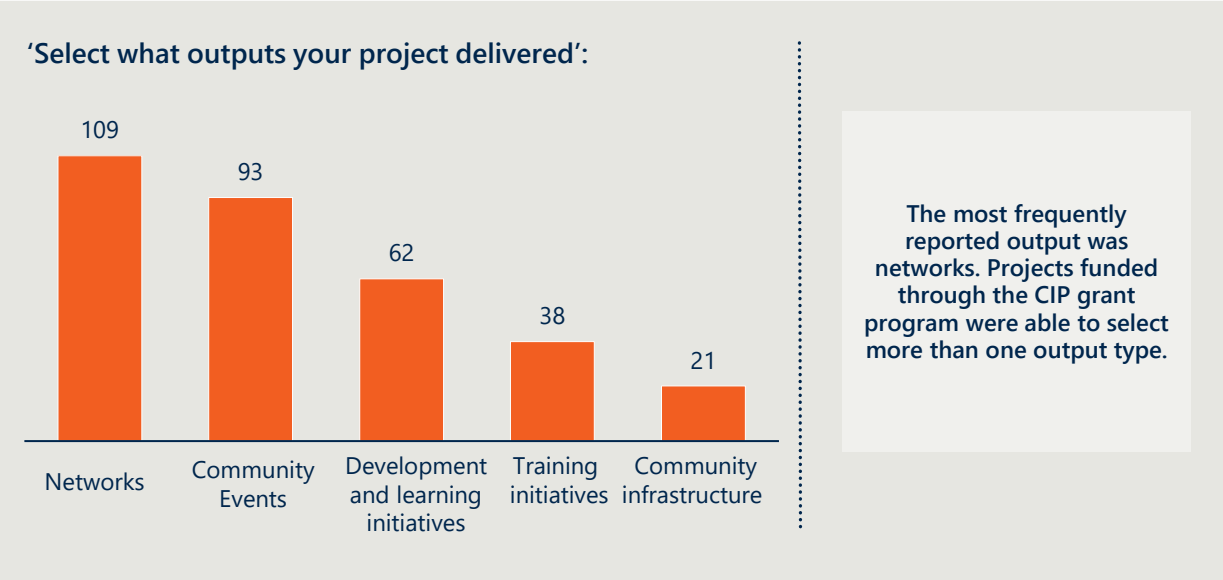
#### CIP projects formalised networks to strengthen local drought preparedness

**Projects formalised networks that fostered collaboration, learning, and cross-sector engagement.** Building and formalising networks was the most frequently reported output across CIP projects, reflecting their central role in strengthening local drought resilience. Twenty-nine projects focused primarily on building new community-based networks to support drought resilience, with 29 of 58 rating this indicator to a large or very large extent. These networks took a variety of forms; each tailored to local needs:

- **Young farmer networks supported peer learning and leadership development**. On the Eyre Peninsula SA, a new network was co-designed by participants, who selected learning topics and built peer support across districts.
- **Cross-sector service provider networks fostered collaboration between previously disconnected groups.** In Central West QLD, Remote Area Planning and Development Board facilitated a regional arts and culture network that connected creatives, councils, and community leaders.
- **Industry and agribusiness networks built technical capacity and preparedness.** In the Wheatbelt Central East region WA, Merredin and Districts Farm Improvement Group established an Agribusiness network that delivered events, training, and mentorship.

These networks enabled communities to share knowledge, coordinate activities, and build relationships that are critical for long-term drought resilience. As shown in Figure 7, networks were the most frequently reported output, underscoring their importance as a mechanism for building resilience.

**Figure 7 | Summary of outputs selected in final grant reports**




*Source: CIP final grant report data provided by FRRR.*

**Networks played a central role in strengthening community connection, trust and collaboration and emerged as a highly effective mechanism for delivering CIP outcomes**. Of the 137 CIP projects, 105 selected "improved communication, social connection and collaboration" (PO1) as one of their two primary outcomes. This outcome was most strongly associated with projects that delivered network activities: of the 109 projects that reported networks as an output type, 66 identified PO1 as their primary outcome and PO7 (community-led preparedness) as their secondary.

Interview data reinforced this association, with 15 organisations explicitly reporting improved collaboration through network activities. As illustrated in Figure 8, networks achieved this by bridging previously disconnected groups, strengthening cross-sector collaboration, and fostering

long-term engagement. These activities not only fostered connection but also laid the groundwork for enduring, community-led collaboration.

**Figure 8 | Final grant report responses that describe the impact of network-focused projects**

*Source: CIP final grant report data provided by FRRR.*

**Coordination funding was a critical enabler for transforming informal connections into formalised, enduring networks that support drought resilience**. Every CIP region had a funded CPLO role, with 30 in total. $1.55 million was invested in coordination, representing 16 per cent of total program funding. CPLOs worked alongside local organisations to plan and deliver activities across regions. In one region, the CPLO withdrew from the program, and FRRR supported with coordination and connection to maintain continuity for this region. This flexibility helped preserve local engagement and ensured regional activities remained connected to the broader Initiative.

CPLOs supported three achievements:

- **Created formal place-based networks**. In the Wheatbelt Central East region of WA, Wheatbelt Natural Resource Management (WNRM) convened regular meetings with diverse delivery organisations, including an arts group, a travel company, a youth mentoring service, and a farming collective. These connections have since been formalised into an ongoing network exploring joint funding and drought resilience initiatives.
- **Strengthened collaboration**. In the Fitzroy Capricornia region of QLD, Dawson Catchment Coordination Association's (DCCA) facilitated regular networking meetings with delivery partners and local organisations to share progress, coordinate activities, and overcome geographic distance. These forums fostered partnerships between Indigenous communities, local governments, NGOs, and rural residents. DCCA also undertook On-Country visits and cultural engagement with Woorabinda Aboriginal Council, helping to build trust and align

activities with local aspirations. This culturally responsive approach strengthened collaboration and ensured regional delivery was grounded in community priorities.

- **Supported successful project delivery**. In the Eyre Peninsula SA, the CPLO AIR EP played a critical role in supporting Cleve Area School to deliver its drought resilience education project. The CPLO helped the school navigate funding requirements and connect with external expertise, including facilitating the involvement of AgCommunicators. This support enabled the school to move from uncertainty to confident delivery and future planning.

> "It became quite evident that the [other CIP project] were going to need a lot of help in that space... they didn't have the resources to execute their project without some additional help."
>
> **- AIR EP, Eyre Peninsula CPLO**

These examples show that where CPLOs were actively engaged, coordination funding helped embed collaboration and build lasting regional resilience platforms. However, engagement levels varied across regions: in some areas, CPLOs exceeded expectations and played an active convening role; organising meetings, distributing newsletters, and facilitating delivery. In others, CPLOs supported delivery organisations through periodic check-ins per the scope of their role. In at least two cases, CPLOs did not complete the level of activities expected of the role.

### CIP projects brought people together through shared experiences.

**Events were a powerful mechanism for strengthening community connection, trust and resilience across CIP projects**. Ninety projects reported delivering events as part of their funded activities, making them the second most common outputs of the program. Events ranged from intimate workshops to large-scale festivals; each tailored to local needs and contexts. Many were designed to be inclusive and welcoming, with organisers offering food, childcare, transport, and culturally safe spaces to reduce barriers to participation. Activities included wellbeing days, community dinners, youth-led forums, and on-Country ceremonies. Some events focused on technical learning and drought preparedness, while others prioritised social connection and mental health.

These events served multiple purposes - reducing isolation, building trust, and strengthening local networks. By creating inclusive spaces for diverse community members to connect and share experiences, events played a vital role in strengthening belonging. Regional stakeholders consistently highlighted that drought affects entire communities, undermining social ties, wellbeing, and participation. In this context, community events provided an essential platform for restoring connection and fostering resilience. As one interviewee reflected, "no matter what's happening on your property, it's these events and the community getting together that gets people through [the drought]." Further reflections are presented in Figure 9.

**Figure 9 | Summary of participant responses when describing the value of local events**

**Participants recognised the value of events for building social resilience.**

> The events gave people a reason to come together and talk about what's happening in their area. It's not just about farming, it's about community.

> Bringing people together for these events helped us reconnect with each other and with Country. It reminded us that healing happens in community.

> The events gave people a reason to come together and share their stories. It wasn't just about the art, it was about being seen and heard.

*Source: Final grant reports provided by FRRR.*

**Curated events and activities intentionally brought together groups who don't usually interact.** This included farmers, First Nations communities, service providers, educators, and health professionals. These gatherings created opportunities for meaningful interaction and collaboration, which are crucial for building community resilience. Across the 93 CIP projects that selected community events as a project output, an estimated 30,993 people participated. On average, 24 per cent of participants were aged between 18 and 35, and 14 per cent identified as First Nations people. Interviewees described these events as "low-pressure spaces" where people could "come together without expectations," helping to rebuild trust and foster a sense of belonging. Several delivery partners noted that events were often the first time diverse groups had come together in a shared space. This intentional design helped create meaningful interactions and laid the groundwork for ongoing collaboration.

As shown in Figure 10 the South Australian Migrant Resource Centre (SAMRC) used curated events to strengthen social ties and enhance cross-sector collaboration and belonging across communities.

**Figure 10 | CIP initiatives used events and activities to bring diverse groups together**

**The South Australian Migrant Resource Centre (SAMRC) ran events that showcased culture and cuisine to improve multicultural participation in civic life.**

**OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED**

**The Limestone Coast is home to a diverse population of migrants from across Asia, the Middle East, the Pacific Islands and Africa.** However, the community has faced challenges related to social cohesion and volunteer engagement, especially among newly arrived migrants.

**SAMRC delivered events to promote migrant participation in the community and strengthen networks that are vital during drought.** Events included the Harmony Day Wish Festival in Naracoorte, featuring performances and food stalls from 12 cultural groups. The festival provided migrants with a platform to showcase culture and cuisine, breaking down stereotypes and generating positive local media coverage.

**The events helped participants feel visible and included in the broader community.** Trust and belonging was built to support collective drought resilience. One project reflection noted: "When people feel seen, celebrated, and invited to contribute, they're more likely to stay, volunteer again, and build a shared future. That's the essence of resilience, and these events brought that principle to life."

*Source: Final grant report data provided by FRRR.*

**Events fostered deeper connection and resilience by enabling shared experiences, cross-sector engagement, and open dialogue**. These gatherings created safe and inclusive spaces where community members could engage across age groups, sectors, and backgrounds. Projects achieved this by:

- **Using shared experiences to connect individuals:** Events enabled participants to engage in activities together, fostering a sense of belonging and collective identity. For example, the Lochiel Progress Association's 'Diner en Rose' in SA provided more than a social outing; attendees described feeling "part of something again," experiencing recognition and inclusion.
- **Bringing together people who do not typically interact:** By enabling cross-sector engagement, events like the SAMRC 'Harmony Day Wish Festival' built understanding and collaboration across different groups.
- **Creating a safe space for dialogue around mental health:** Events offered opportunities for participants to reflect, share challenges, and access support. In VIC, Mallee Sustainable Farming Inc's 'BBQ Trailer' exemplifies this, creating a welcoming environment for both technical learning and personal conversation, helping to reduce isolation and build trust. The organisation reflected that "the BBQ trailer is about creating a supportive, welcoming environment... not just technical learning but a space to talk about personal challenges."

> "What we're noticing is the more we're out in the community, the more these community people come try to engage us in different things... we're being invited to a lot of meetings and planning to make our community and region better for going forward for anything that comes our way in good times and bad. So the event was really good for that."
>
> **- Southern New England Landcare Inc**

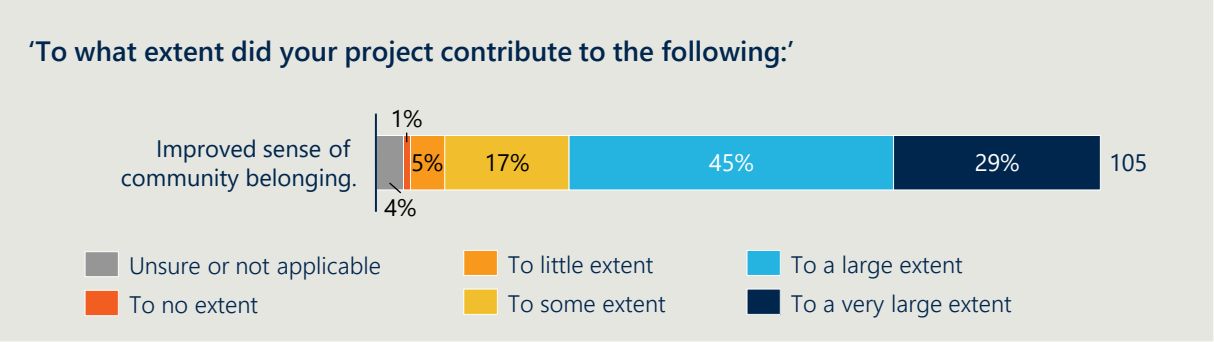
Communities consistently noted that these opportunities for reflection, learning, and emotional support were especially important in regions experiencing drought or recovering from other disasters. At least 34 CIP projects ran events that included mental health and wellbeing components, both as a primary focus and as a secondary benefit of bringing people together. In regions such as Northwest QLD, mental health was an explicit outcome. The regional CPLO, Southern Gulf Natural Resource Management used support from the Royal Flying Doctor Service to deliver mental health first aid workshops designed to support community wellbeing alongside resilience planning. As the CPLO reflected, "[participants] now feel a lot more comfortable and confident in providing mental health first aid to someone in distress."

### CIP projects have deepened community inclusion and belonging.

**Projects strengthened community belonging by engaging diverse sectors and regions in shared resilience activities**. CIP projects worked across agriculture, education, health, emergency services, and the arts to create opportunities for broad community participation. By enabling people from different sectors and regions to come together, projects fostered new relationships and helped individuals feel part of a collective effort. This cross-sector engagement created space for shared experiences, strengthened local networks, and built a sense of pride and contribution among participants. Reflecting this impact, 74 per cent of projects reported an improved sense of community belonging to a large or very large extent (see Figure 11). These outcomes demonstrate

that inclusive, region-wide engagement is a powerful mechanism for building social cohesion and resilience.

**Figure 11 | Final grant report responses**




*Source: CIP final grant report data provided by FRRR.*

**Projects fostered inclusion and belonging by intentionally engaging groups traditionally underrepresented in drought resilience efforts.** CIP projects created space for individuals and communities who had not traditionally participated in resilience initiatives to contribute, lead, and feel recognised. This included First Nations communities, migrant and refugee youth, and cultural groups. By tailoring activities to their needs and strengths, projects enabled meaningful participation and strengthened community identity.

The following examples illustrate how inclusive design and targeted outreach supported belonging among groups that had previously faced barriers to participation.:

- **Meridian Regional Arts Inc – Seasons of Change:** The project reconnected ex-farming seniors with their community in Wheatbelt Central East WA, fostering pride and belonging. One delivery partner shared, "Our project was most impactful on our ex-farming seniors, who found a sense of pride and belonging in community even though many felt like their era of contributing to community was past them." The project saw increased socialisation, with seniors attending workshops at higher-than-expected rates, being transported by younger residents, and becoming more socially present post-project.
- **Igniting Communities – Lutruwita (Tasmania):** This initiative brought together Aboriginal community members - including young rangers, elders, and families - to share cultural land management practices. The project facilitated shared learning and knowledge exchange, with one organiser noting, "Each event built on the previous one, expanding the web of knowledge embedded in cultural learning." These gatherings strengthened intergenerational connection and cultural identity.
- **Wimmera Southern Mallee Development – Migrant Youth Support:** This project connected migrant and refugee youth in Nhill and Horsham VIC with local landscapes and services. Through 40 youth sessions and 25 resilience-building activities, participants developed climate awareness, built social connections, and increased leadership capacity. One participant stepped into a youth coordinator role, and the initiative created a ripple effect of engagement across families and peers.

These initiatives helped broaden the reach of drought resilience efforts and strengthened belonging among these groups.

**Projects that centred First Nations culture and leadership strengthened community cohesion, cultural pride, and inclusive resilience.** These initiatives created opportunities for participation, recognition, and meaningful contribution within broader regional resilience efforts. By embedding cultural leadership and fostering cross-cultural collaboration, projects deepened a sense of belonging for First Nations communities and strengthened partnerships across sectors.

This impact was observed in three key ways:

- **Culturally safe, on-Country activities brought together Elders, youth, and families, fostering trust and shared experiences**. The Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation held a water and traditional ceremony at Leilyn NT, attended by over 45 people. This ceremony, not practiced for over 50 years, supported a grieving family and addressed concerns for Country. It fostered healing and empowerment for both Jawoyn and non-Indigenous participants, strengthening cultural foundations that underpin resilience during drought.
- **New partnerships between First Nations and agricultural organisations encouraged whole-of-community collaboration.** DJAARA's 'Healing Country on Private Land' project connected Traditional Owners with private landholders, Landcare, and Ag Vic facilitators across Central Victoria. Through 17 workshops, over 300 participants built cultural understanding and new partnerships for biocultural land management and drought resilience.

> "Through more engagement directly between Traditional Owners and landholders, relationships were built in each workshop, mutual understanding and respect was established and communication channels open, all which have the potential to build adaptive capacity of communities experiencing future drought."
>
> **- Dja Dja Wurrung Clans**

- **Projects supported intergenerational knowledge transfer and shared goals for drought resilience.** In the Mallee region of VIC, The First People of the Millewa-Mallee Aboriginal Corporation's nursery project increased awareness among other organisations and school students of the knowledge, commitment, and passion of young First Nations staff. Elders requested to help with youth programs, strengthening intergenerational ties and shared resilience efforts.

These initiatives helped embed First Nations leadership in regional resilience efforts and fostered stronger cross-cultural collaboration.

### 4.2.2 The CIP built local capability and adaptive capacity to support drought resilience

CIP projects built local capability and adaptive capacity by strengthening leadership, deepening drought knowledge, and creating enduring platforms for community coordination. Across the program, initiatives supported individuals and organisations to lead, learn and collaborate in ways that extended beyond the life of individual grants. These efforts were closely aligned with key

program outcomes, including strengthened leadership (PO6), improved drought knowledge (PO4), and community-led preparedness (PO7).

This was observed in three ways:

- Leadership development initiatives equipped individuals with the confidence, skills and networks to guide local resilience efforts.
- Tailored learning activities built practical knowledge of drought preparedness, enabling communities to make informed decisions and apply locally relevant strategies.
- Organisational capability and shared spaces provided enduring platforms for coordination, learning and community-led action.

These mechanisms helped embed resilience into local systems, enabling communities to adapt, collaborate and lead in the face of future droughts. The following findings explore these in more detail.

### CIP projects developed leadership, knowledge and skills for drought resilience

**CIP projects equipped individuals with the confidence, skills and networks to lead drought resilience efforts**. Targeted leadership development programs, skill-building workshops and mentoring opportunities supported both emerging and established community leaders. These initiatives strengthened decision-making, communication and collaborative skills, enabling participants to coordinate local resilience activities and support broader community cohesion. By integrating leadership development with drought preparedness, projects ensured leaders could respond to both immediate challenges and long-term risks. Twenty-seven projects selected "Strengthened Individual Leadership Capacity" (PO6) as a primary outcome, including nine that invested specifically in leadership programs.

Figure 12 provides an example of a project that strengthened leadership capacity in their regions. These initiatives helped embed leadership as a core component of community-led resilience.

**Figure 12 | Example of a leadership program that improved leadership capacity**

**CIP projects focused on equipping local leaders with the capability to drive drought resilience**

**OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED**

**Red Earth's Cherbourg Community Leadership Program empowered mostly First Nations participants to lead drought resilience.**

The four-day program supported 37 participants, most of which were First Nations people, to build leadership confidence and skills, and strengthen community ties. Participants noted "strengthened individual leadership capacity and capability to support community, to increase drought resilience, tackle local challenges and harness emerging opportunities. All participants felt more confident to step into leadership and be more involved in decision-making and problem solving."

*Source: Final grant report data provided by FRRR.*

**CIP projects built practical knowledge and confidence in drought preparedness through tailored learning activities**. Workshops, field trips, panels and scenario planning sessions increased awareness of climate science, land management and drought strategies. These activities combined expert advice, peer learning and hands-on experience, enabling participants to explore locally relevant solutions. Thirty-five of 137 projects selected "Improved Knowledge of Drought Strategies" (PO4) as a primary outcome, with 83 per cent reporting large or very large improvements in participant confidence. For example:

- In Tamworth Northwest NSW, the 'Upper Namoi Water in the Landscape Symposium' brought together over 100 participants, including farmers, irrigators, Indigenous leaders, academics and local government officials, to explore land and water management, policy, and community-based initiatives. The event catalysed a regional initiative and inspired new project concepts for drought and water resilience.
- In Central West NSW, Watershed Landcare Group's 'Empowering Watershed Women' event offered expert-led sessions on animal care during drought, mental health strategies, bushfire survival and sustainable land management. A cultural awareness session linked environmental challenges with cultural perspectives, deepening understanding of resilience. Participants reported feeling more confident and informed, with many applying new skills in their communities.

These initiatives helped communities apply new knowledge to local challenges and strengthened their capacity to plan for future droughts.

**CIP projects translated leadership development into organisational capability growth and sustained community action towards resilience**. Structured leadership and knowledge-building opportunities improved participants' understanding of effective leadership and increased their confidence to take on decision-making roles. These outcomes extended beyond individual growth, enabling organisations to coordinate resilience efforts and initiate long-term community projects. Of the 27 projects focused on leadership, 19 reported significant gains in awareness of effective leadership and 16 reported increased confidence. Six interviewed organisations identified improved capability as the most significant change resulting from their project.

The following examples show how leadership development was not an end, but a catalyst for coordinated action and growth in organisational capability and long-term resilience planning:

- In VIC, Alpine Valleys Community Leadership delivered a Community Capacity Creators Program across six regional locations, strengthening leadership capacity among participants from Landcare, CFA, SES, and other community groups. The program built confidence in leading, managing logistics, and engaging in decision-making, with practical workshops reinforcing skills in drought risk and informal leadership.
- In WA, Wheatbelt & Beyond Youth Mentoring Inc supported student leadership through mentoring and a youth-led decision-making team. Participants reported increased confidence, resilience and aspiration, demonstrating both personal growth and strengthened capacity to contribute to their communities.
- In TAS, Tasmanian Leaders Inc's Drought Resilient Impact Preparedness (DRIP) program empowered participants to lead community projects, collaborate with councils and initiate

resilience-focused initiatives. These included a proposed community resilience space and a tree-planting project on Flinders Island to offset emissions and enhance climate resilience.

### CIP projects revitalised or created shared spaces and resources for drought resilience

**CIP projects revitalised underused or established new community spaces, creating platforms for connection, collaboration, and resilience.** By upgrading underused infrastructure or establishing new facilities including halls, pop-up shops and mobile units, projects provided physical platforms for engagement, knowledge exchange and collective problem-solving. Many initiatives integrated local heritage and values into infrastructure upgrades, enhancing pride and reinforcing community identity. Eleven projects focused specifically on establishing or enhancing infrastructure (see Figure 13), with impacts ranging from increased participation to improved coordination of drought resilience efforts.

**Figure 13 | Sample of CIP initiatives that used community infrastructure to build drought resilience**

**CIP Initiatives upgraded and created physical infrastructure to create platforms for connection, collaboration and resilience.**

**Northern Slopes Landcare**

**CIP funding was used to upgrade the Gulf Creek Community Hall.**

"Renovating and reinvigorating the Hall has enhanced the longevity of it as a place of contact for activities and gatherings that improve social capital and enhance well-being, especially in times of hardship."

**Rural Business and Community**

**The Donald Shared Shop supported small businesses facing high overheads and limited foot traffic.**

"[Business owners] all know the next drought's coming, and they value the connectedness and ability to do something with their business model in anticipation of tough times."

*Source: CIP final grant report data provided by FRRR.*

Beyond facilitating connection, these spaces have delivered broader benefits, including financial sustainability of community assets and strengthened capacity of local groups. As shown in the case study in Figure 14 overleaf.

**Figure 14 | Loxton Chamber of Commerce Case Study**

**Loxton Chamber of Commerce is using economic diversification as a foundation for social preparedness to drought.**

**OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED**

Loxton Chamber of Commerce delivered a suite of initiatives to boost resilience in Loxton.

**Many farming households in Loxton needed new ways to manage the impacts of drought.** Access to retail space and business support helped these households with microbusinesses to connect with other business owners and diversify their income streams in response to pressures of drought.

**The Chamber delivered targeted support to strengthen local enterprise.** This included the establishment of a shared retail space for microbusinesses, a coworking space and marketing training for small business owners to come together and share experiences.

**The project boosted household income, strengthened financial resilience and revitalised Loxton's main street.** It enabled families to bring in additional income and contributed to the vibrancy of Loxton's main street, enhancing the town's social cohesion and appeal as a tourist destination.

"They can become financially independent or bring in some extra income whilst things are really tough during drought for the farmers who are working in that industry."

*Photo right of the Collective Business in Loxton project, Provided by Radiant Media*

*Source: Deep dive interviews.*

**CIP projects strengthened community resilience by improving access to support services and reducing barriers**. By centralising information and creating opportunities for community members to engage with service providers, projects helped overcome isolation, increase knowledge and reduce stigma - making support more visible, approachable and trusted. Of the 105 projects reporting on PO1, 63 reported large or very large increases in awareness of community supports.

- In the Gwydir NSW region, the Northwest Rural Leaders and Support Services Network responded to a gap identified in the Future Drought Fund Community Resilience Plan by developing a comprehensive informational booklet. This resource provided a centralised directory of services, resources and contacts, and was launched at Community Impact Project events across the region to improve coordination and visibility.
- Other projects focused on embedding support within trusted community roles. For example, in Ovens Murray VIC, AgBiz Assist used part of their CPLO grant to fund a dedicated Community Wellbeing Officer (CWBO) that served as a familiar and approachable point of contact for individuals who may have previously remained disconnected from services. The CWBO supported 208 community members directly and created space for informal referrals, where

family and friends recognised signs of distress and guided individuals toward help - particularly around mental health, a topic often difficult to address in rural communities.

These initiatives helped make support services more accessible and embedded within trusted networks, strengthening community preparedness and wellbeing in the face of drought.

**Shared spaces created or upgraded through CIP projects became enduring platforms for community-led resilience**. These spaces continue to host workshops, peer support groups and planning sessions, enabling communities to apply skills developed through leadership and drought preparedness initiatives. By embedding these activities in familiar, accessible locations, projects helped normalise collaboration and sustain momentum beyond the life of individual grants. For example, DCCA's Theodore Community Room is a fully equipped asset for community events. According to their final grant report, the Room "is not only well-utilised but has become a critical enabler of local capacity-building and drought preparedness." In addition to supporting ongoing engagement, revitalised spaces contributed to broader outcomes such as cultural preservation, environmental sustainability and organisational capacity. Communities have used these assets to strengthen local governance, attract new partnerships and maintain visibility for resilience efforts. These spaces now serve as physical anchors for long-term coordination, learning and connection.

In Wimmera Southern Mallee VIC, the Ranch Billabong project outlined in Figure 15 received funding for engagement activities through the CIP and contributed to cultural self-determination for First Nations people through revitalising a culturally significant site.

**Figure 15 | Ranch Billabong project case study**

**Wimmera Catchment Management Authority (WCMA) revitalised a culturally significant site for inclusive drought resilience**

**OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED**

**WCMA reconnected the Ranch Billabong to enable First Nations people to self-determine drought resilience.**

**The Ranch Billabong project, led by WCMA in partnership with Traditional Owners, focused on reconnecting the culturally significant Ranch Billabong to the river system via a new pipeline.** The site holds deep historical and cultural importance for the Beridgergungan people, serving as a post-mission settlement, a safe haven, and a place for practicing traditional culture and land management.

**Initial funding from DEECA supported the pipeline infrastructure, while CIP funding enabled engagement, capacity building, and governance support for Traditional Owners to lead the project.** Activities included full-site meetings, group design sessions, site inductions, and skill development workshops.

**The project is helping to strengthen local governance, with Traditional Owners developing principles for ongoing management.** It has also improved cultural outcomes, supported biodiversity, and laid the groundwork for self-determined drought resilience.

**The Ranch Billabong now stands as a physical anchor for long-term coordination, learning, and cultural connection,** with an opening event planned to celebrate the achievement and maintain visibility for future resilience efforts.

**PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK INCLUDED:**

> "The pipeline enables First Nations community members to manage water supply to the Ranch Billabong, supporting greater utilisation, and demonstrating a model for collaboration with First Nations communities to build drought resilience."

*Source: Final grant report data provided by FRRR.*

### 4.2.3 The CIP laid foundations for enduring, community-led drought resilience

CIP projects helped regions shift from short-term collaboration to long-term, community-led resilience planning. By fostering partnerships, embedding First Nations knowledge, and strengthening local networks, the program supported more inclusive and coordinated approaches to drought preparedness. These shifts are continuing beyond the life of the grant, with many regions now driving joint planning, shared governance and long-term investment.

These outcomes reflect the strength of the CIP model - its place-based delivery, flexible design, and emphasis on coordination and learning. The model enabled communities to build the relationships, structures and shared goals needed to respond to future challenges.

Two key mechanisms supported this transition:

- Regional delivery models elevated trusted local organisations and supported peer learning, helping communities align efforts and reduce duplication.
- Enduring networks and committees transitioned from project-based collaboration to long-term platforms for coordination, learning and shared decision-making.

The following findings explore these shifts in more detail.

### The CIP strengthened the capability, visibility and sustainability of regional community organisations working on drought resilience.

**Projects positioned regional organisations to lead long-term drought resilience efforts.** By investing in staff, systems and operational capacity, projects reinforced the internal foundations of local organisations. This support enabled delivery partners to maintain engagement with community members, coordinate activities and plan strategically for future challenges. These investments are helping organisations transition from short-term delivery to sustained leadership in resilience planning.

A range of mechanisms contributed to this outcome, including staffing, digital infrastructure and governance support:

- At least 6 projects improved digital infrastructure to support remote service delivery. For example, Northern Gulf Resource Management Group Ltd's Digital Capacity and Last Mile Connectivity Project enhanced access to online services across 11 QLD communities, improving connectivity and service reach.
- At least 8 projects focused on strengthening governance and operational systems. For example, Not for Profit HQ Ltd used CIP funding to deliver Report Card Assessments in Fitzroy Capricornia QLD, which showed a measurable shift in organisational confidence and risk awareness through pre- and post-evaluation ratings.
- At least 14 projects used funding to provide new or support existing salaried roles or dedicated coordination positions, allowing organisations to maintain continuity in programs and community engagement. For example, DCCA funded part-time regional coordinator role (see Figure 16).

**Figure 16 | DCCA project case study**

**Dawson Catchment Coordinating Association funded a part-time regional coordinator to drive community engagement and visibility as a CPLO**

**OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED**

Dawson Catchment Coordinating Association (DCCA) strengthened community engagement and visibility as CPLO of Fitzroy Capricornia by funding a part-time regional coordinator

**CIP funding enabled a salaried role that was central to expanding DCCA's visibility as CPLO, strengthening its operational capacity, and deepening its engagement with the community.** Across the delivery of the regions CIP projects, the coordinator became a trusted connector across the region, supporting other organisations with project delivery, operational advice, and introductions to smaller community groups across the region.

**This investment has positioned DCCA as a regional hub for coordination and resilience.** The organisation is now onboarding 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."

*Source: Final grant report data provided by FRRR, deep dive interviews.*

**Regional delivery models elevated capable local organisations and enabled peer learning, helping to embed collaboration and resilience across entire regions**.

Participation in the CIP elevated capable local organisations, many of which had not previously been seen as central to drought preparedness and positioned them as trusted connectors within their communities. By facilitating collaboration across delivery partners, these models supported peer learning, cross-organisational knowledge exchange, and more coordinated access to support. CPLOs were a core mechanism of these regional models and helped build shared understanding, reduce duplication, and improve alignment across sectors. For example, the Fitzroy Capricornia region of QLD demonstrated how regional delivery models can embed collaboration into local systems, enhance organisational credibility, and build the capacity needed to sustain long-term, community-led drought resilience at a whole-of-region scale. This was evident in the way the regional CPLO, Dawson Catchment Coordinating Association, unified councils, First Nations groups, and delivery partners around shared infrastructure like the Community Room. They also used existing networks to promote engagement with mentoring and governance programs delivered by Not-for-Profit HQ to uplift regional capability and peer learning.

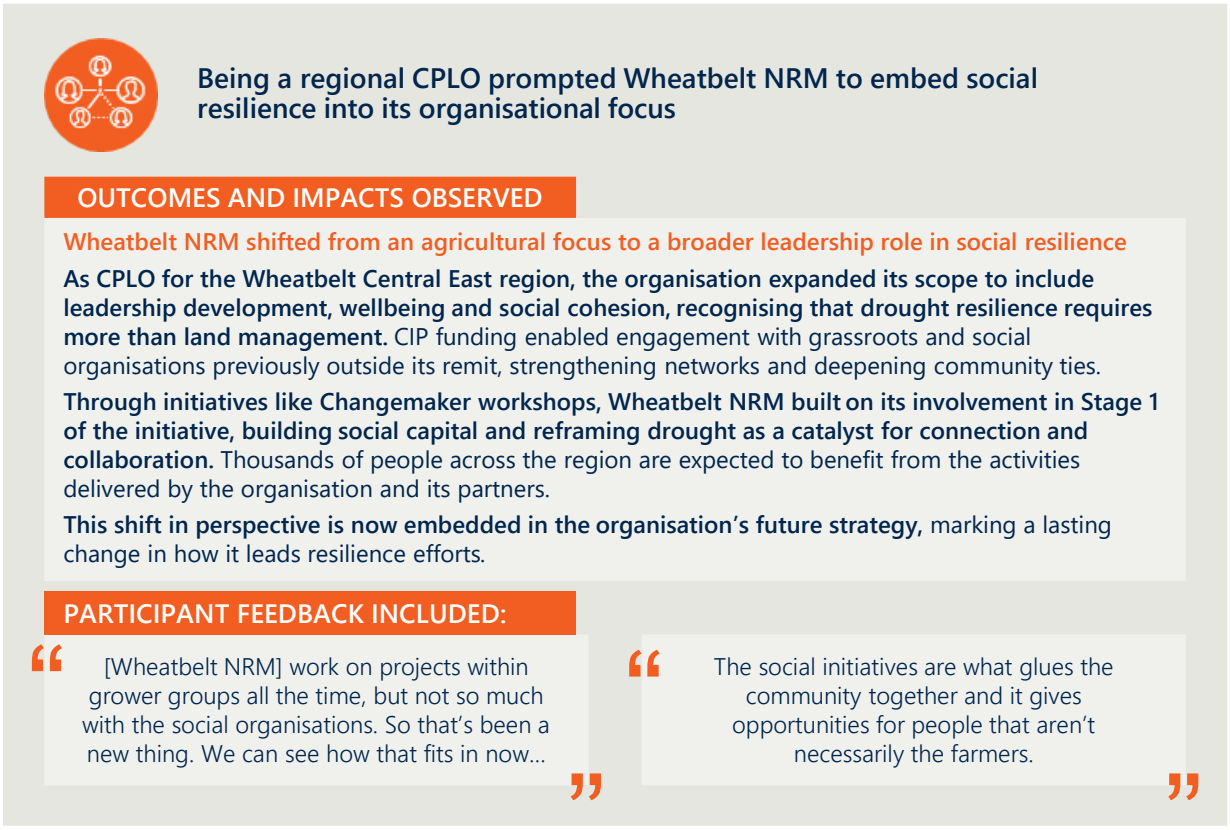
**CIP participation equipped grassroots organisations with the capability, networks and credibility to lead future drought resilience efforts.** The program's flexible delivery model enabled engagement from organisations that may have been too capacity-constrained to participate in larger grants or that do not traditionally access formal funding. Through peer learning, collaborative partnerships and hands-on delivery experience, these groups built the confidence and infrastructure needed to sustain locally led resilience initiatives. For example, DJAARA's 'Healing Country on Private Land' project continues to connect facilitators with landholders across Djandak, enabling sustained knowledge sharing and cultural engagement. These organisations are now better positioned to attract further funding, form strategic partnerships and lead community-driven resilience efforts. These outcomes demonstrate that CIP not only delivered short-term impact - but it also helped embed leadership and capability within grassroots organisations, laying the foundation for enduring, community-led drought resilience.

### CIP projects contributed to long-term shifts in organisational perspectives and collaborative leadership approaches

**CIP projects catalysed organisations to rethink their role in drought resilience, expanding the focus from agricultural practices to broader social, cultural and community dimensions**. Participation in CIP initiatives prompted many organisations to rethink their role in resilience, recognising that preparedness is not only about managing land and water, but also about fostering social cohesion, cultural inclusion and collective action. Community members increasingly viewed resilience as a shared responsibility and reported greater confidence to contribute to local initiatives.

This shift was particularly evident among organisations traditionally focused on agricultural outcomes. For example, Figure 17 below outlines how Wheatbelt NRM, through its role as CPLO for the Wheatbelt Central East region in WA, broadened its scope to include leadership development, community wellbeing and social cohesion.

**Figure 17 | Wheatbelt NRM's CPLO role gave it the opportunity to broaden its focus on social resilience**




*Source: Deep dive interviews, CIP final grant report data provided by FRRR.*

**CIP projects supported a broader shift toward integrating First Nations knowledge into drought resilience planning**. Across several regions, projects brought together Traditional Owners and other community groups to share cultural and ecological knowledge alongside scientific approaches. This helped shift how communities think about drought - not just as a farming issue, but as something that affects everyone and requires a whole-of-community response. By creating safe spaces for learning and conversation, projects supported cross-cultural and intergenerational engagement. These partnerships are continuing beyond the life of the grant, helping to build trust, strengthen relationships and shape shared goals for resilience. For example, In the Murraylands and Riverland Region of SA, the 'Mardawi Community Project' delivered by Ngarrindjeri Ruwe Empowered Communities held basket weaving workshops and rush harvesting on Country. These gatherings brought together Elders, youth, and non-Indigenous allies and became powerful spaces for inclusive participation, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and healing. Communities involved in these projects say that First Nations leadership has made their resilience planning more relevant, inclusive and effective.

**CIP projects helped transition short-term collaborations into enduring regional networks for resilience planning and coordination**. What began as connections formed through grant activities has evolved into platforms for joint planning, shared governance, resource exchange and peer-to-peer learning. These networks are continuing beyond the life of the grant, embedding trust and collaboration into regional systems. In many regions, these partnerships are now driving coordinated approaches to future challenges - from drought preparedness to broader community

development. Delivery partners report that the relationships, structures and shared goals established through CIP are helping communities attract new investment, align efforts and sustain local leadership.

The following case study (Figure 18) illustrates how networks are beginning to translate short-term outputs into long-term regional outcomes.

**Figure 18 | MADFIG project case study**

**Networks are translating short-term outputs into long-term platforms for resilience and belonging**

**OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED**

Merredin and Districts Farm Improvement Group's (MADFIG) Agribusiness Network is building a resilient future for young farmers.

**A high proportion of young farmers in the Wheatbelt region have not faced severe drought conditions.** This meant many young farmers were not equipped with lived experience to weather future droughts.

**MADFIG addressed this challenge through strategic engagement that fostered capability.** CIP funding was used to establish an Agribusiness Network that connected young farmers with researchers. MADFIG adopted a deliberate engagement strategy, hosting events that combined practical on-farm research with social interaction, to make technical knowledge more accessible and encourage participation.

**Strengthened networks supported collective adaptation to future droughts.** The events facilitated stronger social connections across the Wheatbelt and enabled knowledge sharing between experienced and younger farmers and researchers. These networks contributed to a culture of collaboration and mutual support, positioning young farmers to respond more effectively to future drought conditions.

*Source: CIP program data provided by FRRR, CIP final grant report data provided by FRRR.*

## 4.3 To build lasting resilience, future programs must continue to support organisations to lead, collaborate and adapt

CIP projects laid strong foundations for long-term, community-led drought resilience. They helped shift organisational perspectives, broadened the definition of resilience, and strengthened the leadership capacity of local organisations. Many delivery partners evolved from short-term implementers to strategic regional collaborators, now better positioned to lead future resilience efforts. The program also demonstrated the value of inclusive, place-based approaches. It supported First Nations leadership, built enduring networks, and embedded social and cultural dimensions into resilience planning. These shifts are continuing beyond the life of the grant, with several organisations and partnerships now attracting further investment and sustaining locally led initiatives.

### 4.3.1 Four design features will maximise the impact of future community-led grant programs

Drawing on evaluation findings and community feedback, four design features are recommended to maximise the impact of future grant programs.

#### 1. Support place-based, community-led approaches to resilience

Local organisations are best positioned to lead drought resilience efforts, given their deep understanding of regional priorities, relationships and context. CIP findings show that community-led initiatives were more relevant, inclusive and sustained, resulting in stronger engagement, better alignment with local needs, and continued activity beyond the life of the grant.

**Relevant findings:**

4.3.3 The CIP laid foundations for enduring, community-led drought resilience.

**Actions:**

- Prioritise flexible funding models that enable communities to define and deliver their own resilience priorities, rather than prescribing activities from the top down.
- Invest in local coordination roles to support planning, engagement and continuity, ensuring that trusted organisations can convene stakeholders, align efforts and maintain momentum.

#### 2. Strengthen social networks and collaborative partnerships

Social connection and collaboration were central to the success of CIP projects. The program helped build cross-sector relationships that extended beyond individual projects, enabling communities to plan together, share resources and coordinate responses. Organisations reported that networks formed through the program are continuing post-funding, supporting shared planning and long-term resilience.

**Relevant findings:**

4.3.1 The CIP strengthened social connection, networks and belonging.

4.3.3 The CIP laid foundations for enduring, community-led drought resilience.

**Actions:**

- Fund initiatives that build and sustain cross-sector networks, including formal committees, peer learning groups and regional forums.
- Encourage joint planning and shared governance across delivery partners to align efforts, prevent duplication and support collective decision-making.

#### 3. Embed First Nations knowledge and leadership in resilience planning

CIP projects demonstrated the value of integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into regional drought resilience strategies. These partnerships strengthened cultural relevance, built trust, and supported long-term collaboration. First Nations leadership helped shift the framing of drought

from a technical challenge to a shared, community-wide responsibility grounded in Country, culture and intergenerational knowledge.

**Relevant findings:**

4.3.1 The CIP strengthened social connection, networks and belonging.

4.3.3 The CIP laid foundations for enduring, community-led drought resilience.

**Actions:**

- Require meaningful co-design with First Nations organisations in future program rounds, drawing on lessons from the CIP to ensure culturally responsive engagement and shared decision-making.
- Fund culturally safe engagement processes and support intergenerational knowledge sharing to embed Indigenous perspectives in planning, delivery and evaluation.

### 4. Build the capacity of community organisations to lead and sustain resilience efforts

CIP funding enabled many organisations to strengthen internal systems, governance and staffing - laying the groundwork for long-term leadership in their regions. These investments helped delivery partners move beyond short-term project delivery to become trusted convenors and strategic contributors to regional resilience planning.

**Relevant findings:**

4.3.2 The CIP built local capability and adaptive capacity to support drought resilience

4.3.3 The CIP laid foundations for enduring, community-led drought resilience

**Actions:**

- Include dedicated funding for organisational development, such as staffing, systems and governance, to build the foundations for sustained impact.
- Support professional development and succession planning to reduce key person risk and ensure continuity of leadership and capability over time.

# 5 Evaluating the Community Leadership Activities

The Community Leadership Activities (the 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.

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

- The Leadership Activities reached over 2300 participants nationally.
- The Leadership Activities have mostly reached their seven intended short-term outcomes, with 4 realised and 3 developing.
- The Leadership Activities built capability and catalysed action, strengthening community resilience from the ground up.
- Community leadership is a catalyst for resilience - and its impact depends on how it is supported and sustained.

## 5.1 The Community Leadership Activities reached over 2300 participants nationally

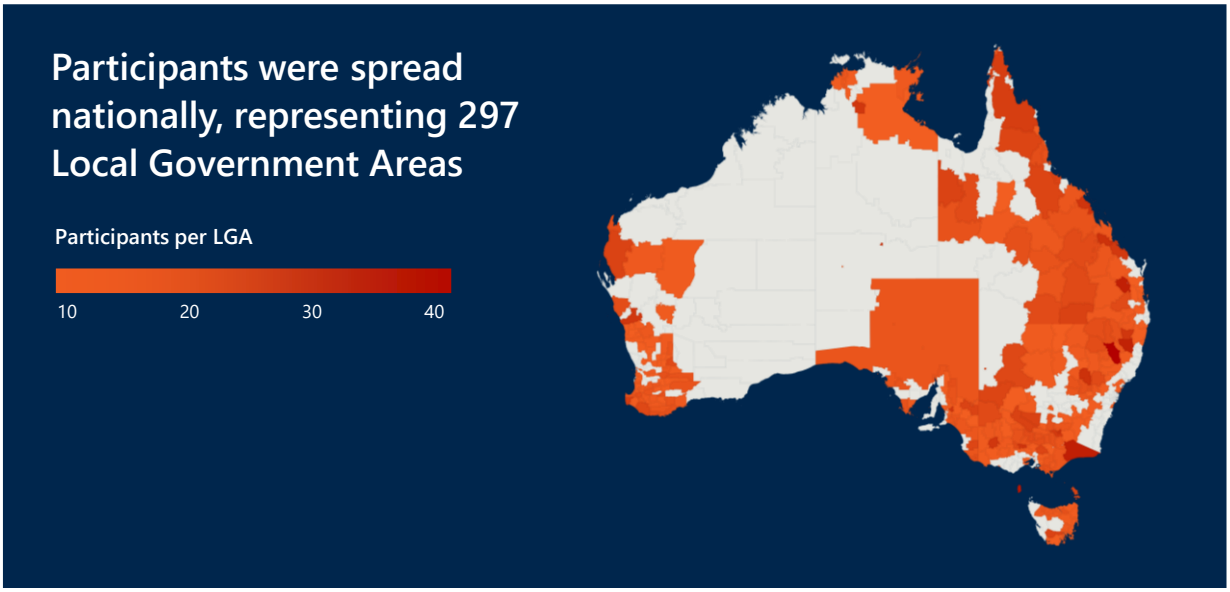
The Leadership Activities aim to support community members in remote, rural and regional Australia to develop their leadership skills to contribute towards drought resilience in their community. ARLF has delivered Leadership Activities to over 2300 people across 121 locations. Figure 19 provides a summary of what Leadership Activities have been delivered.

**Figure 19 | The Leadership Activities output summary**

*Source: Leadership Activities output data provided by ARLF.*

The Leadership Activities were spread nationally and mostly targeted rural and remote areas. Figure 20 provides a summary of delivery locations and the number of participants across these locations.

**Figure 20 | The Leadership Activities participation summary**




*Source: Participant location data provided by ARLF.*

## 5.2 The CIP Leadership Activities realised two of its seven intended short-term outcomes

The overarching assessment is that the Leadership Activities realised four of its seven intended short-term outcomes and achieved three to a developing extent. The Leadership Activities' reach, and quality suggests that its outcomes are likely to continue progressing beyond the evaluation period. The final assessment of achievement against the intended short-term outcomes is shown below in Table 6.

**Table 6 | Summary of assessment against the intended Community Leadership Activity short-term outcomes**

| SHORT-TERM OUTCOME | ASSESSMENT | RATIONALE |
|---|---|---|
| **PO1: Improved communication, social connection and collaboration within and between communities to support drought preparedness.** | **Realised** | Participants built diverse connections through structured activities and reflection. These relationships fostered inclusive leadership and informal support networks beyond the program. The exercises improved cross-sector and regional collaboration (see Section 5.3.2). |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **PO2: Improved access to and use of services, resources, infrastructure and facilities by communities that support drought preparedness.** | **Realised** | Participants applied practical tools and frameworks to local challenges such as climate impacts and social fragmentation. While the activities did not directly improve access to physical infrastructure or services, this was never their intended purpose, so this outcome is realised (see Section 5.3.1). |
| **PO3: A greater diversity of community members and organisations contribute to drought preparedness activities.** | **Developing** | Workshops reached 41 remote communities and drew participants from diverse industries. Geographic and sector diversity increased, though sustained engagement from groups traditionally underrepresented in drought planning remains varied. Participants expressed a desire to include more diverse voices in future decision-making (see Sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2). |
| **PO4: Increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies by communities, volunteers and not-for-profit organisations to prepare for and adapt to drought.** | **Developing** | Participants built adaptive leadership and systems thinking skills. They used these to reframe local challenges and lead change. Awareness of resilience strategies increased, though drought-specific knowledge was not a consistent focus (see Section 5.3.1). |
| **PO5: Increased implementation and improved effectiveness of place-based practices by communities to build and enhance resilience to drought.** | **Developing** | Participants gained new skills and approaches to address local challenges. Some used these to initiate or adapt community-led responses to climate impacts, social isolation and service access. These actions show early place-based resilience, though alignment with regional drought plans is limited and implementation varied (see Sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.3). |
| **PO6: Strengthened individual leadership capacity and capability to support community and drought resilience.** | **Realised** | Participants gained confidence and motivation to lead. Activities reframed leadership as inclusive and action-oriented – especially for younger participants. Tools like DISC profiling and the "Changemaker" identity supported this shift (see Section 5.3.1). |
| **PO7: Community-based networks that strengthen drought resilience are expanded, diversified or created.** | **Realised** | Activities built new networks and strengthened existing ones. Participants connected through shared values and goals – supporting collaborative leadership and sustained action. Regional alumni events and the National Changemaker Summit reinforced these connections. (see Sections 5.3.2 and 5.3.3). |

The Leadership activities are contributing to the Initiative's intermediate outcomes. Emerging evidence shows progress across all five outcomes. These are expected to strengthen over time with continued investment and implementation of the design features in Section 5.4. Assessment against the intermediate outcomes is provided below in Table 7.

**Table 7 | Summary of assessment against the Initiative intermediate outcomes**

| INTERMEDIATE OUTCOME | ASSESSMENT | RATIONALE |
|---|---|---|
| **RC1: There is an increase in the reach and activities of community leaders, mentors, networks and organisations driving action on drought resilience.** | **Major contribution** | The Leadership activities engaged participants across diverse regions and sectors. They applied tools to local challenges, launched community-led projects and built informal support networks. These efforts extended leadership development and catalysed action (see Sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.3). |
| **RC2: There is a change in awareness of and attitudes to drought preparedness at the community level.** | **Some contribution** | Participants reported greater confidence and a shift toward community-led leadership – reframing drought preparedness as a shared, long-term challenge. While individual mindset shifts are clear, broader community change is still emerging and will need time and further support to embed (see Section 5.3.1). |
| **IO1: Communities experience improved cohesion and belonging that supports an ability to prepare for drought.** | **Some contribution** | Participants formed strong regional connections and reported greater belonging and empathy through shared learning. Timeline mapping and group discussions deepened understanding of diverse community experiences. Many sustained these connections post-program, though cohesion varied by region. (see Section 5.3.2). |
| **IO2: Communities have strong adaptive capacity and are empowered to respond to drought.** | **Some contribution** | Participants gained tools and confidence to lead adaptive change. Many have launched local projects and engaged others in resilience-building. Continued investment and activation pathways are needed to embed and sustain this shift (see Sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.3). |
| **IO3: Communities have effective networks and resources that support local responses to drought.** | **Some contribution** | Leadership activities built and strengthened networks – enabling collaboration across regions and sectors. Participants accessed tools, peer support and opportunities to share knowledge. Sustaining these networks and ensuring equitable access to resources remains a challenge, especially in areas with limited follow-up infrastructure (see Section 5.3.2). |

The following Section provides detail on the contribution the Leadership Activities have made to strengthening drought preparedness and social resilience.

## 5.3 The Leadership Activities built capability and catalysed action, strengthening community resilience from the ground up

The Leadership Activities have achieved positive outcomes for participants. There is emerging evidence that participants are translating individual outcomes to initiate local action focused on strengthening community resilience. The evaluation observed that the Leadership Activities:

- built adaptive capacity through new knowledge, tools and skills
- strengthened social capital to enable deeper collaboration and collective action
- catalysed local action, strengthening community resilience through participant-led initiatives.

These three outcomes are explored further below.

### 5.3.1 The Leadership Activities built adaptive capacity through new knowledge, tools and skills

Leadership Activities built practical skills in adaptive leadership, systems thinking and collaborative problem-solving. Participants applied tools and frameworks to real challenges, which deepened their understanding and improved their confidence. Many now lead initiatives in their communities and workplaces. The program helped participants reframe leadership as inclusive and action-oriented. It also strengthened their ability to navigate complexity and engage diverse perspectives. These findings are explored below.

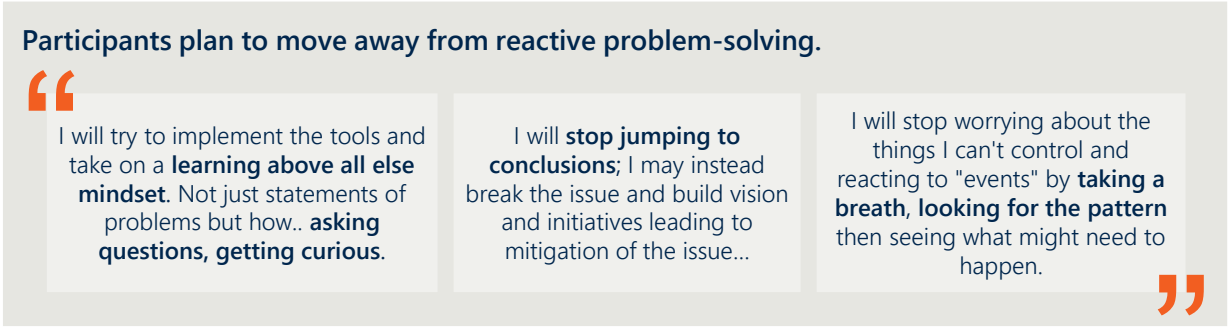
#### The Leadership Activities equipped participants with practical tools and skills for adaptive leadership, systems thinking and collaborative problem solving.

**Applied learning equipped participants to use a range of useful tools and frameworks.** Stakeholders highlighted the Iceberg Model, Horizons of Change and Golden Circles as particularly useful. Applied learning sessions in the Leadership Activities allowed participants to use various tools and frameworks to address live, locally relevant challenges and translate theory into practical action.

**The tools and frameworks helped participants to develop core capabilities that support community resilience building.** Participants learnt to break down complex problems, communicate with intent, plan for long-term change and adapt their leadership style to different contexts. At least 25 per cent of Changemaker participants surveyed highlighted the tools and frameworks introduced during the session in one of the final three questions of their end of program survey response (406 out of 1632 responses). Because most participants identified only one theme per question and responses covered a wide range of topics, this represents strong evidence of the tools' relevance and uptake. Six of the 11 interviewed Changemaker participants highlighted that tools and frameworks helped them think more systemically and approach challenges with greater clarity. Reflections across the Changemaker cohort show a clear shift away from quick fixes toward

deeper reflection, curiosity and a focus on root causes (see Figure 21 below). This shift signals growing capability to lead adaptive, long-term change in complex environments.

**Figure 21 | Changemaker survey responses**




*Source: Changemaker participant completion survey (n=1770), Changemaker workshops (Sep 2023 – June 2025).*

**The Changemaker workshop extended access to adaptive leadership development in underserved communities.** Regional stakeholders emphasised the importance of targeting underserved communities so that adaptive capacity is built where it is needed most. ARLF intentionally delivered the Changemaker workshops in smaller, remote communities that lacked prior access to leadership development and were often excluded from mainstream programs.

The workshops reached 41 remote or very remote communities, serving as a first exposure to adaptive leadership concepts and tools for many community members. Participants expressed deep appreciation for the opportunity to engage with high-quality leadership development that reflected their local realities. One Changemaker noted that "it was truly local input that was being used to run the course and produce worthwhile learning."

### The Leadership Activities built transferable skills that participants now apply across a wide range of local challenges.

**The focus of the Leadership Activities was intentionally broad and flexible to increase relevance to local challenges.** Regional areas face long-standing and interrelated challenges. Regional stakeholders highlighted limited access to essential services, social fragmentation and exposure to climate-related disasters such as drought, floods and bushfires. These are often systemic issues that require community-led, locally specific responses. Rather than focusing narrowly on drought, the focus of the applied learning sessions was community-led. This meant that communities explored a range of challenges, from climate impacts such as floods, fires and heatwaves to issues of social isolation, community engagement and inclusive decision-making.

> "We're dealing with housing shortages, mental health, reconciliation, and climate change, not just drought. These skills help us think through all of it."
>
> **- Changemaker participant**

**The community-led approach equipped participants with transferrable tools and leadership frameworks.** Participants valued the broad and flexible approach, noting that the skills and tools they gained were applicable to a wide range of challenges. Many have started using the models and tools introduced to navigate problems in professional and community settings (see Figure 22).

**Figure 22 | Changemaker survey responses**

**Participants will use the transferrable tools and leadership frameworks they were equipped with.**

> Use some of the **tools** in helping neighbourhood houses with **strategic planning and change processes.**

> I will revisit a work issue using the **tools** we practiced to help create change. I feel **more equipped to initiate** community activities.

> Use **tools** that I've developed within the workshop to **advocate for, lead** and participate in change for the **resilience of my community.**

*Source: Changemaker completion survey (n=1770), Changemaker workshops (Sep 2023 – June 2025).*

### The Leadership Activities helped participants redefine leadership and build the confidence to act.

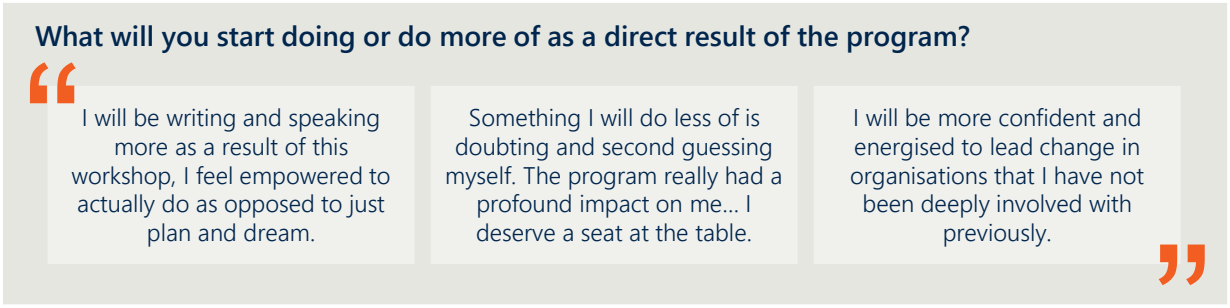
**Participants reframed their understanding of leadership, recognising it as inclusive and relational, not limited to formal roles or titles.** Program activities increased self-awareness, validated lived experiences and introduced diverse leadership styles. This encouraged participants to see themselves and others as capable of leading change within their communities. Changemaker participants noted that the use of the term "changemaker" contributed to a mindset shift, reinforcing the idea that leadership can be grounded in community action. This was reinforced in interviews with ARLF who noted the positive response they received to the program branding. In the Community Leadership Program, the DISC personality profile helped participants identify their strengths and understand how to work more effectively with others. 10 of 43 survey respondents cited this as a key learning or formative experience in the program completion survey.

> "I feel like saying I'm a changemaker gives me the confidence to say I want to do different. Before, I didn't know what that looked like."
>
> **- Changemaker participant**

**Participants gained confidence and began to see themselves as leaders.** Practical tools, supportive peer networks and mindset shifts were key in building this confidence. Across surveys and interviews, participants consistently identified increased confidence as a primary benefit from the program:

- 81 per cent of Changemaker workshop participants surveyed said they feel more empowered to lead community initiatives or projects.
- At least 13 per cent of Changemaker participants surveyed reported feeling more confident or empowered when describing what they would start doing more or less of due to the program (222 out of 1632 responses) (see quotes in Figure 23 below).
- Six out of 11 interviewed Changemaker workshop participants highlighted the increased confidence as a turning point in their leadership journey.
- 12 out of 33 surveyed National Changemaker Summit attendees cited increased confidence as their most significant change.

**Figure 23 | Survey responses to the confidence outcome**



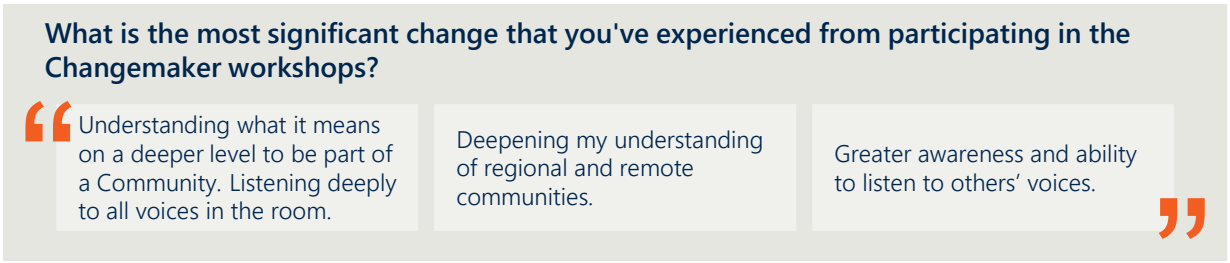

*Source: Participant completion surveys (n=1770), Changemaker workshops (Sep 2023 – June 2025); Leadership Action Initiative (Mar 2024); Emerging Leadership Program (2024); Community Leadership Program (June 2024 – June 2025).*

This shift was particularly impactful for younger participants who often described the Leadership Activity experience as a catalyst for stepping into leadership for the first time. One young participant mentioned in their end of program survey response that they will, "get involved in the community more. [The Changemaker workshop] was the push I needed."

### The Leadership Activities deepened participants' understanding of diverse community experiences and reinforced the value of inclusive decision-making.

**Participants left the Leadership Activities with an expanded understanding of issues and perspectives within their communities.** Participants noted that the guided exploration of local challenges alongside a diverse mix of community members were key enablers of this mindset shift. Timeline mapping exercises and group discussions were particularly effective in broadening this understanding, encouraging participants to consider needs beyond their immediate roles or sectors. Six of 11 interviewed Changemaker participants reported they left the Leadership Activities with greater empathy and a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of others. This was further validated at the National Changemaker Summit. All participants agreed with the finding and some shared that "the timeline activity highlighted lenses, unconscious bias and collaborative understanding of impact..." and that "[the session] provided different perspectives...made us consider the voices not in the room." Six of 42 Changemaker participants surveyed at the National Changemaker Summit identified gaining a deeper understanding as the most significant change experienced during the program (Figure 24).

**Figure 24 | Slido responses from the National Changemaker Summit**




*Source: Slido responses from National Changemaker Summit (n=42).*

**Participants plan to change their ways of working to account for community diversity.** Several participants noted that they intend to seek out diverse viewpoints and actively engage groups traditionally underrepresented in resilience planning in decision-making processes. At least 12 per

cent of Changemaker participants surveyed (218 out of 1,770) reported in their end-of-program survey that the session encouraged them to seek diverse viewpoints and engage more actively with their communities. These comments appeared in the final three free-text questions, which covered a wide range of topics. The frequency of this theme provides strong evidence of a genuine mindset shift in how participants intend to work with their communities. Figure 25 provides a sample of the action's participants plan to take to include others.

**Figure 25 | Survey responses to the seeking diverse community perspectives outcome**

*Source: Changemaker Participant completion surveys (n=1770), Changemaker workshops (Sep 2023 – June 2025).*

### 5.3.2 The Leadership Activities strengthened social capital to enable deeper collaboration and collective action

The Leadership Activities fostered strong, diverse and purpose-driven community connections. Participants connected across sectors, regions, and roles forming new relationships grounded in a shared commitment to community resilience. The sessions intentionally moved beyond surface-level networking, using collaborative exercises to deepen communication and trust. These connections supported collaborative leadership, sparked informal support networks and helped transform existing relationships into vehicles for systemic local change. While many participants sustained these connections post-program, the evaluation found that ongoing momentum could be strengthened through more structured and locally relevant mechanisms for follow-up and engagement. These findings are explored in detail below.

#### Participants strengthened their social connections.

**The Leadership Activities created opportunities to connect with a diverse cross-section of community members.** Participants came from a wide range of industries, including community services, agriculture, healthcare, environment and arts and culture, and held roles from executive leaders to volunteers. In some regions, local councillors and mayors also attended. The sessions also fostered cross-regional connections, enabling participants to share knowledge and perspectives beyond their immediate communities. Nine out of ten participants reported that the session enabled them to network and exchange skills and knowledge with others (see Figure 26 below).

**Figure 26 | Survey data on networking and knowledge sharing**

*Source: Participant completion surveys (n=1770), Changemaker workshops (Sep 2023 – June 2025); Leadership Action Initiative (Mar 2024); Emerging Leadership Program (2024); Community Leadership Program (June 2024 – June 2025).*

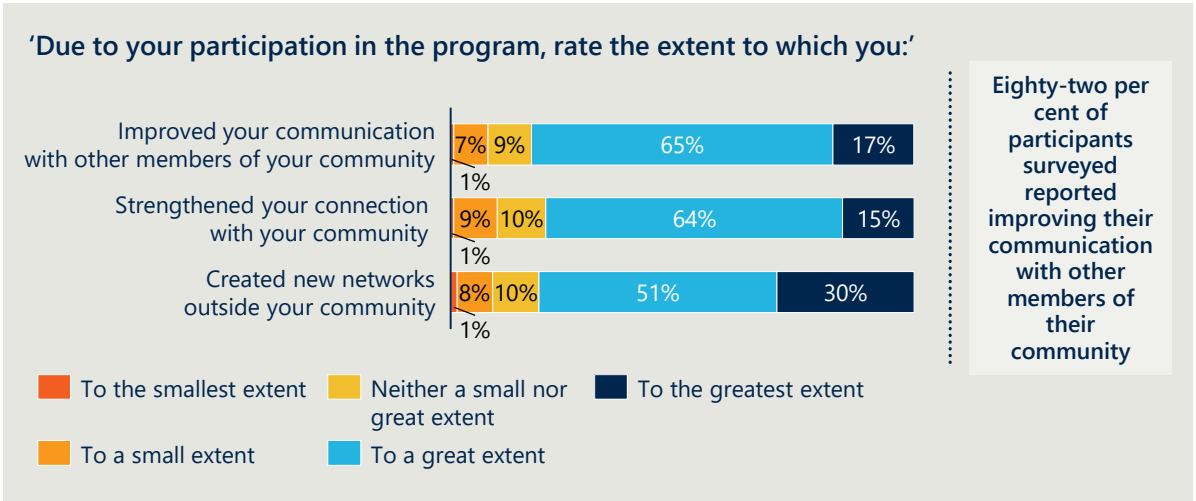
**The Leadership Activities fostered meaningful connections.** The sessions intentionally used group discussions and collaborative exercises to move past surface level connections. These activities encouraged open dialogue and shared reflection, which bridged communication gaps between different community groups and helped most participants to both strengthen existing relationships and form new ones.

"I met people I never would have crossed paths with but we shared values, and now we've got this common thread."

**- Changemaker participant**

Survey data shows that most participants improved their communication and strengthened their existing connection with their community and expanded their networks beyond their usual circles. These findings are outlined in the survey data below (see Figure 27).

**Figure 27 | Survey responses to connection and networking outcomes**



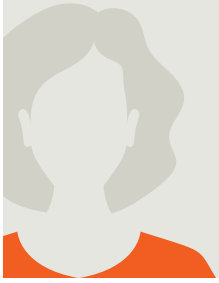

*Source: Participant completion surveys (n=1770), Changemaker workshops (Sep 2023 – June 2025); Leadership Action Initiative (Mar 2024); Emerging Leadership Program (2024); Community Leadership Program (June 2024 – June 2025).*

## The Leadership Activities fostered networks that have supported collaborative leadership through a shared commitment to community resilience

**The connections formed through the Leadership Activities unlocked a shared commitment to action among participants.** This common purpose helped participants discover shared values, goals and experiences, forming a strong foundation for connection. Despite diverse backgrounds, participants built meaningful relationships grounded in a collective drive for community resilience and social impact. This was observed in two ways:

**1. Diverse connections fostered solidarity and supported participants to mobilise others.** Participants working in diverse contexts connected over shared goals, creating a strong sense of alignment and purpose. These new networks gave participants the confidence and support to act on shared ideas and engage others in community-led initiatives. Many described forming informal support networks after the workshops to sustain motivation, exchange ideas and continue driving community-led change. The case study in Figure 28 illustrates how informal support networks fostered shared leadership and ongoing collaboration.

**Figure 28 | Case study about Changemaker Workshops as catalysts for community action**

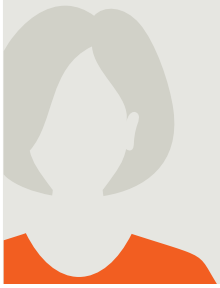


**Changemaker workshops created the space and dialogue to transform a long-standing connection into a strategic collaboration.** At a Changemaker workshop two women, who had done school drop-offs together for 13 years, discovered they were both working to expand childcare facilities. Despite their long-standing acquaintance, they had never discussed their shared goal until the Changemaker workshop. Since then, they have begun collaborating and are actively pursuing funding together. This example illustrates how intentional spaces for dialogue and collaboration can unlock untapped potential within communities, leading to more coordinated and resilient local initiatives

*Source: Nous focus groups with Changemaker participants.*

**2. Existing relationships transformed to address systemic local challenges**. Some participants shared that these strengthened connections helped them feel less isolated and better able to sustain momentum toward their goals. The open recruitment model of the Leadership Activities supported intentional, purpose-driven connection, enabling people from different roles and levels within the community to engage in meaningful dialogue. The case study in Figure 29 highlights an example where this coordination reduced duplication and strengthened collective action.

**Figure 29 | Case study about changemaker participants creating peer networks**



**Changemaker participants are building a cross-sector peer network to drive impact.** Following the Tamworth workshop, participants from Landcare, health and education have formed an informal network. Since May 2024, they have met monthly to share progress, exchange ideas and offer mutual support. What began as a simple connection has become a platform for collective problem solving. Members advocate for each other's projects, provide feedback and strengthen shared initiatives. This collaboration sustains workshop momentum and models networked leadership that builds resilience and mobilises action.

*Source: Nous focus groups with Changemaker participants.*

**The connections formed through the Leadership Activities contributed directly to collective leadership.** Participants expressed a strong desire to take action on shared ideas and engage others in the process. They reported becoming more intentional in how they connect, empower and collaborate within their communities. Survey responses highlighted a commitment to inclusive

leadership, with participants emphasising the importance of listening, avoiding assumptions and involving others in decision-making (see Figure 30 below).

**Figure 30 | Changemaker survey responses**

*Source: Participant completion surveys (n=1770), Changemaker workshops (Sep 2023 – June 2025).*

### Sustaining momentum requires more structured and accessible ways for participants to stay connected

**The extent to which participants remained connected after the Leadership Activity varied across regions.** In some regions, participants took initiative to create group chats or organise local meetups, which helped maintain relationships and drive continued collaboration. In others, this momentum was lost without structured follow-up or accessible ways to stay in touch.

**Structured and accessible mechanisms could support sustained connections.** While participants valued the relationships built during the program, many noted that without intentional follow-up, it was difficult to maintain those connections or collaborate meaningfully. Participants identified several options to maintain connection:

> There needs to be a group chat to continue what's been learnt from the Changemaker forum… especially if they're from a certain area.
>
> **- Gippsland Changemaker participant**

- **Region-specific digital infrastructure**, such as localised group chats. While ARLF encouraged participants to join the broader Drought Ready network, many found it difficult to engage with due to its scale.
- **National alumni events to foster ongoing learning and connection.** ARLF delivered the National Changemaker Summit with 47 Changemaker participants representing different regions and workshops. This event was noted as a valuable opportunity to strengthen and create connections, expand networks and gain new insights.
- **Local follow-up sessions or alumni events** to sustain regional energy and collaboration. For example, in the Murraylands and Riverland region of SA, the CPLO convened a regional alumni event that brought together Changemaker participants and graduates of a separate state-funded leadership program. This created a purposeful and inclusive space for continued connection, cross-cohort learning, and collaboration.

These examples highlight the opportunity to activate lightweight, locally relevant infrastructure to maintain momentum.

### 5.3.3 The Leadership Activities catalysed local action, strengthening community resilience through participant-led initiatives

#### Empowered community members have become catalysts for broader community change

Participants are already translating insights from the Leadership Activities into tangible initiatives that address immediate needs and build long-term community resilience. These efforts are strengthening local capacity, unlocking new partnerships, and inspiring others to take action, demonstrating ripple effects across social, health, education, and economic outcomes. Figure 31 highlights three case studies of initiatives Changemaker Participants are using the create tangible change in their communities.

**Figure 31 | Examples of transformative initiatives from Changemaker Workshop participants**

**Changemaker participants are championing initiatives that drive transformative change in their regions.**

**OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED**

**Changemaker participants have helped drive systemic shifts in local healthcare and crisis support.**

In Mudgee NSW, a new Director for Doctors was appointed and funded, with support from council, state government, and the AMA. A strategic research project is now underway to attract doctors without disadvantaging other rural centres. In parallel, partnerships with large corporates have enabled the creation of a community crisis hub, a new full-time role, and at least $800,000 in committed investment, bringing new services to the region and relieving pressure on neighbouring centres like Dubbo and Bathurst. One downstream impact has been targeted mental health support for primary producers in Dubbo and Parkes.

**A local teacher applied insights from the Changemaker workshop to lead a significant transformation.**

Timber Creek School in the Northern Territory was previously marked by disconnection. The school was reshaped into a place of belonging, agency and co-leadership. Using frameworks like Adaptive Leadership, the Berry Street Education Model, and The Buzz, the teacher initiated deep listening and trust-building across four remote outstations and a neighbouring West Arnhem community. Engagement became grounded in safety, cultural responsiveness, and shared purpose. A defining moment was when students began co-designing their own learning routines—selecting learning spaces, requesting breaks through self-advocacy, and reflecting on progress using solution-focused prompts. Families reported feeling more included, and student attendance and engagement steadily improved. Enrolment at the school increased by 45%. The transformation was not a quick fix, but a process of cultural and adaptive change held together by relationships and voice.

**A Mount Isa Changemaker participant applied workshop insights to partner with government and deliver a cross-sector event supporting children to start school ready.**

The participant collaborated with the Department of Education to deliver the 'Let's Get Enrolled' event designed to connect families with local education, health and community services. The event had over 30 stakeholders from federal state and local government and also other support services that volunteered their time to help children start school with all of the resources that they needed.

*Source: Nous focus groups with Changemaker participants.*

### Continued support is required to activate and sustain community-led ideas.

**Participants consistently emphasised the need for follow-up support to fully activate and sustain the ideas sparked during the Leadership Activities.** Many noted that without follow-up mechanisms, such as funding or structured pathways, it was difficult to maintain momentum or bring their ideas to life. At the National Changemaker Summit, participants identified several enablers that could support continued action, these are highlighted in Figure 32 below.

**Figure 32 | Continued support areas highlighted by Changemaker Summit participants**

**Participants identified several enablers to help them create impact after the Changemaker Workshops.**

> Offering **mentorships** following Changemaker sessions, ideally with **regional leaders** living in a **similar community** or **context.**

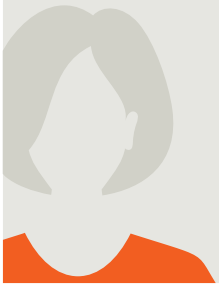
> **Project development tools** that assist to take an idea to a **wider community action.**

> **Funding opportunities** attached to each region to help attendees **take action** - through FDF or philanthropy/investment.

*Source: ARLF National Changemaker Summit Nous interviews and workshops.*

**If strategically aligned, the Initiative elements could serve as a scaffold for ongoing engagement, capacity-building, and implementation.** The sequencing and cumulative design of the Initiative elements, with its layered elements such as grants, mentoring and networks, has the potential to address part of this need for follow-up support. Building momentum overtime, by reinforcing key skills and relationships, would help participants to move from inspiration to sustained action. The case study in Figure 33 highlights an example of how a participant leveraged SNG funding to maintain momentum from the Changemaker workshop.

**Figure 33 | Case study showing the value of strategically aligning the initiative elements**



**The Changemaker Workshops inspired local action in regional Western Australia.**

A community leader in regional Western Australia attended a Change Maker 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 SNG 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 Change Maker workshop helped the participant build confidence and clarify her vision, while the SNG provided the practical support needed to deliver for her community.

*Source: Nous focus groups with Changemaker participants.*

## 5.4 Community leadership is a catalyst for resilience - and its impact depends on how it is supported and sustained

The Leadership Activities have shown that investing in local leadership is a high-impact strategy for building community resilience. When regional and remote communities gain access to high-quality leadership development, they respond with energy, innovation and action. Participants gained practical tools, built confidence, formed new networks and initiated projects that are already delivering tangible benefits.

This is not a marginal intervention. It is a strategic lever that unlocks latent capability, strengthens social capital, and drives community-led change. But access to leadership development remains uneven. Many communities, particularly in remote areas, lack opportunities to build the capability and connections needed to navigate complex challenges.

To realise the full potential of grassroots leadership, investment must be ongoing, targeted and integrated with broader resilience-building efforts.

### 5.4.1 Five design features will maximise the impact of future Leadership Activities

Drawing on evaluation findings and community feedback, five design features are recommended to maximise the impact of future Leadership Activities.

#### 1. Embed leadership development in resilience frameworks and programs.

Leadership development should be embedded in national and state-level resilience strategies, not treated as a peripheral or optional activity. The evaluation observed that leadership development builds critical adaptive capacity and social capital necessary for strengthening community resilience. These outcomes directly contribute to national priorities around disaster preparedness, climate adaptation and regional development.

**Relevant findings:**

5.3.1 The Leadership Activities built adaptive capacity through new knowledge, tools and skills.

5.3.2 The Leadership Activities strengthened social capital to enable deeper collaboration and collective action.

**Actions:**

- Integrate leadership initiatives within resilience programs, such as the RDRPs.
- Position community leadership as a core enabler in resilience planning and frameworks.
- Allocate sustained funding to support long-term leadership capability.

#### 2. Tailor programs to local context and readiness

Leadership development is most effective when it reflects the diversity of regional and remote communities. The flexible design and broad focus of the Leadership Activities enabled communities to focus on locally relevant issues and equipped them with transferrable skills

applicable to a wide range of challenges (see Section 5.3.1). Future programs should continue to offer adaptable formats, while ensuring consistent access to core leadership tools and frameworks.

**Relevant findings:**

5.3.1 The Leadership Activities built adaptive capacity through new knowledge, tools and skills.

**Actions:**

- Continue to deliver a core suite of leadership tools and frameworks across all locations.
- Position leadership development within broader community resilience and climate change to reflect the cumulative challenges that regional communities face.
- Embed co-design processes to ensure program content is relevant to local priorities and levels of readiness.

### 3. Strengthen visibility and access in under-served regions

The evaluation revealed a clear gap: many regional and remote communities lack access to leadership development opportunities. Participants consistently described the Leadership Activities as "first of their kind" in their region. When offered, these programs unlocked latent potential and catalysed action, demonstrating both demand and impact. Future programs need to prioritise delivery in under-served regions and embed leadership development in regional investment strategies.

**Relevant findings:**

5.3.3 The Leadership Activities catalysed local action, strengthening community resilience through participant-led initiatives.

**Actions:**

- Map geographic and demographic gaps in leadership access to inform targeted outreach and future investment.
- Partner with local organisations and networks to increase visibility and build trust in regions with limited prior access.

### 4. Connect leadership development with activation pathways

Leadership development sparks ideas, motivation and confidence but without activation pathways, momentum can stall. Participants requested support to translate ideas into action, including access to grants, mentoring and structured follow-up. The Initiative's layered design offers a model for how leadership development can be scaffolded into sustained action.

**Relevant findings:**

5.3.3 The Leadership Activities catalysed local action, strengthening community resilience through participant-led initiatives.

**Actions:**

- Sequence program delivery in the context of other elements. Delivering leadership development before the mentoring or grant elements would provide a structured pathway for activation.
- Align program timelines with local grant rounds to facilitate access to funding for timely activation.
- Partner with local councils or regional development agencies to connect leaders with ongoing support and decision-making forums.

### 5. Sustain engagement beyond the program

The Leadership Activities support strong and meaningful connections between participants. However, these often faded without structured support for ongoing engagement. Participants called for more accessible ways to stay in touch, such as localised digital groups, alumni events or regional networks to sustain relationships and peer learning.

**Relevant findings:**

5.3.2 The Leadership Activities strengthened social capital to enable deeper collaboration and collective action.

**Actions:**

- Facilitate locally led alumni events or follow-up sessions to support localised support networks.
- Establish regional group chats to support ongoing connection and collaboration within communities.
- Encourage local stewardship by supporting alumni to take on facilitation or convening roles.

# 6 Evaluating the Small Network Grants

The Small Network Grant program was designed to support simple, locally led initiatives that build stronger connectedness and social capital in regional, rural and remote communities. It provided accessible funding to smaller organisations, particularly those not reached by the CIP grants.

This Section describes the evaluation findings relating to the Small Network Grants. Specifically:

- The SNG funded 74 small-scale projects to build drought resilience
- The SNG realised five of its seven intended short-term outcomes
- The SNG catalysed local networks and practical preparedness
- The SNG merits continued investment to extend the reach and impact of the Initiative

## 6.1 The SNG funded 74 small-scale projects to build drought resilience

The SNG program is a distinct element of the Initiative, designed to complement the CIP. Unlike the CIP, which provides larger grants for regionally co-designed, collaborative projects, the SNG program offered smaller, more accessible funding to support individual, locally led initiatives. SNGs were delivered in two streams:

- Stream 1 targeted priority LGAs with high drought risk
- Stream 2 funded projects in four CIP regions that were intended to participate in the CIP co-design process but did not receive funding. In three regions, participation in co-design was not possible due to capacity constraints or operational disruptions such as flood recovery. In one region, the co-design process was completed but did not result in an appropriate set of projects. Stream 2 funding ensured these regions could still access designated grant funding to support drought preparedness activities.

This structure aimed to provide communities often overlooked by larger, regional programs with access to funds to support local projects.

The SNG funded 74 projects worth over $2M. A summary of what the Small Network Grants delivered is described overleaf in Figure 34. A summary of the outcomes achieved and most significant change is shown in Figure 35.

Figure 34 | Overview of outputs delivered by the SNG

## SNG grants supported 74 projects across 7 states and territories

**74 PROJECTS**

**ACROSS**

**32 REGIONS**

**OVER**

**7 STATES & TERRITORIES**

Including with...

- **22** Landcare or other environmental organisations
- **14** Agricultural organisations
- **9** Community associations
- **5** Local councils
- **4** First Nation-led organisations

Focused on a diversity of community members...

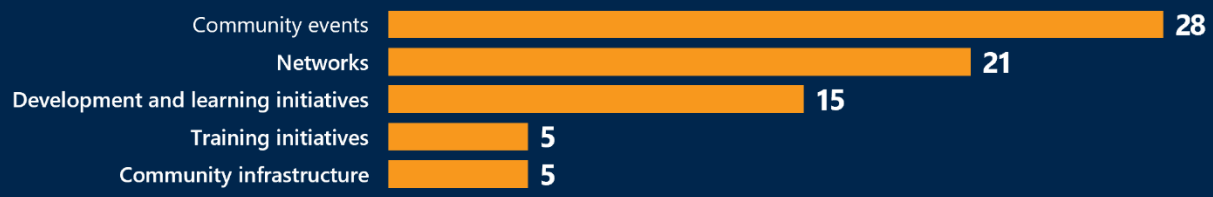
- **15%** Of projects targeted engaged First Nations people
- **19%** Of projects are directly focused on young people (18-35 years)
- **66%** Of projects were delivered to a majority of rural women
- **0.6%** Of projects engage culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities

PROJECTS REACHED **10,375** PEOPLE DURING THEIR DELIVERY.

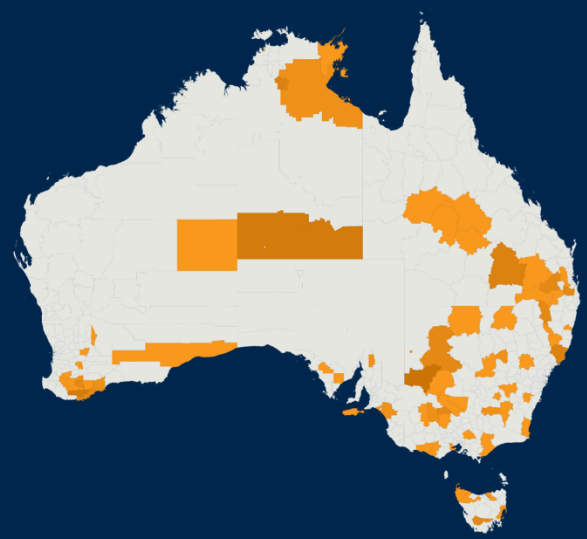
PROJECTS ARE EXPECTED TO REACH **69,912** PEOPLE ONGOING.

For every **one person** reached during a project, an additional **~7 people are expected to benefit from the outcomes achieved by that project.**

Networks was the most commonly selected output




Project activities were spread nationally, representing **79 Local Government Areas**




**43% of projects** were delivered to remote, or very remote locations.

*Source: SNG program data provided by FRRR*

Figure 35 | Outcomes chosen by SNG grant participants in final grant reports

## The most common outcomes reported by grantees:

**Improved communication, social connection and collaboration within and between communities to support drought preparedness. (PO1)**

- 77% of grant reports indicated PO1 as one of their two project outcomes (n=62).
- 33 organisations selected PO1 as their first outcome while 15 selected it as their second (out of 62).
- 16 organisations selected PO1 as one of their third outcomes (multiselect).

**Community-based networks that strengthen drought resilience are expanded, diversified or created. (PO7)**

- 32% of grant reports indicated PO7 as one of their two project outcomes (n=62).
- 4 organisations selected PO7 as their first outcome while 16 selected it as their second (out of 137).
- 24 organisations selected PO7 as one of their third outcomes (multiselect).

**Increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies by communities, volunteers and not-for-profit organisations to prepare for and adapt to drought. (PO4)**

- 26% of grant reports indicated PO4 as one of their two project outcomes (n=62).
- 9 organisations selected PO4 as their first outcome while 7 selected it as their second (out of 137).
- 19 organisations selected PO4 as one of their third outcomes (multiselect).

## The most significant change reported by grantees was:

**62%**
Community connection and social cohesion

**51%**
Empowerment and capacity building

**40%**
Resilience and preparedness for challenges

*Source: SNG deep dive interview data collected by Nous (n = 21) and SNG Final Grant reports (n=62).*

## The most common intermediate and long-term outcomes reported by grantees were:

**60%**
improved social cohesion and belonging
that supports an ability to prepare for drought

**60%**
developed effective networks and resources
that support local responses to drought

**52%**
increased reach and activities of community leaders and members
driving action on drought

*Source: SNG final grant report data provided by FRRR (n = 62)*

## 6.2 The SNG realised five of its seven intended short-term outcomes

The SNG made a significant contribution to building drought resilience in regional communities, realising five of its seven intended short-term outcomes. SNG program design, including its focus on small scale but important projects, was a key contributor to this outcome. The remaining two outcomes were achieved to a developing extent, with early signs of broader and sustained impact emerging across all indicators. Table 8 presents the final assessment of achievement against the intended short-term outcomes.

**Table 8 | Summary of assessment against the intended SNG short-term outcomes**

| SHORT-TERM OUTCOME | ASSESSMENT | RATIONALE |
|---|---|---|
| **PO1: Improved communication, social connection and collaboration within and between communities to support drought preparedness.** | **Realised** | There is strong evidence that SNG-funded events and activities significantly improved social connection and collaboration. Participants reported increased trust, belonging, and collaboration (see Section 6.3.1). |
| **PO2: Improved access to and use of services, resources, infrastructure and facilities by communities that support drought preparedness.** | **Realised** | SNGs funded a range of infrastructure upgrades including community halls, water infrastructure, portable toilets, weather data platforms and mobile or shared resources. This infrastructure improved access and functionality for regional communities. (see Section 6.3.2). |
| **PO3: A greater diversity of community members and organisations contribute to drought preparedness activities.** | **Realised** | SNGs intentionally engaged groups traditionally underrepresented in resilience planning, with 70 per cent of projects targeting First Nations, young people, women, or CALD communities. (see Sections 6.3.1 and 6.3.3). |
| **PO4: Increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies by communities, volunteers and not-for-profit organisations to prepare for and adapt to drought.** | **Realised** | Many SNG projects included training and learning activities building practical skills and increasing awareness of drought preparedness. Participants reported increased confidence to access support and apply new knowledge. (see Section 6.3.2). |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **PO5: Increased implementation and improved effectiveness of place-based practices by communities to build and enhance resilience to drought.** | **Developing** | There is some evidence of new or improved place-based practices. Examples included the adoption of drought-resilient farming techniques and the use of mobile resources. (see Section 6.3.2). |
| **PO6: Strengthened individual leadership capacity and capability to support community and drought resilience.** | **Developing** | SNGs supported leadership development through training, mentoring, and project delivery experience. Projects reported increased confidence and willingness to take on leadership roles, particularly among women and young people. (see Sections 6.3.2 and 6.3.3). |
| **PO7: Community-based networks that strengthen drought resilience are expanded, diversified or created.** | **Realised** | SNGs enabled the creation and strengthening of community-based networks, There is strong evidence of expanded and diversified networks across multiple regions (see Sections 6.3.1 and 6.3.3). |

The SNGs are making measurable progress toward the Initiative's intermediate outcomes. Emerging evidence suggests a major contribution to three of the five outcomes, with moderate progress toward the remaining two. These outcomes are expected to continue developing with time, sustained investment, and implementation of the recommended design features outlined in Section 6.4. Table 9 presents the assessment against the intermediate outcomes.

Table 9 | Summary of assessment against the intended SNG intermediate outcomes

| INTERMEDIATE OUTCOME | ASSESSMENT | RATIONALE |
|---|---|---|
| **RC1: There is an increase in the reach and activities of community leaders, mentors, networks and organisations driving action on drought resilience.** | **Major contribution** | The SNGs reached more than 10,000 people including those not served by the larger CIP grants. SNGs enabled new leaders and organisations to take action, catalysing new networks and extending drought resilience activities into previously under-served regions (see Sections 6.1, 6.3.1, 6.3.2 and 6.3.3). |
| **RC2: There is a change in awareness of and attitudes to drought preparedness at the community level.** | **Moderate contribution** | Projects increased awareness of drought risk and preparedness through training, events, and information sharing. Participants reported greater confidence and willingness to access support. (see Section 6.3.2). |
| **IO1: Communities experience improved cohesion and belonging that supports an ability to prepare for drought.** | **Major contribution** | SNG-funded events and activities consistently strengthened social connection, trust, and a sense of belonging. These effects were especially notable in small or isolated communities (see Section 6.3.1). |
| **IO2: Communities have strong adaptive capacity and are empowered to respond to drought.** | **Some contribution** | SNGs built adaptive capacity by funding practical training, leadership development, and infrastructure upgrades. Participants experienced increased confidence to take on new roles and support others (see Sections 6.3.2 and 6.3.3). |
| **IO3: Communities have effective networks and resources that support local responses to drought.** | **Major contribution** | SNGs enabled the creation and strengthening of community-based networks. Many networks support ongoing collaboration and new initiatives. Infrastructure and shared resources have improved access and resilience (see Sections 6.3.1, 6.3.2 and 6.3.3). |

## 6.3 The SNG catalysed local networks and practical preparedness

The SNG program delivered practical value to regional communities by enabling locally led initiatives that strengthened drought resilience. SNG projects:

- strengthened belonging through locally designed events and activities that built trust, connection and inclusion
- improved access to skills, resources, and infrastructure, that enabled practical, inclusive, and locally relevant preparedness activities
- catalysed systemic change by broadening participation, sparking optimism, and embedding adaptive practices.

These outcomes highlight the important role small investments play for regional and remote communities. The following outlines the key mechanisms through which SNGs achieved the observed outcomes. They also highlight the implications for drought resilience across the target communities.

### 6.3.1 The SNG strengthened belonging through locally designed events and activities that built trust, connection and inclusion

The SNGs strengthened belonging by enabling communities to design and deliver projects that reflected local priorities and created safe, inclusive spaces for connection. Forty-eight of 62 SNG grant reports indicated that projects improved communication, social connection and collaboration as one of their top two project outcomes.

Three key mechanisms were central to strengthening belonging:

- **Events were the primary vehicle for building social cohesion and resilience**, often bringing together people that had not previously interacted.
- **Projects helped to establish multi-purpose networks** that continue to support collaboration and community engagement.
- **Targeted outreach and inclusive design broadened community participation** in drought resilience.

These approaches deepened trust, expanded reach and laid foundations for stronger resilience. These findings are explored in detail below.

#### Community events were the primary vehicle for building social connection and resilience

**Events created new opportunities for connection.** Forty-eight of 62 SNG grant reports, demonstrated that SNG projects delivered a community event. These events enabled people to meet, interact, and build relationships, often bridging groups that had not previously connected. The most common types of events included:

- **Community gatherings:** Forty projects delivered community gatherings including community days, dinners, lunches, BBQs and picnics. Far South Coast Dairy Development Group in NSW hosted a gala dinner that brought together farmers, Rural Fire Service personnel, and young leaders to build social connection and inspire locally led drought and fire planning.
- **Workshops:** Thirty-eight projects included skill-building sessions, forums, training and educational workshops. Warrnambool Coastcare Landcare Network in VIC hosted field days and workshops that fostered peer-to-peer learning and stronger connections among farmers across the region.
- **Cultural activities:** Nine projects delivered ceremonies, traditional practices, online, storytelling or cultural camps. The Shire of Westonia in WA delivered a community art project and cultural event that fostered belonging, volunteerism, and intergenerational participation to strengthen community resilience.

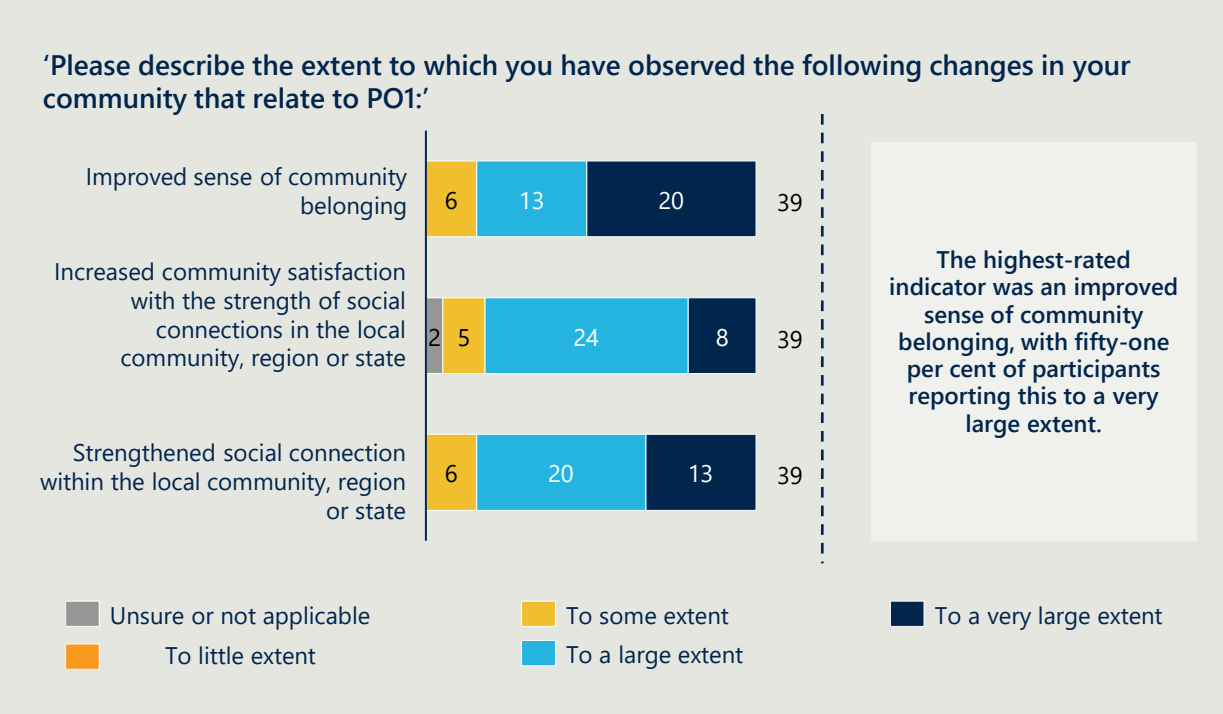
**Events strengthened trust and belonging among participants.** Events and workshops brought together people who had not previously interacted, such as students and farmers, or

geographically isolated residents and service providers. These interactions built trust, reduced isolation, and fostered a shared sense of purpose. Participants reported feeling more connected to their community and more confident to engage in future drought preparedness initiatives. Connection was evident across diverse community cohorts, including:

- **Intergenerational connection:** Big Hart Inc in TAS delivered a series of community feasts that engaged students, farmers and general community members. One student shared that the events brought together diverse community members around a shared purpose. This made the student "the most connected they'd felt to their town in ages."
- **Cross-town and cross-sector collaboration:** Watershed Landcare Group Inc's 'Conversations for Change' event in NSW brought together 230 participants from at least 14 different towns for a regenerative farming forum. The forum sparked new connections across towns and sectors. This secured relationships for continual sharing of trials and demonstrations. One event participant reported they felt less socially isolated in their regeneration journey as a result of the event.
- **Social inclusion:** Wellstead Community Resource Centre's workshops in WA united geographically isolated mothers, elderly residents, and farmers, reducing social isolation and building trust. The organisation reported that the most significant change achieved by their project was increased social networking opportunities for community members who are otherwise unable to connect.

Of the 48 organisations that delivered a community event, 39 reported improved communication, social connection and collaboration as one of their top two outcomes. For many, this sense of connection translated into an improved sense of community belonging (see Figure 36 below).

**Figure 36 | SNG organisation responses to PO1 indicators**




*Source: SNG final grant report data provided by FRRR, August 2025.*

**Flexible funding enabled diverse, locally relevant events.** The SNG program's flexibility allowed communities to design events that reflected local needs, priorities, and contexts. Seven projects specifically reported on the benefits of the flexibility for their projects and regions. This flexibility was observed in several ways:

> "Some degree of flexibility in a project is important when working with rural and regional communities."
>
> **- Stirlings to Coast Farmers Inc**

- **Flexible event scale and format:** The SNG's open, low-barrier design empowered organisations to choose event formats suited to local needs. Events ranged from small workshops to large festivals, with participation spanning from 8 to over 1,500 people. On average, events reached 200 participants, with an expected 300 more benefiting from outcomes.
- **Locally tailored design for remote areas:** Communities shaped events around local rhythms, service alignment and cultural contexts. GroWQ Association tailored first aid training events for very remote communities across five different LGAs in Central West QLD. They reflected: "Smaller and more isolated communities, such as Yaraka, expressed particular gratitude for the tailored nature of the course."
- **Broader reach across high-risk drought communities:** SNG funding complemented CIP funding by enabling participation from communities with limited capacity or distinct cultural needs. In the NT, the Arid Lands Environment Centre engaged over 500 people through inclusive events and partnerships.[3] The simpler and more familiar application and reporting process supported access for smaller and culturally diverse organisations.
- **Responsive adaptation of events to meet emerging needs:** The flexible program guidelines allowed communities to adapt projects in response to emerging needs created by the onset of drought conditions. The Evaluation heard of at least four cases in which SNG organisations adapted their grant activities to meet emerging community needs. A detailed case study on a project delivered by Facey Group in WA is provided in Figure 37 below.

These examples demonstrate how the SNG program's flexible funding enabled communities to deliver events that were locally relevant in scale, design, and timing. This adaptability helped them respond to emerging needs, engage remote populations, and reach culturally diverse groups. Some organisations highlighted that ongoing access to flexible funding at a greater scale would unlock greater and, in some cases, more sustainable community outcomes.

[3] SNG Final Reports provided by FRRR 6 August

**Figure 37 | Facey Group demonstrates responsive adaptation to meet emerging needs**

*Source: Deep dive interviews, SNG Final Report data provided by FRRR.*

### SNG projects supported the creation of ongoing, multi-purpose networks.

**SNGs enhanced existing networks.** SNG projects supported existing networks to foster cross-sector partnerships, increase volunteer engagement, and improve governance and communication. Figure 38 below demonstrates how many SNGs reported this theme and examples of what this looked like in practice. Section 6.3.2 further describes how community capacity and capability was increased through volunteer engagement, improved governance and communication.

**Figure 38 | SNG organisations demonstrated strengthened networks**

**SNGs enhanced existing networks by fostering cross-sector partnerships, increasing volunteer engagement, and improving governance and communication.**

**Twenty-one projects enabled cross-sector collaboration.**

The Arid Lands Environment Centre works with a network of schools, artists and environmental advocates. Their SNG project fostered cross-sector collaboration through running community events and supporting new governance structures.

**Seventeen projects strengthened internal and external communication.**

Western Murray Land Improvement Group's Murray Connect Hub delivered 14 drought preparedness events. They strengthened communication by using open platforms, newsletters, and targeted outreach to increase participation and maintain ongoing dialogue about drought preparedness.

**Fourteen projects helped networks to expand and energise volunteer participation.**

Foundation Broken Hill Ltd delivered governance and leadership workshops to community leaders and board members. The project built volunteer skills and confidence. As a result, they observed boosted morale and engagement among volunteers.

**Nine projects strengthened governance structures and decision-making.**

Mimal Land Management Aboriginal Corporation supported the Strong Women for Healthy Country's annual forum. The forum was an opportunity to build transparent governance for the network. This was one of the priority actions identified in the Strong Women for Healthy Country Strategy.

*Source: SNG Final Report data provided by FRRR.*

**SNGs enabled communities to establish new networks.** Twenty projects reported that they created a new network.[4] The new networks ranged from informal WhatsApp groups to formal structures such as reference groups, governance committees and peer circles. These networks achieved a range of outcomes:

- **Seventeen projects reported that new networks expanded and diversified connections.** For example, Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation's new water council network in NT brought together 12 traditional leaders and diverse community members to reconnect cultural practices with water protection. This expanded and diversified networks by integrating Aboriginal knowledge into drought resilience efforts, fostering cross-cultural collaboration and long-term community stewardship.
- **Sixteen projects reported that new networks strengthened social connection and community cohesion.** For example, NT Farmers Organisation provided mental health training that encouraged open conversations and peer support. Informal networks emerged, enabling growers and staff to check in on each other and build trust, critical for collective drought resilience.

[4] SNG Final grant report data provided by FRRR (n = 62).

- **Fifteen projects reported that new networks enhanced knowledge sharing and learning. For example,** Arid Lands Environment Centre built a cross-sector network in NT through the Alice Springs' community gardens. The network provided practical workshops on soil health and irrigation. This provided diverse community members with enhanced knowledge on water-wise gardening and food security practices.

These examples highlight the positive role new networks can play to support drought preparedness and social resilience.

**Networks were seen as critical mechanisms for future preparedness.** Strengthening existing and creating new networks delivered a range of outcomes, as outlined above. Twenty of 62 final grant reports identified strengthened community networks and collaboration, as one of the top two outcomes. By enabling cross-sector relationships, expanding connections, strengthening social connection and enhancing knowledge sharing and learning, these networks laid the groundwork for sustained collaboration and equipped communities with the relationships and knowledge to navigate future drought and climate challenges.

> "Our project initiated ground-level collaboration with the local bushfire brigade, forming new, valuable relationships across community groups."
>
> **- Gnowangerup Aboriginal Corporation**

### Targeted outreach and inclusive design broadened community participation in drought resilience.

**SNGs targeted projects that aimed to engage diverse groups.** FRRR prioritised funding toward not-for-profit organisations in LGAs outside of CIP delivery locations. There was also a specific focus on organisations that serviced smaller, more remote communities. This helped to diversify the SNG applicant pool such that 38 per cent of Round 1 and 2 grantees were new to FRRR.

**The focus on diverse groups enabled the SNG to benefit a broader cohort**. In SNG application forms, more than 70 per cent of projects aimed to deliver their projects to diverse cohorts including First Nations and CALD communities, women and youth.[5] In final grant reports, 27 of the 62 SNG organisations (44 per cent) reported that their projects supported a greater diversity of community members and organisations to contribute to drought preparedness. This was either as a top two outcome or among several reported impacts.[6] These projects engaged First Nations people, young people, women and CALD communities. Figure 39 provides an overview of the number of projects that were led by or targeted diverse community members.

[5] SNG program data provided by FRRR (n=74 organisations).
[6] SNG final grant reports provided by FRRR 6 Aug

Figure 39 | Summary of the SNGs diverse outreach and inclusion

*Source: Final Grant report and application data (n(projects)=74).*

**Design choices increased accessibility.** Projects were tailored for groups traditionally underrepresented in resilience planning, using familiar venues, food, childcare and inclusive formats. Organisations built trust by working with community leaders, helping reduce participation barriers and broaden reach. Two projects exemplify how design choices reduced barriers and increased accessibility:

- **The Country Women's Association Western Australia Darkan Branch delivered a full day 'Wellbeing for Women' event for women of all ages in their rural community.** They offered childcare, a women-only space, and designed inclusive workshops to foster safety and connection. One participant shared, "It made a safe space to exercise and be vulnerable." The event led to new social ties and an ongoing exercise group.[7]

> "The whole event brought women together… building strong connections with other women they already knew and those they wouldn't usually talk to"
>
> **- Country Women's Association of WA, Darkan Branch**

- **Charles Darwin University (CDU) in NT engaged CALD participants from India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal to explore migrant perspectives on drought resilience.** The team adapted their approach when initial outreach in Katherine was less effective, drawing on CALD leaders in Darwin to build trust and facilitate introductions. This flexible strategy led to a successful two-day workshop and the development of practical resources for the community.

[7] SNG Final Report data provided by FRRR 6 Aug

These strategies broadened community participation in drought resilience.

### 6.3.2 SNG projects improved access to infrastructure, resources and services to build skills and strengthen community preparedness and resilience

SNG projects improved access to practical supports by funding locally relevant infrastructure, events and training. Three key mechanisms supported the SNG to achieve this outcome:

- Infrastructure upgrades created lasting assets that support resilience
- Events, training and forums increased awareness and confidence to access support
- SNGs built practical skills that communities have used to strengthen drought resilience.

Together, these mechanisms have enabled inclusive participation and helped communities prepare for future drought in ways that reflect their local context and needs. Each mechanism is explored further below.

#### Infrastructure upgrades and mobile resources created lasting assets that support resilience.

**Infrastructure upgrades improved service access and community functionality.** Communities invested in assets that matched local needs. These upgrades enabled essential services, supported community gatherings, and maintained core community functions in drought-prone regions. Fifteen of 62 final grant reports reported that improved access to infrastructure was a top two or third outcome achieved by their project. Figure 40 below provides one example of how social infrastructure improved community resilience.

**Figure 40 | Infrastructure projects delivered a range of assets for regional communities.**

**Projects developed social infrastructure, data assets and communication assets to support community resilience.**

OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED

District Council of Orroroo Carrieton addressed a critical childcare gap through social infrastructure investment.

**Orroroo Carrieton, a remote and drought-affected community, faced severe limitations in childcare access.** This challenge 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 SNG funding to upgrade the local church hall.** This 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.

*Source: Final report data provided by FRRR and regional deep dive interviews 2025.*

**Mobile and shared resources extended reach into isolated areas and enabled inclusive participation.** Communities observed that mobile assets became community-wide tools for connection, education, and resilience-building. In the final grant reports, seven SNG organisations specifically reported that their projects enabled mobile or shared resources that extended reach

into isolated areas. For example, Stirlings to Coast Farmers Incorporation in WA invested in a mobile BBQ trailer that enabled the organisation to deliver events in diverse locations. A detailed case study is provided in Figure 41 below.

**Figure 41 | Stirlings to Coast Farmers Inc embed inclusive participation with a mobile resource**

**Stirlings to Coast Farmers Inc used a mobile BBQ trailer to embed inclusive drought resilience.**

**OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED**

**Stirlings to Coast Farmers Inc lacked infrastructure to support gatherings in paddocks, as well as smaller more remote communities.** This limited opportunities for connection and engagement at their events.

**They used their 'Fit for Farming' project to invest in a BBQ trailer.** This mobile asset enabled events to be delivered in paddocks and smaller communities without permanent facilities.

**The trailer became a practical tool for connection, allowing participants to gather in familiar, informal settings.** It has supported six community events, including Spring Field Days, Trials Review Days and a Mental Health Sundowner. Gatherings facilitated conversations about stress, health and resilience that may not have occurred in more formal environments. The relaxed format encouraged participation from groups who might otherwise be excluded due to distance, infrastructure limitations or social barriers.

**The trailer is now a long-lasting shared resource.** Beyond the original project scope, the trailer is now shared across the region, supporting fundraising, engagement and social connection. It has become a lasting resource that continues to strengthen local networks and preparedness.

*Photo of Stirlings to Coast Farmers Inc 'Fit For Farmers' Project, provided by FRRR.*

> "The BBQ trailer has become a highly valued piece of mobile infrastructure… bringing people together in practical, welcoming spaces. It continues to support social connection, fundraising and engagement across the region."

*Source: SNG Final Grant Report data provided by FRRR.*

**SNGs have created enduring community assets that continue to support engagement and resilience.** SNG organisations reported on the value of lasting infrastructure for their communities. Specifically:

- **Infrastructure projects expect to reach a significant number of community members.** In total, SNGs that delivered infrastructure projects reached 1,757 people through the life of their project. However, the total anticipated reach of infrastructure projects ongoing is more than 30,000 people. Of all project types, infrastructure projects delivered the most reach relative to the number of projects delivered (see Figure 42 below). On average, each of the 15 infrastructure-focused SNG projects saw its reach grow from 103 people during delivery to 1,668 in ongoing use. This reflects an increase of over 16 times. One organisation highlighted

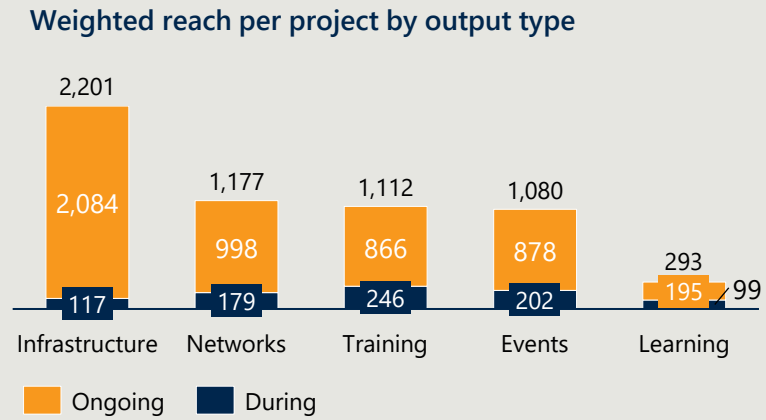
the enduring benefits of SNG-funded infrastructure saying, "The amount of people who will benefit is limitless. Our facilities can now cater for large and small groups. We can now host more diverse workshops and events."

- **Infrastructure upgrades unlocked new opportunities for engagement and activity.** At least three SNG organisations explicitly reported that their upgrades will create lasting community assets that can continue to support engagement and resilience. For example, Milparinka Sporting Club's ablution block upgrade in NSW enables larger events, improves hygiene and accessibility, and strengthens the town's role as a regional connector. This demonstrates how targeted infrastructure investment can deliver enduring value in remote settings.

"Within 12 to 18 months the Sporting Club hopes to have held more community events, not necessarily linked to sports, but just bringing community together."

**- Milparinka Sporting Club**

**Figure 42 | Overview of reach by project type**




**Infrastructure had a short-term reach of 1,757 and expected ongoing reach of 31,255 across just 15 projects. This makes it the output that is likely to achieve the greatest reach when combining both short-term and long-term impact.**

*Source: SNG Final report data provided by FRRR.*

### Events, training and forums increased awareness and confidence to access support.

**SNG-funded events provided platforms for service providers to connect with communities.** Among the 48 projects that delivered events, the average number of different organisations involved per event was 16. These organisations included service providers from health, emergency, mental health and education services. Forums and workshops became trusted spaces for participants to learn about available support, especially in areas where isolation or lack of information had previously limited access. Figure 43 demonstrates how Contact Inc's SNG project in NSW increased connection between rural communities and service providers.

**Figure 43 | Contact Inc increased connection between communities and service providers.**

*Source: SNG Final Grant Reports provided by FRRR.*

**Training, learning and development initiatives built local capacity to engage with services and respond to emergencies.** Nineteen of 26 projects that delivered a training and/or learning and development initiative reported that their projects helped build local capacity to engage with services and respond to emergencies. Through these project types, communities gained practical skills in first aid, mental health support, and emergency response. For example, GroWQ's Rural First Aid Training in QLD equipped 269 participants with life-saving skills, one of whom successfully applied them just days later (see Figure 44 below).

**Figure 44 | GrowQ Association delivered first aid training to remote communities**

**GrowQ Association's Rural First Aid training equipped individuals with life-saving skills in regions where medical services are delayed.**

**In remote Western Queensland, limited access to emergency services left communities vulnerable during drought and other climate events.** This gap was particularly acute in small, isolated towns like Yaraka, where opportunities for community-wide training and connection are rare but deeply needed.

**GrowQ used SNG funding to deliver nine Rural First Aid training sessions to a selection of these remote communities.** GroWQ's Rural First Aid Training equipped 269 participants with life-saving skills and confidence to handle health emergencies independently. They were delivered locally and tailored to rural realities to enable greater participation, engagement and inclusion.

**Participants built their confidence to respond to emergencies in the absence of distant services.** One participant successfully applied the newly learned life-saving skills just days later. The training also sparked ongoing community-led emergency planning, strengthening local capacity to respond to future drought-related challenges.

> "Participants who completed the training are now more capable of providing critical support to their families and communities, particularly in high-pressure situations that often arise during drought conditions."

*Source: Final grant report data provided by FRRR 6 Aug.*

**Participants reported increased confidence in accessing help and supporting others.** Across projects, communities described a shift from passive awareness to active engagement. Ten projects specifically reported that participants now know where to turn for help and are more confident in accessing support. One project example is Holbrook Landcare Network, NSW, who increased awareness of local services by involving health professionals in resilience workshops. They noted, "Attendees became more aware of local support services, how to recognise health emergencies, and how to access help." Feedback showed participants felt more confident about where to go or who to talk to if support was needed.

### SNGs built practical skills that communities now apply to strengthen resilience.

**Training initiatives developed leadership, governance and strategic planning.** Of the 26 projects delivering training or development activities, 20 reported strengthened skills in these areas. These capabilities are often underdeveloped in remote and resource constrained communities. Sixteen of 62 organisations identified 'increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies to prepare for and adapt to drought' as a top two outcome.

A project example is Foundation Broken Hill in NSW, who delivered governance and leadership training for community leaders, committee members and volunteers. The training supported a shift from short-term delivery to strategic thinking, improving decision-making, communication, meeting structure and community engagement.

> "Community leaders are now more confident in their roles, demonstrating stronger decision-making skills, clearer communication, and a more strategic approach to planning and engagement."
>
> **- Foundation Broken Hill Limited**

**Projects deepened understanding of drought preparedness and climate resilience strategies.** Eleven of 62 SNG grant reports demonstrated that 'increased implementation and improved effectiveness of place-based practices by communities to build and enhance resilience to drought' was a top two outcome of their project. Participants were introduced to new concepts such as drought indicators, climate projections and resilience frameworks. Data, expert input and local knowledge were used to build awareness of how drought affects communities and how to mitigate its impact.

For example, in WA, Southern Dirt's 'Cultivating Sustainable Futures' project helped 254 farmers and students adopt new land management practices. Through workshops and planting days, participants gained practical knowledge, peer support and expert advice, leading to changes in grazing, species selection and water infrastructure.

> "Participants developed a stronger understanding of the causes and impacts of drought, as well as practical strategies to reduce vulnerability"
>
> **- Southern Dirt Inc**

## 6.3.3 The SNG catalysed systemic change by broadening participation, sparking optimism, and embedding adaptive practices

Projects created space for new leaders to emerge and challenged assumptions about who contributes to resilience. Broader participation shifted local mindsets, while early successes sparked momentum and appetite for change. Communities trialled new approaches and built feedback loops to support continuous improvement. These outcomes are explored in more detail below.

### Inclusive participation expanded leadership and challenged assumptions on who should lead on drought preparedness

**Leadership emerged across diverse cohorts.** The SNG expanded leadership capability among cohorts traditionally underrepresented in resilience planning, including First Nations, CALD communities, women, and young people. An example from each cohort includes:

- **The Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation strengthened leadership through cultural water stewardship.** Their project revived ceremonial practices and empowered community members to advocate for Country in NT. One participant reflected: "We are learning to advocate, protect, speak up and do what we can in cultural practice to make sure water is protected."
- **K2W Link empowered young people to play a more active role in drought resilience activities.** K2W Link engaged high school students in NSW in a three-day event focused on thriving through drought. Students gained confidence in understanding local challenges and are now actively involved in water conservation and sustainable land management.
- **CDU's project empowered CALD community leaders in Katherine NT to lead on drought resilience for their communities.** Through workshops and multilingual resources, participants translated learnings into locally relevant strategies for their communities.
- **Mallee Sustainable Farming's *Beyond the Crossroads* program supported rural women in isolated areas of Far-Western NSW to develop leadership skills in preparation for drought.** Through a series of online and face-to-face workshops, women built confidence and empowerment to take on leadership roles in their communities and encourage others to do the same.

**SNGs challenged assumptions about who leads drought preparedness and resilience efforts.** SNG-funded initiatives created space for diverse groups to step into leadership roles, challenging traditional notions of who holds knowledge and authority in drought preparedness. Five organisations explicitly reported this shift, including Gnowangerup Aboriginal Corporation. Their Cool Burning project facilitated collaboration between Noongar community members and local fire services, enhancing trust and recognition of Indigenous land management practices.

### SNGs enabled optimism and momentum for change.

**SNGs rejuvenated traditions and renewed community spaces.** These efforts helped to restore a sense of belonging and sustain cultural practices in places that had experienced disruption and loss. This was achieved through locally designed activities or infrastructure upgrades. An example includes Porongurup Community Association in WA, who used SNG funding to deliver a hall kitchen renovation. This case study is depicted in more detail in Figure 45 below.

**Figure 45 | Porongurup Hall's upgraded infrastructure sustains community traditions**

**Porongurup Community Association's kitchen renovation re-enables community participation and sustains local traditions.**

**OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED**

**The Porongurup community faced declining use of its district hall due to an outdated and inadequate kitchen.** The lack of a clean, safe, and functional kitchen space limited the hall's ability to foster local connection and support, particularly important amid ongoing drought impacts.

**The Porongurup Community Association used SNG funding to renovate the hall kitchen.** The upgrade focused on creating a safe and versatile facility to meet the needs of diverse user groups.

**The kitchen renovation has reactivated the hall as a focal point for community life.** The improved facility is expected to increase participation in local events, strengthen social ties, and provide a supportive environment for residents facing the challenges of drought. It enables the Porongurup community to gather, connect, and continue traditions again that build trust and resilience.

> "The kitchen can be the centre of our community group connections. A shared space which is available to all the community."

*Source: SNG Final Report data and deep dive interviews.*

**Some projects catalysed new initiatives and further funding.** Organisations described the SNG as "the start of something" or a "catalyst" for further action. This was observed in two ways:

- **SNG projects led to new funding applications or inspired new investment**. For example, Agriculture Kangaroo Island's demonstration day prompted farmers to invest in weather stations and use new data platforms to inform decisions
- **SNG projects led to new or innovative follow-on activities, sometimes providing continuity from earlier FRRR funding streams**. In TAS, Big Hart Inc's 'Just Feasts' program expanded on the successful community dinner concept piloted in the existing Watershed Project funded through the Networks to Build Drought Resilience program. Through the SNG, Big Hart established ongoing connections between farmers, young people and food producers, which have since evolved into plans for a community abattoir (see Figure 46 below).

**Figure 46 | Big Hart's SNG seeded new ideas and initiatives**

### Big HART's Just Feasts Project seeded new ideas and initiatives to strengthen community and food system resilience.

**Food and place-based learning created a meaningful entry point for building drought resilience.** In communities facing social isolation and limited engagement opportunities, Just Feasts responded by bringing people together through locally relevant events.

**Six themed gatherings immersed producers, youth and locals in regenerative agriculture and food sovereignty.** Supported by a $20,000 grant, the events included lunches for new mothers and hands-on hospitality training for young people.

**The project strengthened social connection and sparked future-focused initiatives.** Participants built confidence, explored career pathways, and co-designed new ideas, including a proposed community abattoir and a ten-year artisan site to train and retain young people in the region.

> "The Watershed Space became a place where people came together to learn, share, and build resilience through food and connection. Adapting events to suit the community helped include diverse voices and sparked important conversations."

*Source: Deep dive interviews and final grant reports provided by FRRR.*

**New and revitalised networks continue to support collaboration and resilience.** Many projects established or strengthened local groups and now provide platforms for ongoing coordination, collaboration and learning. Eleven projects reported that new networks catalysed transformative practices for drought resilience. One example is the Arid Lands Environment Centre, NT, who built a cross-sector network through the Alice Springs' community gardens. The network enabled inclusive governance, expanded volunteer roles, and delivered practical workshops on soil health and irrigation. This empowered diverse community members to adopt water-wise gardening and food security practices, embedding long-term resilience into local systems.

## Communities embedded adaptive practices and built systems for continuous improvement.

**Communities trialled new practices and built feedback loops to support ongoing adaptation.** Agricultural-based organisations in particular provided opportunities to test drought-resilient farming techniques, water management tools, and community engagement models. An example is Watershed Landcare Group Inc., NSW. Their regenerative farming practice trial, the 'Conversations for Change' forums, enabled community-wide sharing and reflection. They noticed a shift in attitudes and increased action on drought-resilience across multiple towns in their region.

**Resilience is now seen as a continuous journey understood as a dynamic process of connecting, learning, adapting, and thriving.** Across projects, communities described resilience not as a fixed goal, but as a dynamic process of connecting, learning, adapting and thriving. Workshops, forums and networks were seen as "steps in a longer process" rather than endpoints. To continue building resilience, communities and SNG-funded organisations reflected on the need for ongoing

programs, continued learning and regular opportunities to connect. Examples of specific organisation reflections include:

- **The Alpine Valleys Community Leadership's 'Community Capacity Building Drought-Ready' workshop in VIC helped participants to identify what 'being prepared' could look like in different contexts.** They reported that the forum served as a meaningful step in a longer process, creating connections and surfacing priorities that the community can now act on through other channels.
- **Common Ground Projects' 'Community Drought Preparedness' network in VIC has achieved "groundwork".** However, the organisation noted that participants wanted continued opportunities to deepen knowledge and connections.
- **Katanning Landcare in WA used SNG-funding to deliver a week-long event.** They emphasised the importance of more regular opportunities to build trust and relationships.

These examples show that resilience-building is an ongoing process, and that meaningful progress depends on continued opportunities for connection, reflection and adaptation.

> "Our community needs regular opportunities to come together, work together, build trust and relationships so that our collective resilience and understanding can grow."
>
> **- Katanning Landcare**

## 6.4 The SNG merits continued investment to extend the reach and impact of the Initiative.

The SNGs complemented CIP grants by enabling locally led initiatives that reached communities and cohorts otherwise excluded. They helped remote areas unlock early benefits and build momentum in drought preparedness. SNGs were particularly effective in fostering social connection, inclusion and trust. Their simple application process and flexible design supported diverse participation, organisational capacity-building and peer learning.

Communities delivered high-impact projects by leveraging existing networks and skills. Many organisations noted challenges in sustaining momentum without continued support. To extend the benefits seeded by SNGs, future programs should invest in ongoing support and embed small grants within broader resilience-building efforts to maximise cumulative impact.

### 6.4.1 Six design features to strengthen future Small Network Grants

Drawing on evaluation findings and community feedback, six design features are recommended to reinforce and evolve the SNG model.

#### 1. Use small grants to complement and extend larger programs.

Small grants can unlock early wins, sustain momentum, and support communities not ready for larger-scale initiatives. Future iterations should integrate small grants into broader program ecosystems to maximise cumulative impact.

**Relevant findings:**

6.1 The SNG funded 74 small-scale projects to build drought resilience.

6.3.1 The SNG strengthened belonging through locally designed events and activities that built trust, connection and inclusion.

**Actions**

- Sequence small grants to follow leadership or mentoring activities, enabling activation of ideas.
- Target regions or cohorts not reached by larger grants to ensure broader inclusion.

### 2. Maintain simple application processes to enable broad participation.

The streamlined SNG application process lowered barriers for smaller and less-resourced organisations. This enabled diverse participation and supported locally led innovation. Future programs should maintain accessibility while offering tailored support to maximise impact.

**Relevant findings:**

6.3.1 The SNG strengthened belonging through locally designed events and activities that built trust, connection and inclusion.

**Actions**

- Maintain simplified application and reporting processes
- Provide clear guidance and flexible formats to accommodate varied organisational capacity
- Offer support for first-time applicants and groups traditionally underrepresented in resilience planning
- Ensure reporting is right sized to capture impact without overburdening grantees.

### 3. Engage diverse organisations and cohorts to drive inclusive, system-level change.

SNGs successfully engaged First Nations communities, young people, women and CALD groups. Inclusive participation expanded leadership and shifted local mindsets about who contributes to resilience. Future programs can build on this momentum to embed inclusive leadership and resilience thinking into program design.

**Relevant findings:**

6.3.1 The SNG strengthened belonging through locally designed events and activities that built trust, connection and inclusion.

6.3.3 The SNG catalysed systemic change by broadening participation, sparking optimism, and embedding adaptive practices.

**Actions**

- Prioritise outreach to groups traditionally underrepresented in resilience planning

- Community led initiatives that are localised with strong community ties encourage co-design and culturally safe practices.

### 4. Design flexible grants that empower communities to invest in locally relevant resilience initiatives.

SNGs enabled communities to invest in what mattered most, whether that be social connection, infrastructure, leadership, training or networks. Flexible design allowed communities to tailor activities to their context, capacity and priorities. Future programs should continue to empower communities to invest in locally relevant resilience initiatives.

**Relevant findings:**

6.3.1 The SNG strengthened belonging through locally designed events and activities that built trust, connection and inclusion.

6.3.2 SNG projects improved access to infrastructure, resources and services to build skills and strengthen community preparedness and resilience.

**Actions**

- Avoid prescriptive funding categories; allow communities to define their own resilience priorities
- Support a mix of project types (e.g. events, infrastructure, training, networks)
- Encourage locally tailored formats, venues and engagement approaches
- Elevate local stories, culture and identity to deepen belonging.

### 5. Connect grantees to foster collaboration and shared learning.

Many SNG organisations reported connection and collaboration as the key achievement of their project. However, organisations expressed an ongoing desire to connect with other grantees and establish more formalised and connected networks. Facilitating structured connections can spark collaboration, reduce duplication and strengthen regional resilience ecosystems at greater scale.

**Relevant findings:**

6.3 The SNG catalysed local networks and practical preparedness.

6.3.3 The SNG catalysed systemic change by broadening participation, sparking optimism, and embedding adaptive practices.

**Actions**

- Create opportunities for grantees to share insights, resources and challenges.
- Support regional forums, online communities or peer learning networks for SNG recipients.
- Encourage joint initiatives across organisations and sectors.

- Provide coordination support or digital infrastructure to sustain connections.

### 6. Strengthen organisational resilience to sustain local leadership and delivery

While SNGs built leadership and delivery skills, many organisations still face volunteer fatigue and limited resources. Strengthening organisational resilience is essential to sustain local action.

**Relevant findings:**

6.3.2 SNG projects improved access to infrastructure, resources and services to build skills and strengthen community preparedness and resilience.

6.3.3 The SNG catalysed systemic change by broadening participation, sparking optimism, and embedding adaptive practices.

**Actions**

- Fund training and mentoring in governance, succession planning and volunteer management
- Support leadership development and peer mentoring for emerging leaders
- Support initiatives that enable organisational capacity building.

### 7. Invest in sustainability to extend the impact of successful projects

Many SNG-funded projects sparked new initiatives, networks and momentum. Some projects built upon the foundations laid in the Networks to Build Drought Resilience and the Drought Resilience Leaders programs. Without continued support, these gains risk being lost. Future programs should invest in sustaining and scaling what works.

**Relevant findings:**

6.3.3 The SNG catalysed systemic change by broadening participation, sparking optimism, and embedding adaptive practices.

**Actions**

- Seed and strengthen pilot projects to further develop momentum and deepen impact.
- Fund network continuity and alumni models to maintain momentum.
- Integrate small grants with regional planning and resilience strategies
- Encourage light-touch monitoring and learning to track long-term outcomes. Noting that community capacity for monitoring and learning activities was constrained.

# 7 Evaluating the Expertise Pool

The Expertise Pool was a national service that connected rural and regional organisations with expert advice to strengthen their capacity and capability to support drought preparedness. Delivered by the Social Impact Hub, the Expertise Pool took the form of an online platform that offered free concierge support and access to a vetted pool of specialists. The Expertise Pool was available to all HRCPD-supported organisations.

This Section describes the evaluation findings relating to the Expertise Pool. Specifically:

- The Expertise Pool was designed and refined to meet capacity constraints of regional organisations.
- The Expertise Pool delivered its intended short-term outcomes to a limited extent.
- The Expertise Pool delivered value to a few, but overall had limited reach and impact.
- Future programs may consider alternative options to more effectively deliver expert support.

## 7.1 The Expertise Pool was designed and refined to support regional organisations overcome capacity constraints

The Expertise Pool (the Pool) was a national brokerage service designed to provide access to expert advice and support to strengthen the capacity of rural and regional not-for-profit organisations. Delivered by the Social Impact Hub (SIH) via an online platform, the Pool connected Initiative-supported organisations to a curated pool of 156 vetted experts. It also offered a free concierge service to help identify appropriate support.[8]

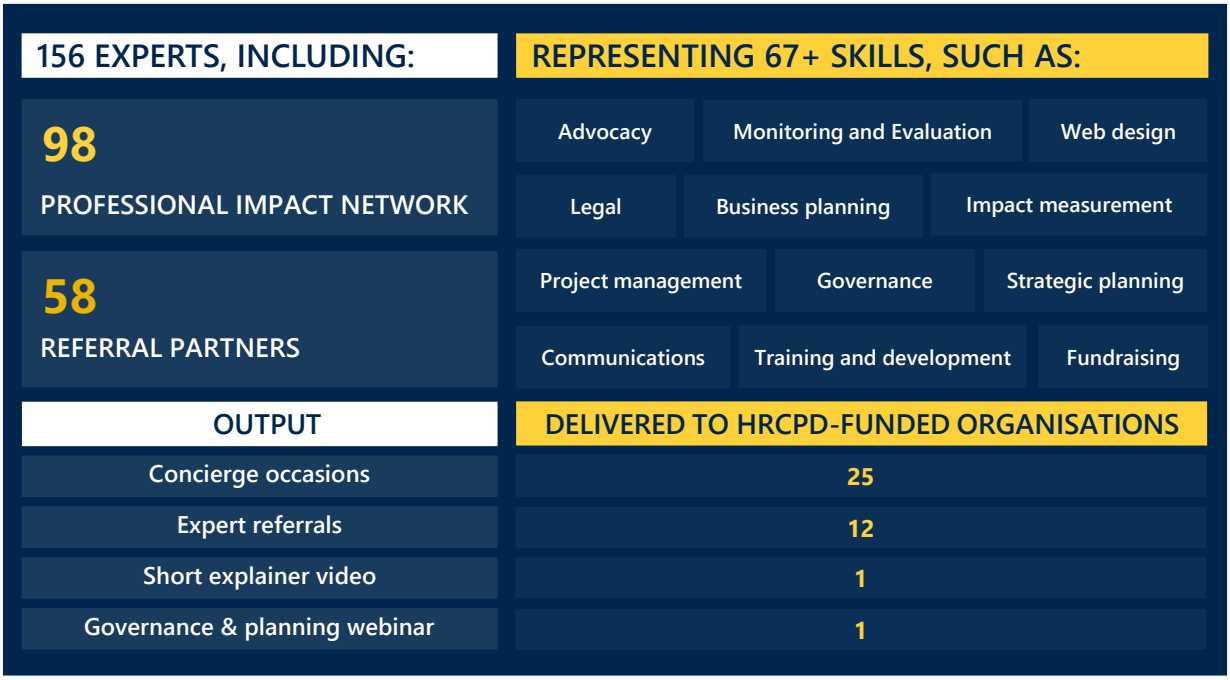
The delivery model was refined over the life of the program in response to feedback and lower-than-expected uptake. This Section outlines the Expertise Pool's outputs, the rationale behind its design, and how delivery was adapted to better meet grantee needs in rural and remote communities.

### The Expertise Pool provided access to specialist professional services and advice

The Expertise Pool connected HRCPD organisations to a national network of 156 experts, spanning over 67 areas of professional expertise. In addition to direct expert referrals, a free concierge service supported organisations to identify their needs and access tailored advice. Key outputs and the breadth of expertise are summarised in Figure 47 below.

[8] FRRR Expertise Pool Final Report, provided by FRRR, 15 July 2025

Figure 47 | Overview of outputs delivered by the Expertise Pool




*Source: Expertise Pool data provided by FRRR.*

### Delivery was adapted to improve relevance and better match grantee needs

Mid-term evaluation findings highlighted limited utilisation by HRCPD organisations and identified barriers to engagement, including low awareness, unclear value proposition, and a preference for regionally based experts. In response, FRRR and SIH revised the delivery model to improve relevance and accessibility for regional organisations. Key adjustments included:

- Prioritising expert recruitment from regional communities, with 25 new regional experts onboarded.
- Reducing the expected number of concierge occasions to reflect actual demand.
- Introducing two new capacity-building components: a short explainer video and a one-hour governance webinar.

These changes aimed to clarify the service offering and better align with the needs and readiness of rural and remote organisations.

The revised scope was largely achieved. The platform exceeded expert recruitment expectations and delivered new content, including a webinar that attracted 293 registrations. While concierge usage remained below revised expectations, this reflected limited demand rather than unmet targets.

## 7.2 The Expertise Pool delivered its intended short-term outcomes to a limited extent

The Expertise Pool made limited progress towards its intended short-term outcomes. It continued to provide access to a large pool of experts and delivered targeted support to 25 Initiative-funded

organisations. Broader engagement remained constrained. Since the Mid-Term Evaluation in June 2024, uptake did not significantly increase. These findings suggest minimal change in the Expertise Pool's reach and impact over the final stages of the initiative. There is limited evidence to suggest that the short-term outcomes will continue to strengthen beyond the program's conclusion. A final assessment of progress against the intended short-term outcomes is shown in Table 10.

**Table 10 | Summary of assessment against the intended short-term outcomes of the Expertise Pool**

| SHORT-TERM OUTCOME | ASSESSMENT | RATIONALE |
|---|---|---|
| **PO2: Improved access to and use of services, resources, infrastructure and facilities by communities that support drought preparedness.** |  **Limited** | The Expertise Pool provided access to vetted experts and a free concierge service. Some organisations did not progress beyond initial enquiries. As a result, access was available but not widely activated (see Sections 7.3.1 and 7.3.2) |
| **PO4: Increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies by communities, volunteers and not-for-profit organisations to prepare for and adapt to drought.** |  **Limited** | Sustained efforts by FRRR to provide information of the Expertise Pool and promote available supports across the life of the program did not improve organisational uptake of the service. As a result, the program made limited progress in building knowledge and understanding of strategic support options (see Sections 7.3.1 and 7.3.2). |

The main purpose of the Expertise Pool was to enable stronger outcomes for CIP and SNG organisations through access to expert services and advice. The Expertise Pool made strong contributions to 25 HRCPD-funded organisations but little contribution to the broader success of the CIP and SNG. The Expertise Pool therefore made a limited contribution to the achievement of the intermediate outcomes.

## 7.3 The Expertise Pool delivered value to a few, but overall had limited reach and impact

The Expertise Pool delivered practical value to the 25 organisations that engaged with the service. Its impact was constrained by variable uptake due to timing misalignment and a delivery model that did not align with the preferences of many grassroots organisations. Stakeholders and the experience of other elements highlighted different strategies to deliver the intended capacity building outcomes. These findings are explored in detail below[9].

[9] Data on the outcomes of the Pool is limited to a modest selection of HRCPD-funded organisations. Nous spoke with eight organisations about the Pool in Deep Dive interviews. Ten participants provided feedback through an Expertise Pool interview and 13 HRCPD organisations responded to Expression of Interest Surveys. Nous also accessed four case studies in the Expertise Pool Final Report provided by FRRR.

### 7.3.1 The Concierge Service delivered the most meaningful outcomes; other supports extended reach but had limited uptake

Outcomes were predominantly achieved through the concierge service. A small number of organisations also engaged with experts. A webinar enhanced the reach of the Expertise Pool. These two mechanisms are explored below.

#### The Concierge Service helped organisations clarify direction and take action.

**The Concierge Service provided a 'front door' service.** It helped 25 Initiative-funded organisations identify what services they required and then brokered a connection to an appropriate expert. Most engagements involved tailored advice, curated referrals and practical guidance. Support themes spanned governance, legal compliance, strategic planning, fundraising, monitoring and evaluation, and communications. The concierge service also connected organisations with pro bono support. Detailed case studies on two occasions are provided in Figure 48 below.

**Figure 48 | The Concierge Service connected organisations to a range of support and resources**

**Community organisations used the Concierge Service to access a range of expert help and resources.**

OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED

**Wheatbelt & Beyond Youth Mentoring were connected to pro bono legal support.** Wheatbelt & Beyond Youth Mentoring (WBYM) accessed legal support through the Expertise Pool, facilitated by the Concierge service. MinterEllison provided pro bono legal services that enabled WBYM to successfully apply for Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status. This unlocked critical philanthropic funding opportunities and strengthened the organisation's long-term sustainability.

> "The FRRR Expertise Pool has been of great value as WBYM has connected with professionals with regional experience in areas that have been required as an NFP association."

**Yaninee Institute built digital skills to uplift community outreach.** Yaninee Institute sought help to improve its social media communications in preparation for its 100th anniversary. The Concierge connected the Institute with an expert from the Pool who ran a customised session on Canva and AI tools. The support helped streamline content scheduling, lifted the visibility of their campaign, and provided the Institute with tools they continue to use.

> "It's great that FRRR offers this kind of practical support to help small community groups like ours."

*Source: Expertise pool recipient case study, FRRR Expertise Pool Final Report, provided by FRRR, 15 July 2025.*

**Organisations valued the concierge for its practical support, strategic guidance and ability to meet needs quickly without further expert engagement.** The service was praised for its responsiveness, practical advice and ability to match organisations with the right expert at the right time. One organisation reported "We really appreciated how easy it was to access the right person, at the right time." FRRR reported that organisations valued having a "real person" to talk to, who could both listen and provide relevant and actionable support within days.[10]

[10] Expertise pool recipient case study, FRRR Expertise Pool Final Report, provided by FRRR, 15 July 2025.

**The Concierge Service was particularly beneficial for low-capacity or early-stage organisations.** Many organisations supported by the Concierge Service had little experience with advisory support and were led by individuals juggling multiple responsibilities. SIH reported that these organisations often faced climate-related challenges and operated with limited time and resources. The complimentary, flexible service provided a practical entry point by helping them identify needs and connect with relevant expertise. One interviewed organisation reported, "It was extremely valuable – it gave me confidence that my first drought project and FRRR grant application aligned with the criteria." They also reported value in accessing future support. The service met the immediate, practical needs for less experienced and low-capacity organisations.

> "Some organisations were highly flood impacted and capacity to deliver things varied per region and organisation."
>
> - North Eastern Wheatbelt Travel Association

### Other expert supports and group resources improved governance and knowledge for a small number of organisations.

**HRCPD organisations commonly sought community resilience and/or compliance support from the Expertise Pool.** The evaluation analysed 13 expressions of interest forms submitted by HRCPD organisations over the life of the program, a small yet illustrative sample. There were five main types of support requested, with community resilience, climate preparedness, and financial or regulatory compliance most prominent. These organisations primarily aimed to benefit rural and remote communities, though some targeted more diverse groups, environmental outcomes, or health-impacted individuals. Given the limited data pool, findings should be interpreted as indicative only. Figure 49 provides more detail on the type of support and areas of impact.

**Figure 49 | Examples of the support and impact areas HRCPD organisations were aiming for through the Expertise Pool**

HRCPD organisations sought five support types across seven key impact areas.

| KEY SUPPORT SOUGHT | COUNT |
|---|---|
| Community resilience and climate preparedness | 5 |
| Financial and regulatory compliance | 5 |
| Strategic and organisational development | 4 |
| Capacity building and training | 3 |
| Legal and governance | 3 |

| PRIMARY IMPACT AREA | COUNT |
|---|---|
| Rural and remote communities | 9 |
| General community | 7 |
| Youth | 3 |
| Women | 1 |
| First nations communities | 1 |
| The environment | 1 |
| People with chronic/mental illness | 1 |

*Source: HRCPD Organisation Expression of Interest form data provided by FRRR 2025.*

**Expert referrals delivered targeted, high-impact support to those who engaged the service.** HRCPD organisations that were referred to experts throughout the life of the program reported enhanced organisational capability, increased confidence and empowerment, and improved strategic enablement and grant readiness. Specific examples of expert support included helping organisations to achieve deductable gift recipient status, workshop delivery to strengthen governance and building confidence to navigate Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission registration. Figure 50 below demonstrates two examples of support that community organisations received through expert referrals.

**Figure 50 | Community organisations received support through the Expertise Pool**

**Community organisations received a range of support through the Expertise Pool.**

OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED

**North Eastern Wheatbelt Travel Association received tailored guidance to empower independent action.** North Eastern Wheatbelt Travel Association (NEWTRAVEL) approached the Expertise Pool for support with ACNC registration and governance queries. They were matched with an expert who offered clear, practical advice and reassurance. With this tailored guidance, NEWTRAVEL felt equipped to move forward independently and gained confidence in navigating regulatory requirements.

**MacKillop Farm Management Group built confidence and clarity**. MacKillop Farm Management Group (MGMG) participated in a four-part governance workshop series delivered by an FRRR Expertise Pool expert. The sessions covered constitutions, strategic planning, meeting procedures and financial reporting. MFMG reported that the workshops helped them to strengthen committee governance and boost their confidence in decision making.

*Source: FRRR Expertise Pool Final Report.*

**A webinar extended the reach of the Expertise Pool in the latter half of the Initiative.** In May 2025, SIH delivered a governance and planning webinar to provide accessible, light-touch support through practical tools and expert-led guidance. The webinar reached a broad audience of regional organisations; 293 organisations registered to attend the webinar of which 100 participated.[11]

The format proved an efficient way to spread governance knowledge and expert insights at scale. Several participants noted the value of the format with responses including, "[the Governance and Planning webinar was] one of the most useful webinars I've attended this year" and "one hour is perfect to learn without overloading." The success of the webinar demonstrated there is value in delivering one-to-many delivery modes, particularly when organisational readiness for bespoke support is low.

### 7.3.2 Uptake and impact remained limited, proving more effective in other Initiative elements

Persistent timing, funding and capacity constraints continued to reduce the relevance and utility of the Pool. Regional organisations also shared preferences for local, specialist expertise and trusted relationships, which may have limited engagement with the national Expertise Pool. Evaluation

[11] FRRR Expertise Pool Final Report provided by FRRR, 15 July 2025.

findings show that organisations used locally embedded strategies and other Initiative elements to meet some of their capacity needs. These findings are explored in more detail below.

### Limitations reduced relevance and utility for regional organisations.

**Operational barriers continued to restrict engagement and use of the Expertise Pool.** FRRR made a concerted effort to shift perceptions and raise awareness of the Pool, especially for later CIP tranches and SNG rounds. This improvement came after key engagement windows had passed for at least one grantee. Three participants interviewed after FRRR had made several changes still described the offering as poorly timed, or unclear. One participant noted, "the Expertise pool was communicated too late, so we had limited awareness of how to use it." Another observed that, "If people knew about it in the co-design stage and could put it into their budget, they probably would have." These comments reflect the lasting influence of rollout delays on the perceived relevance and integration of the service, particularly for CIP and SNG organisations who had already completed project planning.

> "The Expertise Pool arrived after we had already submitted our roadmap… too late."
>
> **- Expertise Pool participant**

**Funding constraints persisted, despite improved communication and a refined delivery model.** Several organisations had limited or no budget to engage paid services, even after submitting EOIs or participating in concierge occasions. Assumptions that all services required payment further reduced uptake. Budget cuts during co-design led some to deprioritise external expertise and not re-engage later. The free Concierge Service helped bridge gaps and was sufficient to meet organisational needs, reducing demand for further support. Four organisations expressed appreciation for the support provided through the free Concierge Service.[12] SIH reported, "Feedback highlights the concierge service's effectiveness in supporting community organisations who don't have budget for professional advisory." However, perceptions about cost continued to impact sustained engagement with the Expertise Pool.

> "We were looking for pro bono advice because we didn't have the budget."
>
> **- Expertise Pool participant**

**Organisations preferred local, specialist expertise and trusted relationships over national offerings.** Interviews with Initiative funded organisations highlighted their preference for accessing support from local experts who understood their community, context and networks. All the organisations that shared this sentiment had not engaged with the Expertise Pool. This highlights that the Expertise Pool may not have fully met this preference. However, positive engagement with the concierge service indicates that access to timely and useful advice may have overcome this sentiment. By November 2024, the Expertise Pool included 121 experts, with an additional 25 regional experts onboarded through a targeted EOI.[13] These new inclusions built on the 40 regional experts added in mid-2023 and

> "We already know where to find the people. That's why we're the lead organisations."
>
> **- Expertise Pool participant**

[12] FRRR Expertise Pool Final Report, provided by FRRR, 15 July 2025.
[13] FRRR Quarterly Reports provided by FRRR from July 2024 to July 2025

directly responded to concerns that the platform was too metro centric. Addressing operational barriers, outlined below, may have had a large impact on potential uptake of the Pool.

**Smaller organisations continued to lack capacity to absorb expert support.** As noted in the Mid-term evaluation report, volunteer fatigue, staff turnover and limited access to skilled support were widespread, especially in rural and remote areas. These challenges were compounded by climatic disruptions and the demands of servicing dispersed communities. The second round of Deep Dive interviews confirmed that limited capacity persisted, restricting organisations' ability to engage with the Expertise Pool. Smaller organisations excelled in grassroots engagement, but often lacked the scale, systems and funding to benefit from national offerings. These constraints limited their ability to absorb and act on expert advice, reducing the reach and impact of the Expertise Pool. The evaluation highlighted a continued need for additional support to strengthen organisational capability. Figure 51 provides a summary of common capacity constraints still experienced by remote organisations.

**Figure 51 | Examples of capacity challenges faced by SNG and CIP organisations**

> Many of the project partners are small, resource-limited not-for-profit organisations. These groups often struggled with the time and capacity required to fully engage with the project.
>
> - CIP organisation

> The local volunteer population is both declining and consequently increasingly fatigued.
>
> - SNG organisation

> The community spent a decade in survival mode, focusing on merely keeping afloat and paying bills, with little time for self-care or supporting others.
>
> - CIP organisation

*Source: Deep Dive interviews 2025 with SNG and CIP organisations.*

### Alternative, locally embedded strategies supported capacity building.

**HRCPD organisations actively sought and received capacity-building support through other Initiative elements and activities.** Across the Initiative's five elements, there were many opportunities for community organisations to access and receive capacity building support. Specifically:

- FRRR and ARLF hosted quarterly webinars to facilitate cross-program learning for CIP and SNG organisations.
- CIP and SNG grants funded various project types that supported community capacity building. For example, 37 out of 147 CIP and 12 out of 62 SNG organisations specifically reported that one of the top two leading outcomes achieved by their project was an increase in awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies to prepare for, and adapt to drought.[14]

[14] CIP and SNG Final Grant Reports provided by FRRR, 6 August 2025

- CIP Leadership Activities equipped participants with adaptive leadership tools and systems thinking frameworks. These were applied in organisational settings, including policy development, board leadership and project design. Over 80 per cent of Leadership Activity participants reported improved communication and leadership confidence, with many initiating organisational or community projects as a result.[15]

**Organisations found more value in locally embedded capacity-building models.** More than 100 CIP and SNG organisations delivered a combination or training and/or learning and development initiatives. In final grant reports, at least eleven CIP and SNG organisations reported that the success of training and learning or development initiatives was amplified by local facilitators, locally tailored content, and place-based or relationship-based delivery models. One example is Foundation Broken Hill in NSW who used locally tailored training to help regional board members to build confidence, improve participation and strengthen long-term board succession and sustainability.

Foundation Broken Hill along with other CIP and SNG projects addressed the same core needs that the Expertise Pool was designed to meet, such as governance, strategic planning, communications, and volunteer management. However, project delivery in embedded, relationship-based formats better matched the operating realities of regional organisations. Project participants valued the real-time support and trusted relationships, which were critical to success in a regional context. These examples suggest that a need for specialist expertise and support remains, yet organisations benefited most from models that were embedded, flexible and responsive to local contexts.

## 7.4 Future programs may consider embedded, multi-modal and better integrated options to more effectively deliver expert support

The Expertise Pool demonstrated that investing in organisational capacity is a valid community need. However, uptake was limited, and the evaluation found that other Initiative components may have delivered similar support more effectively through locally embedded models. The evaluation also found that the Expertise Pool model would be more suited to business and organisations of a larger scale than those participating in the CIP and SNG programs.

These experiences suggest that capacity-building support is most effective when it is embedded early, flexibly delivered, and tailored to organisational readiness. Future programs should prioritise clear positioning of capacity-building options across all initiative components and offer a multi-modal mix of supports, not just expert brokerage, but also peer learning, guided workshops, and just-in-time coaching or advice.

[15] CIP Leadership Activity data provided by ARLF, 2025

### 7.4.1 Three design features could help to improve the Expertise pool.

#### 1. Tailor capacity-building models to organisation needs and preferences.

Organisations varied in size, maturity and readiness, and not all needed formal expert advice. Many preferred local, specialist expertise and trusted relationships over national offerings, valuing consultants who understood their community and context. A broader mix of capability-building options, beyond expert brokerage, may better meet community organisation needs.

**Relevant findings:**

7.3.1 The Concierge Service delivered the most meaningful outcomes; other supports extended reach but had limited uptake

7.3.2 Uptake and impact remained limited, proving more effective in other Initiative elements

**Actions**

- Co-design support models with delivery partners and prospective funded organisations early in the grant process, so that support is available from the outset of project delivery.
- Offer peer learning, webinars, online tools, skill audits, and facilitated workshops, matched to different organisational contexts and project stages.
- Offer free or low-cost support and connect organisations with pro bono support to meet remote community organisational capacity constraints.
- Strengthen pathways for organisations to access local and specialist support, including brokering connections with trusted local advisors where possible.

#### 2. Embed expert support early and across the project lifecycle.

Organisations benefit most from expert input when it is embedded early, during project scoping and design. Early access to expert support can strengthen project logic, sharpen delivery plans, and build confidence in execution. Organisations also thrive when support is available at critical points across the delivery lifecycle, not just at a single stage. For example, discrete project stages or deliverables, such as event promotion, communications, evaluation or strategic reviews may also be valuable expert touchpoints.

**Relevant findings:**

7.3.2 Uptake and impact remained limited, proving more effective in other Initiative elements

**Actions**

- Integrate relevant expert support into project design and budget planning processes where relevant or desired.
- Provide touchpoints and reminders at key delivery stages to prompt purposeful engagement with support options.

- Promote experts with relevant experience in common delivery challenges, and offer flexible access aligned to key milestones or emerging needs during the project lifecycle.

### 3. Deliver timely, tailored communication to recruit active users of the capacity supports

Organisations are more likely to benefit from expert support when they clearly understand what is available and how it aligns with their needs. Timely, tailored communication, combined with tools that help organisations reflect on their priorities, can enable more confident and purposeful use of available support.

**Relevant findings:**

7.3.2 Uptake and impact remained limited, proving more effective in other Initiative elements

**Actions**

- Enhance onboarding materials and ensure expert options are clearly explained during budget planning.
- Provide needs-assessment tools, case studies, or guided conversations to help organisations clarify goals and identify the support that will add the most value.
- Include reminders at key project stages to prompt timely engagement.

# 8 Evaluating the National Mentoring Program

The National Mentoring Program brought together diverse and experienced mentors with mentees who have a connection to agricultural-dependent communities in a 12-month mentoring and learning program. The National Mentoring Program built on the FDF Drought Resilience Leaders (DRL) Mentoring Program that was delivered in 2021-2022.

This Section describes the evaluation findings relating to the National Mentoring Program. Specifically:

- The National Mentoring Program engaged 156 diverse mentees and mentors
- The National Mentoring Program realised three of its intended six short-term outcomes
- The National Mentoring Program strengthened social capital through a networked cohort of future leaders
- The National Mentoring Program strengthened skills and networks, and impact could be measured through longitudinal data collection

## 8.1 The National Mentoring Program engaged 156 diverse mentees and mentors

The National Mentoring Program aimed to build national drought resilience capability through a 12-month mentoring and learning program. The program connected established leaders with emerging leaders who have a connection to agricultural-dependent communities in rural Australia to facilitate knowledge sharing and help individuals expand their networks. Participants were also provided a series of learning opportunities across the 12 months to enhance their leadership, communication and resilience skills to support rural Australian communities prepare and adapt for future drought or other natural disasters.

Figure 52 overleaf provides a summary of the Mentoring Program demographics.

## Figure 52 | Demographic and geographic characteristics of National Mentoring Program participants

### The Mentoring Program was delivered in two rounds to 156 participants.

| ROUND 1 | | ROUND 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 30 MENTORS | 59 PARTICIPANTS ACROSS 7 STATES AND TERRITORIES | 53 MENTORS | 97 PARTICIPANTS ACROSS ALL STATES |
| 30 MENTEES | | 53 MENTEES | |
| 1 BOTH MENTEE & MENTOR | | 9 BOTH MENTEES & MENTOR | |

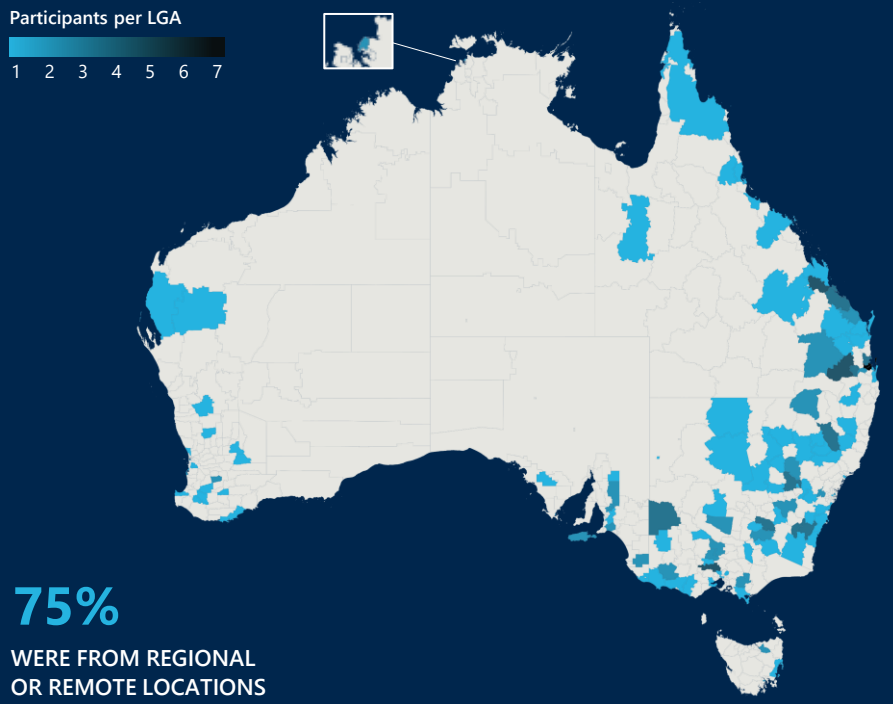
| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 27% | Were young people (18 – 35 years old) | 35% | Were young people (18 – 35 years old) |
| 02% | Identified as First Nations | 01% | Identified as First Nations |
| 74% | Were women | 61% | Were women |

### Across both rounds, most participants were employed in agriculture.

| Industry | Mentee | Mentor |
|---|---|---|
| Agriculture | 50% | 59% |
| Professional services and private sector | 10% | 21% |
| Government, public sector, education | 7% | 7% |
| Not-For-Profit | 14% | 17% |
| Manufacturing | 7% | 7% |

| Industry | Mentee | Mentor |
|---|---|---|
| Agriculture | 57% | 66% |
| Professional services and private sector | 13% | 40% |
| Government, public sector, education | 4% | 6% |
| Not-For-Profit | 15% | 25% |
| Manufacturing | 2% | 4% |

### Participants were spread nationally, representing 104 Local Government Areas across both rounds




**75%**

**WERE FROM REGIONAL OR REMOTE LOCATIONS**

**29%**

**WERE FROM LOCATIONS WITH MEDIUM OR HIGH POTENTIAL DROUGHT IMPACT***

*Regions ranked 0.33 or higher on the Potential Drought Impact indicator in the ABARES Community vulnerability and resilience to drought index. The indicator measures the potential of an LGA to be adversely affected by drought, accounting for both agriculture industry exposure and sensitivity and community dependence on agriculture. The indicator ranks LGAs between 0 to 1 with the most sensitive LGAs ranked near 1.

## 8.2 The National Mentoring Program realised three of its intended six short-term outcomes

The overarching assessment is that the National Mentoring Program realised three of its six intended short-term outcomes. The program achieved two outcomes to a developing extent and one outcome to a limited extent. It is unlikely that the National Mentoring Program will fully realise these outcomes. The final assessment of achievement against the intended outcomes is shown below in Table 11.

**Table 11 | Summary of assessment against the intended National Mentoring Program short-term outcomes**

| SHORT-TERM OUTCOME | ASSESSMENT | RATIONALE |
|---|---|---|
| **PO1: Improved communication, social connection and collaboration within and between communities to support drought preparedness.** | **Realised** | The program provided participants with several channels of communication and opportunities to connect and collaborate with each other. Participants reported developing strong and sustainable connections with other participants (see Section 8.3.2). |
| **PO3: A greater diversity of community members and organisations contribute to drought preparedness activities.** | **Developing** | The program engaged 62 young people across both rounds and participants represented a diverse range of industries and regions. The program did not achieve PO3 to the full extent due to limited engagement from First Nations people (see Section 8.1). |
| **PO4: Increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies by communities, volunteers and not-for-profit organisations to prepare for and adapt to drought.** | **Developing** | The program is unlikely to achieve this outcome to the full extent due to the lack of specific focus on drought in the learning sessions content (see Section 8.3.1). |
| **PO5: Increased implementation and improved effectiveness of place-based practices by communities to build and enhance resilience to drought.** | **Limited** | The program is unlikely to achieve this outcome to the full extent due to the lack of specific focus on drought in the learning content (see Section 8.3.1). |
| **PO6: Strengthened individual leadership capacity and capability to support community and drought resilience.** | **Realised** | The program strengthened the leadership capability and confidence of participants (see Section 8.3.1). The learning content and support from experienced mentors supported the achievement of these leadership outcomes. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **PO7: Community-based networks that strengthen drought resilience are expanded, diversified or created.** | **Realised** | The national and cross-sectoral matching of mentors and mentees supported participants to expand and diversify their networks beyond their industry and region (see Section 8.3.2). |

The National Mentoring Program made good progress towards the intermediate outcomes for the Initiative. The program has demonstrated some contribution to two out of the five intermediate outcomes. The Evaluation has observed little contribution to three of the five intermediate outcomes however it is expected that these outcomes will continue to mature as program participants leverage individual outcomes to deliver benefits to their communities. Assessment against the intermediate outcomes is provided below in Table 12.

**Table 12 | Summary of assessment against intermediate outcomes**

| INTERMEDIATE OUTCOME | ASSESSMENT | RATIONALE |
|---|---|---|
| **RC1: There is an increase in the reach and activities of community leaders, mentors, networks and organisations driving action on drought resilience.** | **Some contribution** | The program reached an additional 79 LGAs outside those included in the CIP regions. Further, the national nature of the program enabled participants to expand their networks to regions outside their own (see Section 8.3.2). |
| **RC2: There is a change in awareness of and attitudes to drought preparedness at the community level.** | **Little contribution** | The program supported a change of attitude towards drought preparedness within individual participants. The Evaluation did not observe change in attitudes or awareness at a community-level. (see Section 8.3.3). |
| **IO1: Communities experience improved cohesion and belonging that supports an ability to prepare for drought.** | **Little contribution** | The program facilitated new connections between participants across industries and regions. It did not support community-level connections to the same extent (see Section 8.3.3). |
| **IO2: Communities have strong adaptive capacity and are empowered to respond to drought.** | **Some contribution** | The program has enhanced the adaptive capacity of participants by strengthening their social and human capital. The program has also improved the confidence of participants which has empowered them to take action in their communities (see Section 8.3.3). |
| **IO3: Communities have effective networks and resources that support local responses to drought.** | **Little contribution** | The program has supported participants to create new networks with other likeminded individuals. Participants can also continue to access other participants and resources on the Mighty Networks platform (see Section 8.3.3). |

## 8.3 The National Mentoring Program strengthened social capital through a networked cohort of future leaders

The National Mentoring Program's theory of change posited that agricultural communities become more resourceful and adaptable by connecting emerging and established leaders who are committed to building social and drought resilience. The program aimed to enhance leadership and network building capabilities so participants can play more active leadership roles to build social resilience to drought. For example, a more active role may involve initiating collaborative projects that contribute to building more resourceful and adaptable communities. Ultimately, the program expects that individual participant outcomes will contribute towards broader community-level outcomes.

This Section provides detailed findings on the progress of the National Mentoring Program toward its intended outcomes. Specifically, the National Mentoring Program:

- strengthened the leadership capability and confidence of mentee and mentor participants, and drought-specific skills to a lesser extent
- facilitated strong connections between participants and broadened participant networks
- catalysed participants to use their new skills, confidence and networks to deliver broader benefits to their organisation, community and the agricultural sector.

These three outcomes are explored further below.

### 8.3.1 The program strengthened participants' leadership capability and confidence, and drought-specific skills to a lesser extent

The National Mentoring Program achieved its primary aim to strengthen leadership capability and confidence by providing participants with formal learning sessions on leadership practices and through informal discussions about leadership in mentoring conversations. The program achieved outcomes relating to building participant knowledge and skill in drought resilience to a lesser extent. These findings are explored below.

#### Strengthened leadership capability was the primary benefit for participants of the National Mentoring Program.

**The mentoring program strengthened participant leadership knowledge, skills and capability.** Seventy-four per cent of participant survey responses indicated the program strengthened their leadership capacity. Surveyed participants highlighted two key mechanisms that supported this outcome:

- **The mentor-mentee relationship enabled knowledge transfer and reflective practice.** Mentees gained practical insights from their mentors' experience and knowledge that helped strengthen their knowledge and understanding of leadership. Meanwhile, mentors refined their coaching skills and reflected on their own leadership practices.

- **The theories and skills learned through learning sessions deepened participant knowledge across key leadership topics.** The learning content supplemented the mentoring sessions through a broad range of leadership topics that aligned with ARLF's six leadership practices. These include authenticity, awareness, adaptation, affiliation, advocacy and action. Seven out of 15 interviewed participants specifically highlighted that the learning sessions were valuable to learn effective leadership techniques. In the mid-program surveys, 75 per cent of participant responses rated the learning session as a seven or higher on a scale of 10.

These two findings highlight how both relational and knowledge-based mechanisms supported leadership development.

### Participants reported improved confidence in themselves and their leadership capability from participation in the program.

**Mentees built confidence in their leadership abilities through both the mentoring and learning aspects of the program.** The skill development through the learning sessions, support and practical advice from their mentors and access to a network of peers contributed to building mentees' confidence in themselves and their leadership ability. Across interviews, evaluation outcome panels and program surveys, 12 mentees cited improved confidence as the most significant impact they have experienced from the program. Seventy-one per cent of mentees reported an improvement in their confidence to take on a leadership role within their community. Figure 53 below highlights a case study of a mentee that increased his confidence in his leadership ability, enabling him to pursue other leadership opportunities.

**Figure 53 | Case study on improved confidence achieved through the program**

**The National Mentoring Program has strengthened the confidence of mentees to pursue further leadership opportunities.** A young mentee reflected on the program's effectiveness in building his confidence and launching his leadership journey. He highlighted that the program's short duration and minimal commitment made it an ideal introduction to leadership. The tailored support and guidance from his mentor combined with the practical leadership theories from the learning sessions, enabled him to develop self-awareness and confidence in his leadership abilities. He shared that his increased confidence motivated him to apply for other leadership programs and pushed him to become more active in local politics and community-based leadership initiatives.

*Source: Nous conducted interviews*

**Mentors also reported improved leadership capability as a benefit of the program.** Mentors cited improved skills in asking questions and deep listening as the most crucial leadership outcomes. The mentor's handbook, the learning session content and the reciprocal mentoring dynamic were pivotal in contributing to their development. Mentors shared several examples of where they gained new insights and developed new skills while guiding and supporting their mentees. One mentor noted "I did expect to learn a lot from my mentee but was not expecting to want to spend all of our time together learning". These experiences underscore the mutual growth and development benefit of mentoring for both emerging and established leaderships.

### The program achieved outcomes relating to building participant knowledge and skills in drought resilience to a lesser extent

**Participants rated drought related outcomes lower than leadership outcomes.** The National Mentoring Program focused on building leadership skills that participants could leverage in drought contexts, without specifically focusing on building drought resilience skills. For example, learning session content focused on leadership and personal development rather than technical drought skills and knowledge. Eight interviewed participants shared they had anticipated that the learning sessions would provide in-depth strategies and skills specific to drought preparedness and management. This was primarily reported by mentors who brought deep industry and technical experience relating to farming, agriculture and environmental management.

Fewer participants reported achieving drought-specific outcomes through the program. On average, only 35 per cent of surveyed participants across both rounds reported improvements in their experience, knowledge, understanding, awareness, confidence, skills, techniques and practices related to drought preparedness. In interviews, three participants reported that the program enhanced their understanding of the impacts of drought on communities and businesses. Despite this, most surveyed participants agreed that the social capital and leadership skills gained through the program could be applied to enhance drought resilience. Many survey respondents also reported developing a deeper understanding and appreciation for the sector's challenges through their mentor.

## 8.3.2 The program facilitated strong connections between participants and broadened participant networks

The National Mentoring Program facilitated the development of new connections between mentor and mentee partnerships, as well between mentor and mentee cohort groups respectively. These findings are explored below.

### Participants developed strong and sustainable connections.

**Participants reported creating meaningful relationships with their mentor or mentee.** The 12-month duration of the program enabled participants to build trusting and deep relationships. While some mentors observed that it took a few mentoring sessions for their mentees to feel comfortable and to ‘open up’, these relationships strengthened over time. Most interviewed participants (13 out of 15) have maintained contact with their mentor or mentee beyond the program, with many staying in touch regularly. The interstate matching of mentors and mentees enabled participants to create national connections. As shown in Figure 54, 75 per cent of mentoring pairs involved mentors and mentees from different states.

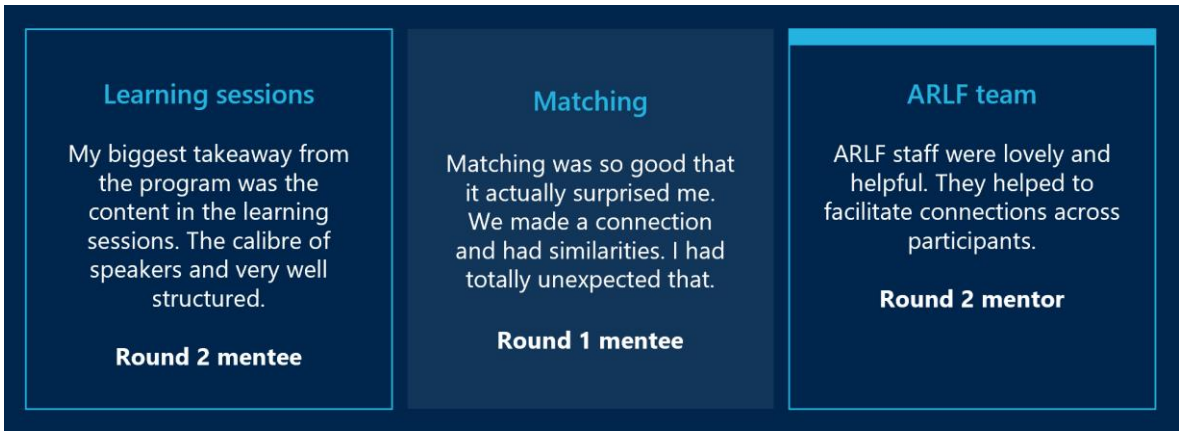
**Figure 54 | Map of mentoring pairs**

*Source: ARLF provided data*

**The effective matching process helped participants build connections.** ARLF improved on the mentor/mentee matching process from the DRL program by combining various data points, including applicant interviews and EOIs, to enhance potential mentor/mentee compatibility. They matched mentors and mentees based on their goals rather than discipline or sector. Participants reflected positively on the matching process, with 91 per cent of participants surveyed from both rounds reporting that they were satisfied or highly satisfied with their mentor or mentee. The compatibility in mentoring pairs contributed to the strong connections and trust between mentors and mentees. One mentee highlighted the effectiveness of her pairing, noting that they were able to connect and relate to each other easily and that her mentor's relevant strategic expertise greatly supported her goals.

**ARLF staff support was critical for facilitating positive interactions between participants.** Nine out of 15 interviewed participants highlighted the support provided by ARLF staff as a key strength of the program. They emphasised the supportive environment that the ARLF team fostered which enhanced the overall network and interaction within the program. One mentor noted that the ARLF staff helped to facilitate connections between participants. Figure 55 overleaf includes quotes from participants with feedback on program design.

**Figure 55 | Participant feedback on program design**




*Source: Nous conducted interviews*

### Participants expanded their networks with other participants in the program.

**The mentoring program communities of practice broadened participant connections beyond their immediate mentor or mentee.** Two mentees reported that the mentee communities of practice provided valuable opportunities for informal connection and discussion with other mentees. Furthermore, ARLF delivered a two-day, in-person summit in Canberra to bring together 41 participants from both rounds of the program. Participants reflected positively on the summit, noting that it supported relationship building by offering participants the chance to connect in-person. Figure 56 overleaf provides more detail on the mentoring summit.

**Figure 56 | Overview of the mentoring summit in Canberra**

**The mentoring summit facilitated meaningful connections between participants.**

## OVERVIEW OF THE SUMMIT

**The mentoring summit in Canberra brought together 41 participants from both rounds of the program.**

In response to participant requests for an in-person event, ARLF delivered a mentoring summit in Canberra at the conclusion of Round 2. Forty-one participants across both rounds attended the summit, with ARLF providing subsidies to support their travel and accommodation costs.

The two-day event began with a dinner and a guest talk on AI technology. The following day featured a design thinking workshop and a Q&A session with a mentoring pair from the program.

## OUTCOMES AND IMPACT OBSERVED

**Participants appreciated the opportunity for face-to-face connection.**

Program participants reflected positively on the summit, highlighting it as a valuable opportunity to connect in-person and reflect on their experiences in the program. Five out of the six interviewed participants who attended the summit agreed that the face-to-face interactions fostered deeper connections with other participants. They reported engaging with participants that they had not had the opportunity to connect with in the program. One interviewee shared that they connected with another participant living in their region through the summit.

> "It was helpful to speak to other mentors and mentees about their experiences and justify the previous 12 months."

> "[The summit] was so good to have that personal connection with people."

*Source: Nous conducted interviews*

**Participants expanded their networks to regions and industries outside of their own.** The national and cross-sectoral matching of mentors and mentees supported participants to expand diversify in their networks beyond their industry and region. Seventy-one per cent of survey respondents reported creating new networks outside their community through the program. Three interviewed mentors reported connecting with participants from other industries that they would not have interacted with otherwise. One mentor noted, "[My] most significant change from the program [is] the extended network across the country that I now have access into in the future who are engaged in local communities and on the same page".

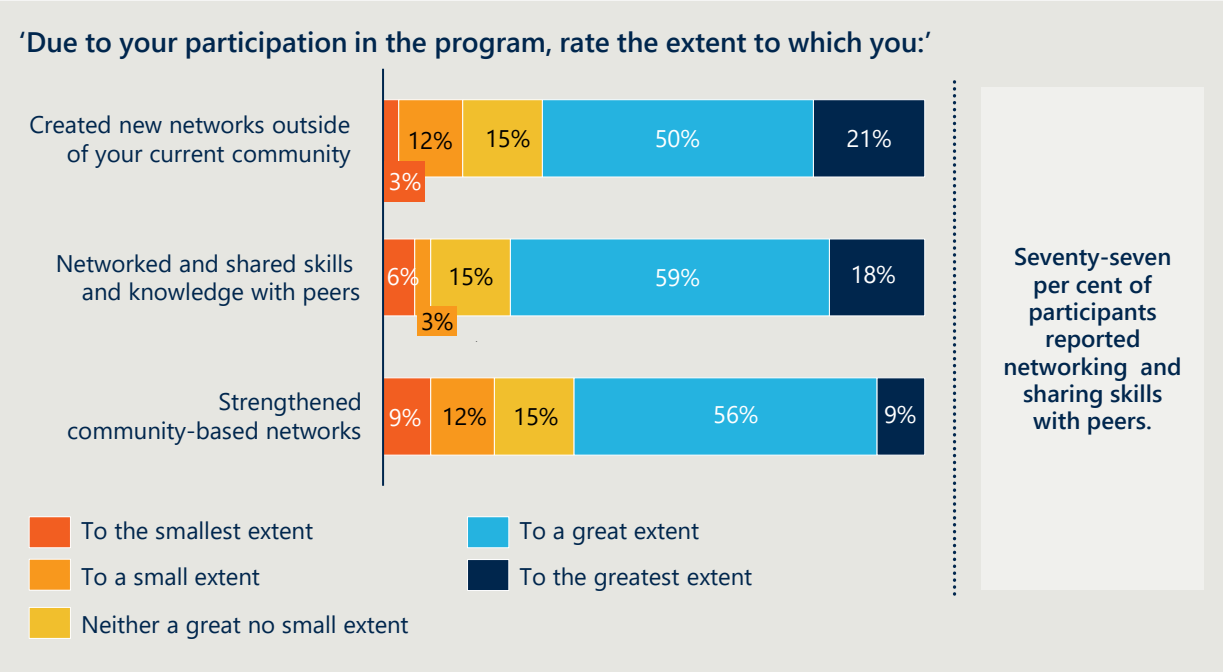
> "You can get entrenched in your region and local networks. I learnt a lot from having a mentor outside my region"
>
> **- Round 1 mentee**

### Despite connecting mentors and mentees nationally, participants expressed a desire to strengthen their local networks.

**Participants highlighted an opportunity for the mentoring program to better connect individuals at a community level.** The program supported participants in strengthening their community-based networks, with 65 per cent of survey respondents reporting this achievement to a great or greatest extent. However, the program had a much stronger impact on facilitating new networks outside the local community. This is evident in survey responses with 21 per cent of participants surveyed reporting this outcome to the greatest extent, compared to only nine percent reporting strengthened community-based networks to the same degree (see Figure 57).

This sentiment was echoed in participant interviews where only two participants noted strengthened local networks, while six suggested that regionally based events or networks could have better supported local connections. During the mentee outcome panel session, three mentees acknowledged that they had not expanded their local networks but expressed a desire for opportunities to do so. This feedback aligns with the program's primary objective of fostering national connections, which differentiates it from state-based mentoring programs.

**Figure 57 | Survey responses to networking outcomes**




*Source: Round one and two participant completion surveys n = 34*

## 8.3.3 Participants intend to use their new skills, confidence and networks to deliver broader benefits

There is emerging evidence that the National Mentoring Program is supporting long-term outcomes for participants' organisations, community and the agricultural sector. The evaluation found that the mentoring program is on track to achieve its intermediate-term outcomes, with many participants contributing to community-level outcomes by leveraging their new skills, knowledge, confidence and capability. These actions demonstrate the program's impact on

empowering participants to contribute actively to their communities. Specifically, the evaluation found:

- Participants' new leadership skills and knowledge is helping them to be more effective in their current jobs.
- Participants intend to apply their leadership skills to contribute towards building social resilience in their communities, the sector and regional Australia.
- Mentors and mentees derived the most benefit from the program when they possessed select criteria.

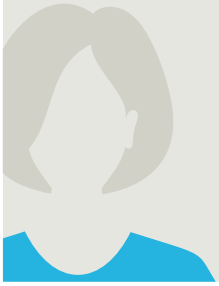
These findings are explored in more detail in the following three subsections.

### Participants' new leadership skills and knowledge is helping them to be more effective in their current jobs.

**Participants are applying skills and knowledge gained from the learning sessions to improve their workplace performance**. Five participants reported using strategies from the learning sessions in their current jobs, such as collaboration and conflict resolution techniques. Participants noted that these new skills are making them more effective in their roles. Mentees noted that their mentor played an important role translating theoretical insights from the learning sessions into practical action. For example, one mentee described how they would use their mentoring session to reflect on learning sessions with their mentee and apply it to real-world situations or current challenges in their workplace to contextualise the learning.

Mentoring sessions also provided participants with practical strategies and perspectives applicable for their jobs. For example, one mentee working in regional policy design gained a depth of understanding of the practical realities of regional economies from the lived experience of her mentor that she didn't have prior to completing the program. Figure 58 provides a case study of a participant who used the skills and knowledge developed through the mentoring program in their workplace.

**Figure 58 | Case study on skills and knowledge developed by the program**



**Participants are utilising the skills and knowledge gained from the National Mentoring Program to deliver benefits to their organisations.** One mentee reflected on the leadership and personal development outcomes that she experienced from the program which have enabled her to become a more effective leader in her workplace. She highlighted that the interpersonal and leadership topics from the learning sessions provided her with useful strategies to connect with her team and work with diverse personality types. The DISC personality profile and advice from her mentor also helped her gain greater self-awareness of her own leadership style and personal strengths. She has applied her new knowledge and strategies in her role as a team leader to foster a more collaborative and connected environment. She noted that these changes have significantly improved her team's dynamics and supported a culture of mutual respect and understanding.

*Source: Nous conducted interviews*

**Participants' increased confidence and capability has supported them to step into leadership roles.** Six interviewed participants have taken on leadership roles or sought promotions following completion of the program, demonstrating the increased confidence and capability gained from

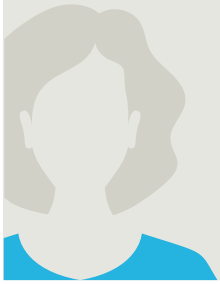
the program. Three participants noted that they have applied for promotions in their workplace as a direct result of the confidence they developed. Additionally, one mentee shared that they have utilised their new leadership skills to coach others in their new board role. This progression reflects the significant impact of the program in empowering participants to advance in their professional journeys.

### Participants intend to apply their leadership skills to contribute towards building social resilience in their communities, the sector and regional Australia.

**Participants plan to develop networks and share resources within their communities following the program.** Five participants noted they intend to create more networking opportunities in their region to build a stronger, motivated community network. Additionally, three participants expressed their intent to support local drought resilience by sharing knowledge or leading community events.

Participants are also eager to support the growth of their fellow community members. Five participants mentioned their desire to help others tackle challenging situations or assume leadership roles. For instance, one mentee is organising a leadership program for young rural women and plans to share some of the leadership skills they gathered through the program. Another mentee ran for local council, was elected, and developed an on-farm tourism initiative based on their learnings about problem solving and creative thinking from the mentoring program. Additionally, one mentee took on committee positions focused on sustainable farming and climate action. Figure 59 includes a case study of one mentee that has enhanced her network and confidence due to the program.

**Figure 59 | Case study on leadership and networks achieved through the program**



**Participants are leveraging leadership and networking outcomes from the National Mentoring Program to deliver community programs.** 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 conducted interviews*

**Participants are seeking opportunities to contribute to the resilience of the agricultural sector and regional Australia more broadly.** The program has influenced participants inclination to seek employment in the agriculture sector. One participant credited their mentor with encouraging them to return to the agriculture sector, resulting in their new role as a landholder liaison. Two participants shared that because of their deeper understanding of the challenges faced by farmers, they now want to get involved in local programs directly supporting farmers in their region. Additionally, one participant said that they are using insights from the learning session on regenerative agriculture to contribute to a local land holding group to support broader environmental impacts in their community.

**Participants are also dedicated to supporting careers in regional Australia.** Two participants reported their intentions to create work opportunities for regional women, inspired by the program's focus on community-building and leadership development. Another participant expressed a desire to support individuals exploring careers in regional Australia, encouraging them to stay and contribute to their local communities.

### Mentors and mentees derived the most benefit from the program when they possessed select criteria.

**The extent to which participants experienced transformative change from the program varied for mentors and mentees and was influenced by several factors.** Having defined networks prior to the program was a key factor in achieving outcomes and sustainable impact for both mentors and mentees. Mentors gained the most benefit from the program when they had mentoring experience and experience in social resilience, while clear goals and a desire to learn were the most influential factors in mentees' gaining benefits from the program. A summary of the factors influencing mentor and mentee program benefits are described in Table 13 below.

**Table 13 | Factors influencing mentor and mentee program benefits**

| MENTOR | MENTEE |
|---|---|
| **Mentors with established networks could significantly expand the networks of their mentees.** | **Mentees who were not from farming or agricultural backgrounds had more to learn about drought preparedness and social resilience in an agricultural context.** |
| **Those with experience in social resilience, rather than a specific drought background, were particularly effective in helping mentees link theories and skills from learning sessions to real-world applications.** | **Mentees who had agency, clear intentions, and an openness to learn derived the most individual benefit from the program.** Three mentors emphasised the importance of mentees setting clear goals and being well-prepared for the mentoring sessions, noting they found it challenging to coach mentees that lacked defined objectives for the program. |
| **It was essential for mentors to have established coaching and mentoring experience. Those lacking this felt they needed more support earlier in the program to be effective.** While feedback for mentors was largely positive, two mentees suggested that their mentors could have benefitted from additional training. One mentee noted that the final learning sessions on coaching habits would be more beneficial if delivered at the start of the program to better support mentors. | **Those with already established local networks were better positioned to take action following the program.** |

*Source: Nous conducted interviews*

## 8.4 The National Mentoring Program strengthened skills and networks, and impact could be measured through longitudinal data collection

The evaluation found that the National Mentoring Program achieved positive outcomes for individual participants by strengthening their social capital, leadership capability and building new connections. Based on survey and interview data, it is likely that participants will contribute to building social resilience in their communities. However, the extent of this impact is unclear at this stage and would require longitudinal data collection.

The mentoring program has potential to deliver stronger drought resilience outcomes. The program's theory of change – that building individual capacity and capability of leaders or emerging leaders will support stronger social resilience to drought – relies on individuals having the skills and knowledge to respond to drought events. Future mentoring programs should better integrate with other Initiative elements. The evaluation observed positive cumulative outcomes for participants who had engaged with the CIP leadership activities or the Drought Ready network. Another approach is to incorporate more drought and climate-related content into the program through the learning content.

There are opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of the National Mentoring Program based on participant feedback and Evaluation findings. The Evaluation identified five recommendations to strengthen the ability to measure and deliver lasting impact through the National Mentoring Program. Each design and delivery feature is explored below.

### 8.4.1 Five recommendations can maximise future iterations of the National Mentoring Program

Drawing on evaluation findings and participant feedback, five design features are recommended to maximise the impact of future mentoring programs.

#### 1. Consider the delivery of the program in the context of other element objectives

Round 1 of the National Mentoring Program was delivered in January 2023, while other Initiative elements were rolled out between July and October 2023. Stronger alignment between the mentoring program and other elements could support cumulative, place-based community impacts and outcomes for participants. For example, engaging participants of the CIP Leadership Activities in the mentoring program could have provided an opportunity for individuals to expand their learnings and networks at a national scale, building on what they gained in their local sessions.

**Relevant findings:**

8.3.1 The program strengthened participants' leadership capability and confidence, and drought-specific skills to a lesser extent.

**Actions**

- Use the National Mentoring Program as an extension of other ARLF leadership courses, capitalising on the in-depth subject matter and potential for knowledge extension.
- Coordinate with the Drought Ready Network to cross-promote drought-related content and events. This could include joint sessions, shared resources, or referrals to experts in the Expertise Pool for technical support.

### 2. Maintain the learning sessions, matching process and ARLF support

The learning sessions, matching process and ARLF support were essential to the mentoring program's success. The learning sessions facilitated leadership capability building and personal development. The effective matching process helped participants build new and lasting connections. ARLF staff support was critical for facilitating positive interactions between participants. Continuing to deliver these three elements will continue enabling high satisfaction with the National Mentoring Program.

**Relevant findings:**

8.3.1 The program strengthened participants' leadership capability and confidence, and drought-specific skills to a lesser extent.

8.3.2 The program facilitated strong connections between participants and broadened participant networks.

**Actions**

- Continue the personalised matching process to connect mentors and mentees.
- Maintain the broad design of the mentoring program with both mentoring and learning session components.
- Continue providing tailored support through dedicated ARLF staff members to run the mentoring program, including having a mentoring coach and Mentoring Program Manager.

### 3. Incorporate more drought or climate resilience content into the program

The program successfully delivered on its primary objective to deliver leadership and personal development. To increase relevance and engagement, the program may respond to several participants' desire for more comprehensive training on technical aspects of drought resilience. This can better support participants in addressing this critical issue within their communities and organisations.

**Relevant findings:**

8.3.1 The program strengthened participants' leadership capability and confidence, and drought-specific skills to a lesser extent.

**Actions**

- Design and embed dedicated or elective sessions or parts of sessions on drought preparedness, climate adaptation strategies, and environmental management into the existing learning session curriculum. These sessions could include case studies, practical tools, and scenario-based exercises.
- Offer optional technical deep dives for mentors and mentees with strong technical backgrounds to explore drought resilience concepts in more depth. Deep dive topics may include water management, regenerative agriculture, or climate risk planning.

### 4. Facilitate more local connections for participants

Participants reflected positively on the national networks built through the program however, they highlighted an opportunity to strengthen local networks. ARLF could consider facilitating local connections between participants to complement the national networks created through the program and deliver strong community resilience benefits.

**Relevant findings:**

8.3.2 The program facilitated strong connections between participants and broadened participant networks.

**Actions**

- Introduce regionally focused activities, such as local mentoring circles or community-based events, to strengthen local networks and support place-based resilience.

### 5. Design and implement an alumni engagement strategy to enhance long-term outcomes

The National Mentoring Program has been consistently delivered by ARLF across multiple stages of Future Drought Fund (FDF) investment. This continuity presents a strategic opportunity to strengthen long-term outcomes by establishing a structured alumni engagement approach. By creating mentoring program alumni groups, ARLF can better understand intermediate-term outcomes experienced by past mentors and mentees, and foster ongoing connections. Longitudinal data collection, such as tracking mentees who return as mentors, can provide measurable insights into the enduring impact of the program. This alumni strategy would not only illuminate the sustained benefits of mentoring but also identify areas for continuous improvement.

**Relevant findings:**

8.3.1 The program strengthened participants' leadership capability and confidence, and drought-specific skills to a lesser extent.

8.3.2 The program facilitated strong connections between participants and broadened participant networks.

8.3.3 Participants intend to use their new skills, confidence and networks to deliver broader benefits.

**Actions**

- Collect survey feedback from alumni at regular intervals after the program to understand emerging needs and measure long-term impacts.
- Establish mentoring program alumni groups to understand intermediate term outcomes experienced by previous mentors and mentees.
- Promote continued alumni involvement in the program, including opportunities to return as mentees, mentors or facilitators.

# 9 Evaluating the Drought Ready Network

Drought Ready (formerly the National Learning Network)[16] aims to help individuals and organisations across regional, rural and remote Australia to connect, support and learn from each other. It is primarily delivered online through a Facebook group, supplemented with events, resources and chat groups.

This Section describes the evaluation findings relating to Drought Ready. Specifically:

- Drought Ready is an impact network, connecting more than 1,400 members nationally.
- Most of Drought Ready's six intended short-term outcomes were exceeded or realised.
- Drought Ready has connected people, curated knowledge and catalysed action to build drought resilience.
- Drought Ready merits continued investment, and its impact depends on how it evolves.

## 9.1 Drought Ready is an impact network, connecting more than 1,400 members nationally

Drought Ready aims to help individuals and organisations across regional, rural and remote Australia to connect, support and learn from each other. The network is primarily delivered online through a Facebook group, supplemented with events, resources and chat groups. Figure 60 provides a summary of what the network has delivered.

**Figure 60 | Drought Ready output summary**

**Drought Ready is primarily delivered online through a Facebook group, supplemented with events, resources and chat groups.**

**The Facebook platform has offered:**

**37 CHAT GROUPS INCLUDING:**

- General chat
- Youth engagement
- Requests, ideas and feedback
- Community café
- Changemaker
- Free community resilience video resources
- State and territory
- Community size

**40 GROUP EVENTS INCLUDING:**

- **21 EVENTS** promoted by individual members and organisations
- **13 ONLINE EVENTS** hosted by ARLF
  **8 CHANGEMAKER EVENTS** cross-promoted
- **3 EVENTS** hosted by TNQ drought hub
- **5 IN-PERSON EVENT** offered by ARLF

**7 GUIDES AND RESOURCES INCLUDING:**

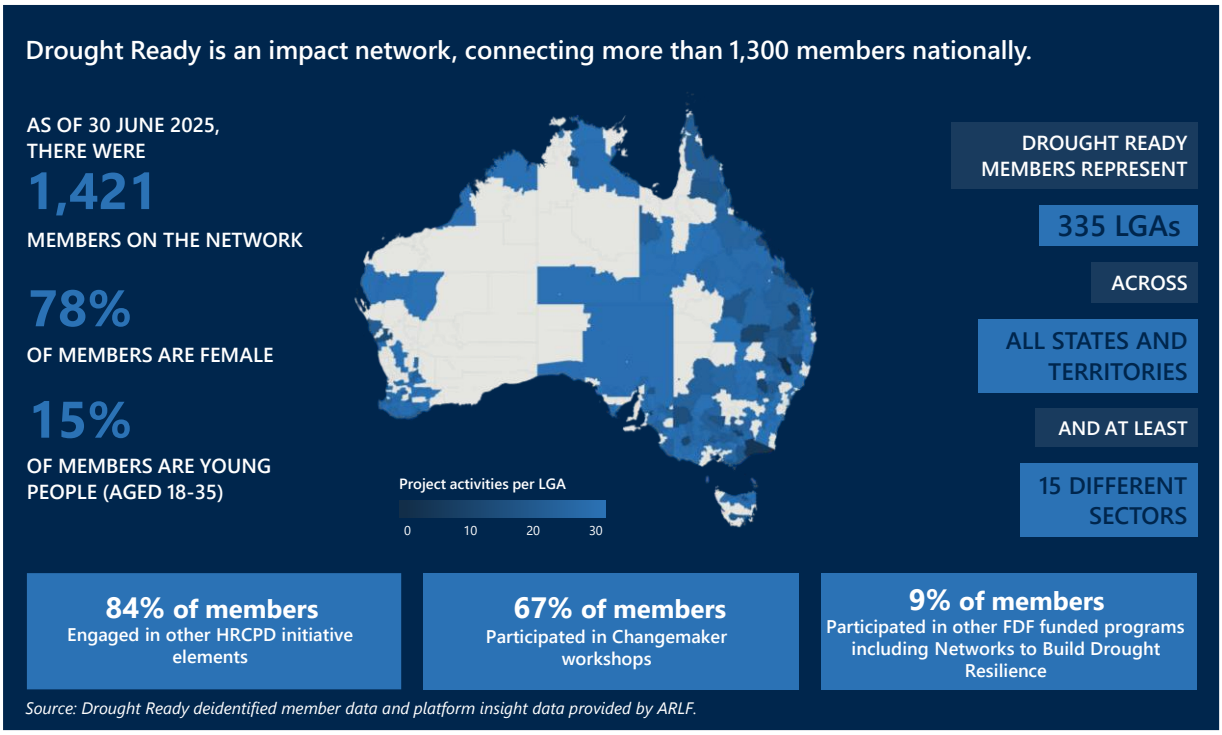
- **5 GUIDES** including 'how to make the most of this network' and ways to gain value
- **2 RESOURCES** including mental wellbeing resources and natural disaster preparedness and response resources

[16] Drought Ready was previously called the National Learning Network in the MEL Plan and Mid-Term Evaluation. As it is better known by its Facebook title, the evaluation uses 'Drought Ready'.

*Source: Drought Ready Platform data accessed by Nous.*

Drought Ready targets individuals who have participated in programs funded by the Initiative or broader FDF to create a network of national significance. Figure 61 provides a summary of the network demographic.

**Figure 61 | Drought Ready network demographic summary**




## 9.2 Most of Drought Ready's six intended short-term outcomes were exceeded or realised

The overarching assessment is that Drought Ready exceeded two and further realised another two of its six intended short-term outcomes. Drought Ready achieved its remaining two short-term outcomes to a developing extent. Drought Ready's growing momentum and scale indicate that its outcomes are likely to continue progressing beyond the evaluation period. The final assessment of achievement against the intended short-term outcomes is shown below in Table 14.

Table 14 | Summary of assessment against the intended Drought Ready short-term outcomes

| SHORT-TERM OUTCOME | ASSESSMENT | RATIONALE |
|---|---|---|
| **PO1: Improved communication, social connection and collaboration within and between communities to support drought preparedness.** | **Exceeded** | Drought Ready enabled communication and collaboration across a broad cross-section of regional, rural, and remote communities. Members reported forming new and deeper connections, with strong engagement and participation for a national network (see Section 9.3.1). |
| **PO2: Improved access to and use of services, resources, infrastructure and facilities by communities that support drought preparedness.** | **Realised** | Drought Ready enabled members to access a wide range of resources, including those shared by other members. These contributions helped establish the platform as a lasting repository for learning and knowledge exchange. (see Section 9.3.2). |
| **PO3: A greater diversity of community members and organisations contribute to drought preparedness activities.** | **Developing** | Drought Ready connected over 1,400 members across diverse sectors, Initiative elements and other FDF programs. Engagement from priority cohorts, including First Nations communities and young people, was not widely observed (see Section 9.3.1). |
| **PO4: Increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of strategies by communities, volunteers and not-for-profit organisations to prepare for and adapt to drought.** | **Realised** | Members gained knowledge and tools through peer learning, curated content and events. The Platform supported mindset shifts and increased awareness of drought resilience strategies. (see Section 9.3.2). |
| **PO6: Strengthened individual leadership capacity and capability to support community and drought resilience.** | **Developing** | Webinars, peer learning and shared resources supported member development, especially for alumni of other HRCPDI elements. New or passive members showed fewer signs of capability growth. (see Section 9.3.3). |
| **PO7: Community-based networks that strengthen drought resilience are expanded, diversified or created.** | **Exceeded** | Drought Ready catalysed the expansion and diversification of community-based networks, connecting members from a wide range of regions and backgrounds. The breadth, inclusivity, and maturity of these networks, demonstrated through sustained engagement and cross-sector participation, reflect a very high standard for the Initiative (see Section 9.3.1). |

Drought Ready is making progress toward the intermediate outcomes of the initiative. There is emerging evidence to support an assessment that major contribution has been made toward two

of the five and intermediate outcomes and some contribution has been made toward the three remaining intermediate outcomes. The evaluation anticipates that these outcomes will continue to emerge and mature with more time, continued investment, and implementation of the recommended design features in Section 9.4. Assessment against the intermediate outcomes is provided below in Table 15.

**Table 15 | Summary of assessment against the Drought Ready intermediate outcomes**

| INTERMEDIATE OUTCOME | ASSESSMENT | RATIONALE |
|---|---|---|
| **RC1: There is an increase in the reach and activities of community leaders, mentors, networks and organisations driving action on drought resilience.** | **Major contribution** | Drought Ready has extended the reach of drought resilience efforts by connecting over 1,400 members. The platform has enabled leaders, mentors and organisations to engage in new drought resilience activities (see Section 9.3.2). |
| **RC2: There is a change in awareness of and attitudes to drought preparedness at the community level.** | **Some contribution** | Drought Ready has contributed to a shift in how individuals and communities conceptualise drought preparedness. Some members reported greater awareness of drought strategies, a deeper understanding of systems thinking, and stronger motivation to act (see Section 9.3.3). |
| **IO1: Communities experience improved cohesion and belonging that supports an ability to prepare for drought.** | **Some contribution** | Drought Ready has fostered new, more diverse and deeper connections across regions, sectors and cohorts. Some members noted limited local relevance (see Section 9.3.3). |
| **IO2: Communities have strong adaptive capacity and are empowered to respond to drought.** | **Some contribution** | Drought Ready has helped build adaptive capacity by equipping members with knowledge, tools and confidence. Members are beginning to apply these capabilities in their communities, with some initiating projects and collaborations (see Section 9.3.3). |
| **IO3: Communities have effective networks and resources that support local responses to drought.** | **Major contribution** | Drought Ready established a national resource repository and space for knowledge sharing and peer learning. Members reported using connections made through the network to inform local action (see Sections 9.3.2 and 9.3.3). |

The following Section provides detail on the contribution Drought Ready has made to strengthening drought preparedness and social resilience.

## 9.3 Drought Ready has connected people, curated knowledge and catalysed action to build drought resilience

There is growing evidence that Drought Ready is creating positive outcomes for communities through the delivery of a national impact network. This Section provides detailed findings on the progress of Drought Ready toward its intended outcomes. Specifically, Drought Ready:

- enabled members to create new, more diverse and deeper connections
- helped members to build their capability to prepare for and respond to drought
- catalysed and extended mindset shifts, helping turn reflection into action.

### 9.3.1 Strong membership growth and engagement have enabled members to create new, more diverse and deeper connections

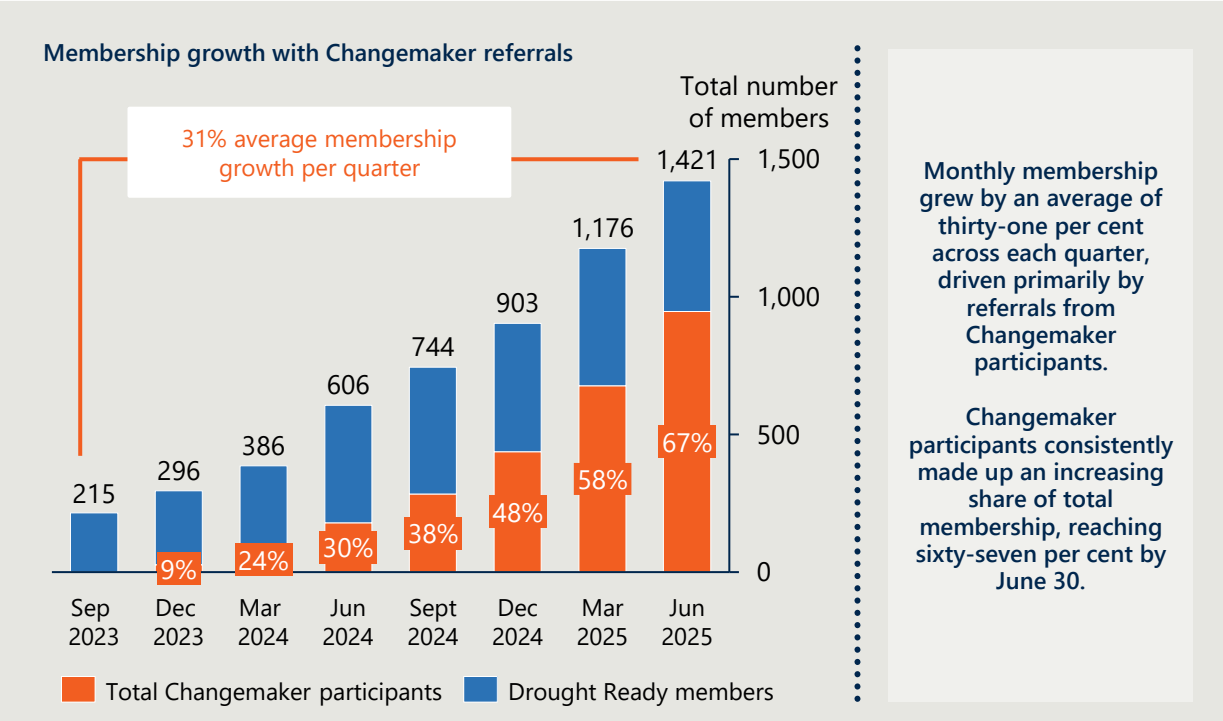
**Drought Ready membership grew steadily thanks to referrals from other Initiative elements.**

Drought Ready membership achieved steady growth. The Platform reached 1,421 members by the end of the funding period on 30 June.[17] Membership growth was consistent between August 2023 and June 2025, averaging 31 per cent growth each quarter.

**Referrals from the Initiative Leadership activities have been the biggest driver of membership growth.** Changemaker participants represented 67 per cent (946) of members as of 30 June.[18] The ARLF Drought Ready element lead explained that "Drought Ready provides a clear and meaningful next step for ARLF Changemaker participants to sustain relationships formed during the programs, reinforce leadership practice through peer learning and offer real-time opportunities to stay engaged and lead beyond the initial program period." Figure 62 demonstrates how the strong referral pathway from Changemaker workshops into the network has helped to maintain a steady membership growth rate.

[17] Platform Insights provided by ARLF, 2025
[18] HRCPD Initiative Quarterly Meeting, July 2025

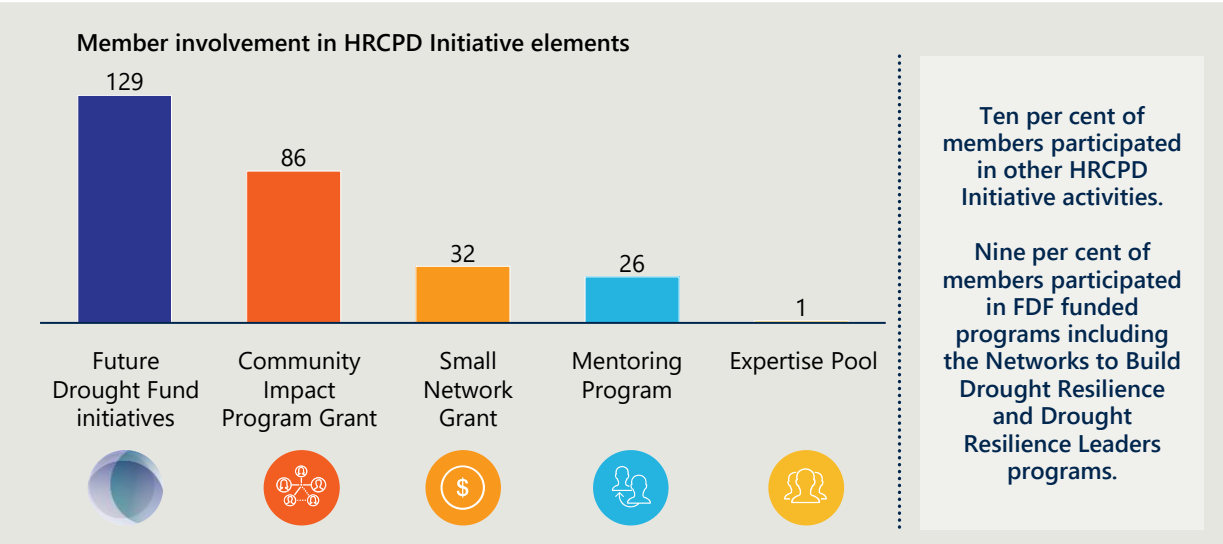
### Figure 62 | Drought Ready membership growth with Changemaker referrals




*Source: Platform insights provided by ARLF.*

**Other Initiative elements and previous FRRR-funded programs also supported membership growth.** Drought Ready members participated in other Initiative activities, including the ARLF Mentoring Program, the CIP and the SNGs and other FDF funded programs such as the Networks to Build Drought Resilience and Drought Resilience Leaders programs.[19] Figure 63 demonstrates Drought Ready member involvement in other HRCPD and FDF initiative elements.

### Figure 63 | Drought Ready member involvement in other HRCPD and FDF programs




*Source: Drought Ready de-identified membership data provided by ARLF.*

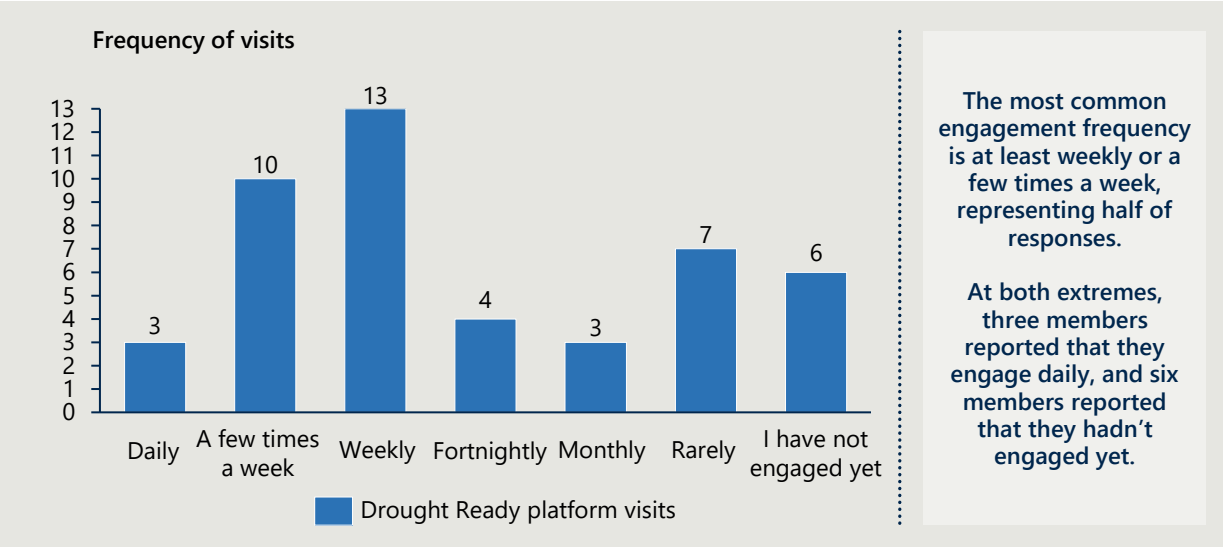
[19] Drought Ready de-identified membership data provided by ARLF, June 2025, n = 1418

**There is potential for Drought Ready to receive more referrals from grant elements.** CIP and SNG programs reached more than 200 organisations and more than 57,000 individuals.[20] Together, the CIP and SNG have only resulted in 117 member referrals.[21] This highlights the potential for a significant number of future referrals through the CIP and SNG organisations.

### The Network achieved strong engagement because of dedicated and effective curation.

Drought Ready has expanded its active member base, defined as those who view, post, comment or react daily. Between July 2024 to July 2025, average daily active members grew by 86 per cent, from a maximum of 272 to 507 active members per day.[22] In the same period, average engagement per person grew by 29 per cent, from 2.68 to 3.45. A Drought Ready member survey showed that some members are highly active and others are yet to participate (see Figure 64).[23] While the results are not statistically representative of the whole member base this variation suggests a broad spectrum of engagement patterns.

**Figure 64 | Drought Ready survey responses to 'How often do you visit the Facebook Platform?'**




*Source: Drought Ready member survey conducted by Nous (n = 46). Note there was 46 specific responses to this survey question out of 50 people who filled in the survey.*

**The Platform exhibited high engagement compared with like networks.** Overall member engagement is measured by the number of posts, divided by reactions, and then multiplied by 100. As of 29 June, the Platform had averaged 11.8 per cent engagement over the 12-month period.[24] According to Klipfolio, most social media experts consider a one to five per cent engagement rate to be strong, making this result notably high for a Facebook platform.[25]

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[20] CIP and SNG final grant report data provided by FRRR, July 2025.
[21] Drought Ready de-identified membership data provided by ARLF, June 2025.
[22] Drought Ready Facebook Insights provided by ARLF, 2025.
[23] Drought Ready member survey conducted by Nous June 2025. Note that with 50 responses out of 1,421 total members, the margin of error is 13.6 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.
[24] Drought Ready Facebook Insights provided by ARLF, 2025.
[25] Klipfolio, Facebook Engagement Rate, 2025 (accessed 14 July 2025). Facebook Engagement Rate: What It Is & How to Measure It | Klipfolio

**Dedicated curation, consistent content and diverse engagement methods have driven high engagement**. Specifically:

- **Dedicated curation from ARLF and Writers Who has been crucial to sustain engagement.**[26] The ARLF Working Group reported that the curation of consistent content, such as 'Wednesday Wins' and 'Sunday Shares' creates a predictable rhythm that encourages engagement. One member reflected that "it gives me confidence to keep going and doing things, knowing that other people are doing [projects] too."
- **Diverse and curated platform content offerings, such as online and in-person events, supported membership engagement with the Platform.** One Drought Ready member reported, "The events are the most useful – the webinars provide you with links and contact with further information", while another member reported "Love the tips and suggestions Sections, even if I don't comment much, I love to read them."

A strong example of effective and innovative content offerings was the Leadership Circles. ARLF used the Leadership Circles to pilot the use of in-person events for platform members to strengthen drought resilience engagement (see Figure 65 below).

**Figure 65 | Leadership Circle pilot initiative**

**Leadership Circles deepened engagement and strengthened drought resilience.**

**OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED**

**The Leadership Circles were a pilot initiative developed by the ARLF to complement the Drought Ready network.** The program brought together small, peer-led groups of community leaders from different regions. Each group met for five structured sessions focused on reflection, support and shared learning.

**The circles helped participants build leadership skills and confidence to address complex challenges, including those related to drought preparedness.** During the sessions, participants shared practical strategies and experiences, which strengthened their ability to prepare for and manage drought.

**Feedback was overwhelmingly positive.** Participants reported stronger peer networks, greater clarity in their leadership roles, and increased confidence to support their communities through drought and other challenges.

**PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK INCLUDED:**

> "Sometimes, I feel I might be the only one who is trying to make some positive change in my community/industry, which can be isolating. So, it was great to connect with others who are like-minded and experience similar challenges."

> "I've enjoyed making new connections, our interactions, and hearing quite unique insights to the different challenges being faced across the regions."

[26] Writers Who are a professional community management and content curation consultancy that partnered with the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation to moderate and strategically grow the Drought Ready network.

*Source: ARLF Leadership Circles data, provided by ARLF.*

**While overall engagement remains strong, engagement per person declined as Platform membership grew**. Engagement per person is calculated as the sum of posts, comments and reactions, divided by the total number of members for the same period. Since launch, engagement per person has seen a nine per cent decline from 4.1 to 3.8.[27] This may reflect a core group of active users and recent joiners from Changemaker workshops are typically more engaged, than the larger, more passive group. The trend highlights the importance of ongoing coordination and curated content to sustain meaningful participation. This was reinforced by the ARLF element lead, who encouraged ongoing platform maintenance, regular updates, and content curation.

### Members have created new, more diverse and deeper connections.

Connection was a key motivator for individuals who joined Drought Ready. Over 60 per cent of surveyed members stated that they joined to connect with others working in drought- and climate-affected areas[28]. While the survey sample represents a small proportion of the overall membership, the findings nonetheless highlight connection as a key driver of engagement. The strong membership growth and high engagement provided most members with a valuable space to make connections. Specifically, the Platform has facilitated new connections, more diverse networks and deeper connections. Each of these outcomes are explored below.

**Members created new connections.** The Platform's national scale enabled members to connect widely across Australia. Survey respondents reported adding an average of nine new contacts, with one member adding 120.[29] These connections were valued professionally and personally. For example, one member reported, "I made connections that have helped me at the infancy of my career".

> "I am shy by nature, and this has been a great networking opportunity for me"
>
> **- Drought Ready member**

**Members diversified their networks.** One surveyed member reported they have been "mixing with people [they] wouldn't have otherwise met" and "have since gone to a lot more events that aren't within [their] usual stakeholder crown". Another member said that Drought Ready enabled them to "support and learn from others who are diverse from [their] normal social circles." This diversity was supported by the Platform's reach, spanning over 335 local government areas and more than 15 industries, which enabled cross-sectoral and cross-regional connection.

**Members deepened existing connections.** This was most evident among Changemaker and mentoring participants, many of whom joined the Platform to continue relationships formed during these activities. One Drought Ready member reported that, "I joined after the Changemaker workshop to stay connected with the people I was involved with and also build a wider network." Another member reflected that continuing to connect with their mentee through group discussions, such as the Leadership Circle and Community Café, was particularly rewarding.

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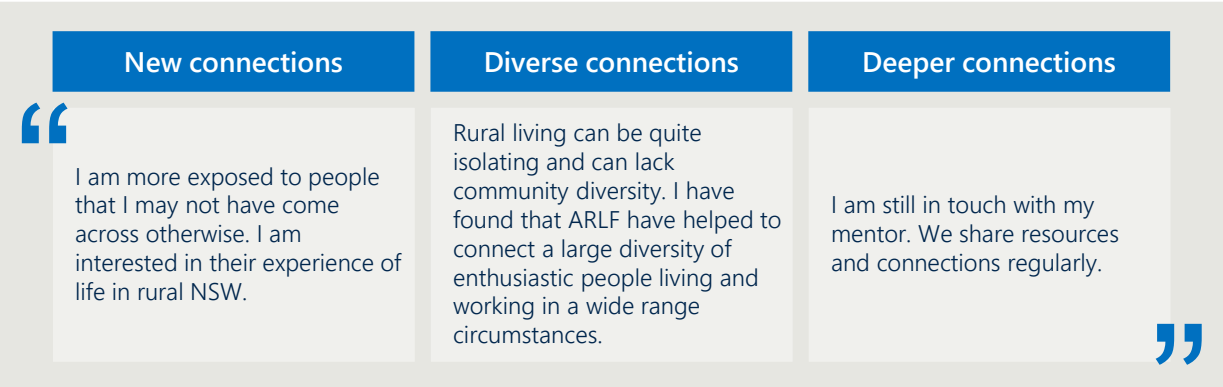
[27] Drought Ready Facebook Insights provided by ARLF, June 2025.
[28] Drought Ready member survey conducted by Nous June 2025. Note that with 50 responses out of 1,421 total members, the margin of error is 13.6 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.
[29] Drought Ready member survey conducted by Nous June 2025. Note that with 50 responses out of 1,421 total members, the margin of error is 13.6 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

Figure 66 exemplifies types of connection that Drought Ready members experienced.

**Figure 66 | Drought Ready members described connections achieved through the Platform**




*Source: Nous analysis of Drought Ready member survey responses 2025 (n=50).*

**Drought Ready's national scale and online format sometimes limited local relevance for members seeking deeper connections.** Two of 50 surveyed and two of seven interviewed members said the network hadn't delivered the connections they expected. Comments included: "It's too Australia-wide for me to have useful connections" and "I find the same voices often, and would love to hear from other voices." These reflections highlight the need to balance national reach with local engagement. Members suggested more face-to-face and local events, place-based content, and opportunities to hear from a broader range of voices.

### 9.3.2 Drought Ready helped members build their capability to prepare for and respond to drought

Drought Ready enabled members to build their capability to prepare for future droughts by fostering peer learning, promoting skill building opportunities and providing a lasting knowledge repository. The following Section explores these findings in detail.

#### Drought Ready enabled members to share knowledge, learn from each other, and access enduring resources.

**Chat groups connected cohorts with shared interests.** The Platform hosts 37 chat groups organised by jurisdiction, community size, topic, or changemaker cohort. These groups were designed to foster peer-to-peer exchange and collaboration among members with aligned goals or commonalities. While direct feedback on chat group utility was limited, one surveyed member highlighted the value of cohort specific connection, noting that "Changemaker workshops have enhanced [Drought Ready] network relationships with confidence and trust." Another member expressed a desire for "more localised content and state-based engagement," reinforcing the need for dedicated spaces that enable relevant connections and effective peer learning. However, one member noted that the number of chat groups diluted their focus and made navigation difficult, "the number of groups on the Facebook pages are confusing". Writers Who recommended continuing to spotlight niche communities through chat groups, recognising their role in supporting meaningful dialogue and targeted knowledge exchange.

**Promoting events and delivering regional activities gave members access to resilience and leadership development experiences.** The Platform promoted 40 events from August 2023 to June 2025. These included a mix of online and in-person events, hosted either by the ARLF or promoted by members. The ARLF hosted nearly 30 online and five in-person events, offering regular opportunities for members to build skills and share knowledge. This consistency helped build trust and engagement. The ARLF Element Lead noted that "participation in online spaces, especially Learning Webinars and Community Cafés, has grown. These forums are emerging as trusted environments where members share experiences, exchange contacts, and collaborate on ideas." A strong example of this consistent offering was the *Leading and Learning* online webinar series (see Figure 67).

**Figure 67 | The Leading & Learning Series provided practical skills and shifted perspectives**

**The Leading & Learning Series enhanced practical leadership skills, shifted perspectives, and supported local drought resilience action.**

**OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED**

**ARLF provided a tailored webinar series to build leadership capability across the Network.** The Leading & Learning Series comprised 19 online webinars between September 2023 and June 2025. Each session featured expert-led presentations designed to build practical leadership skills, shift perspectives and inspire action. Presenters brought expertise in teaching, leadership and hands-on community development.

**The series reached members nationwide.** The workshops were delivered to 427 Drought Ready members. The participants came from nearly every state and territory, excluding the Northern Territory.

**Participants built practical leadership skills, shifted perspectives and inspired community action.** Participants connected, exchanged ideas and learned from one another. ARLF reported: "Attendees valued the opportunity to trouble-shoot related challenges and to go deeper with presenters into the illuminating, inspiring, motivational and practical content they had shared." Feedback from participants confirmed the series was effective in building practical leadership skills, shifting perspectives and inspiring action (see below).

> "Refined and added to my knowledge and skill levels."

> "Have applied systems thinking and innovation frameworks to strategic plans."

> "[I have applied] the tools to seek and evaluate new opportunities to solve a community issue."

*Source: Drought Ready engagement initiatives report, and Leading and Learning Webinar completion survey data provided by ARLF.*

**Open dialogue on the Platform feed supported ongoing peer learning, knowledge sharing and access to skill-building opportunities.** Members used the central feed to ask questions, share insights and promote resources, from climate ethics papers to leadership opportunities. These activities reinforced the Platform's role as a trusted space for collaboration, skill-building and sustained engagement.

> "Members share opportunities and hires within their community, such as empowering women in agri-food tech – a powerful example of next-generation leadership."
>
> **- Writers Who**

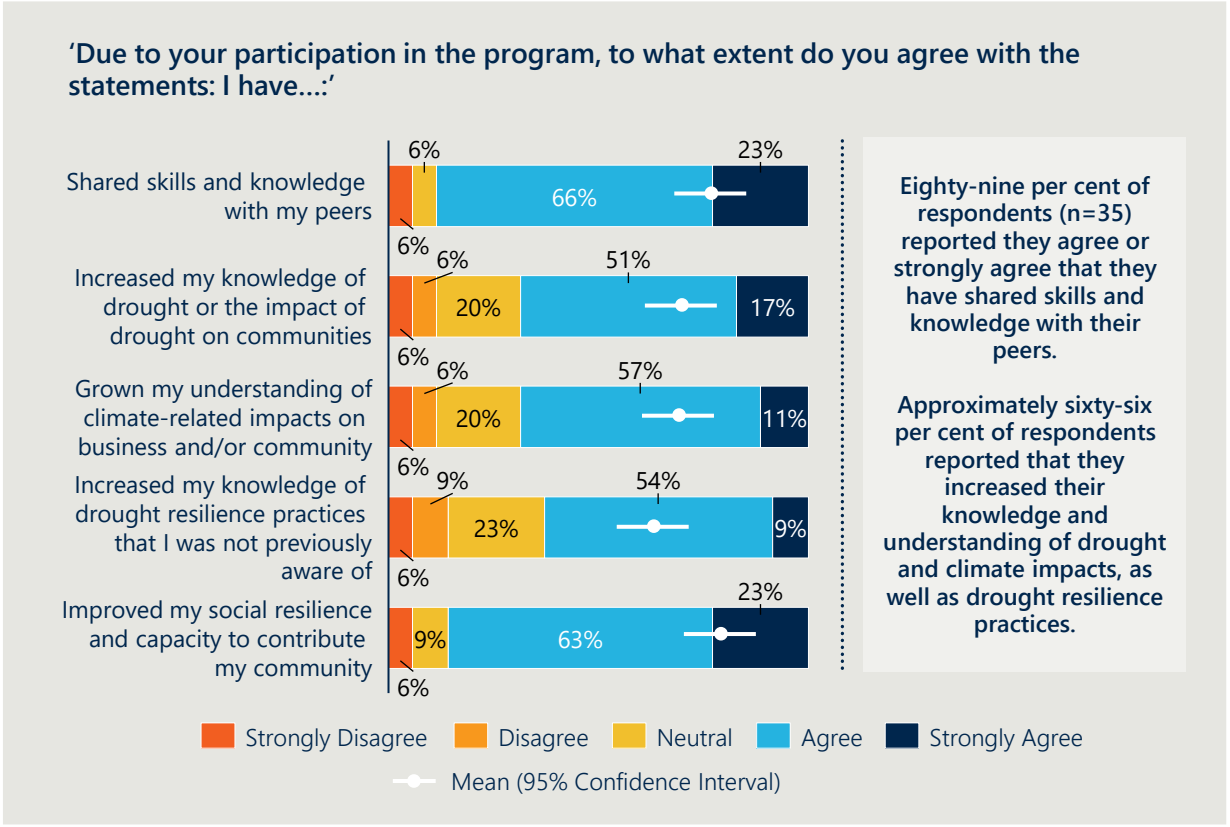
### Drought Ready provided a platform for members to build knowledge, develop skills and gain confidence through peer learning and shared resources.

**Members found value in shared learning.** Peer learning and access to resources were key drivers of value. Over half of surveyed members (57 per cent of 49 responses) joined to build knowledge on drought preparedness. To meet these needs, the Platform hosts a rich collection of shared resources, including five practical guides and one focused on youth engagement. Two curated collections further support members:

- Mental wellbeing resources for young farmers, rural agri-businesses, community staff and volunteers.
- Natural disaster preparedness and response resources, including place-based materials such as 'Understanding Psychological Impacts of Drought in Alice Springs'.

These resources positioned the Network as a space for learning and exchange. Surveyed members highlighted the personal and community benefits of resource sharing. One member reflected that "sharing knowledge and community connectedness enhances individual resilience and in turn community resilience." Figure 68 illustrates the extent to which members achieved individual skill building, knowledge sharing, and community capacity outcomes.

**Figure 68 | Drought Ready survey responses about capability and capacity building.**




*Source: Drought Ready member survey conducted by Nous, (n=50).*

**Members built confidence through the Drought Ready resources and network.** Six surveyed members specifically reported increased confidence, with one reporting "confidence in myself and my opinions" as the most significant change. Others noted improvements in public speaking, starting conversations and leading workshops. One surveyed member reflected, "My public speaking has improved greatly and I'm looking forward to seeing these ideas take action by the end of the year." These experiences demonstrate how the Network supports both technical skill development and personal growth.

> "Having lived and 'managed' climate and associated challenges, [Drought Ready] enabled me to learn how to improve my self-awareness, confidence and control of life, business and environment.
>
> **- Drought Ready member**

**Members reported increased motivation to act locally because of their involvement in the Network**. Six surveyed members identified community leadership as the most significant change they experienced. One surveyed member shared, "I feel empowered and motivated to continue the important work in communities… This has strengthened me and refreshed my enthusiasm." Another member hoped to, "create change as a leader and move others to action." Survey data reinforces this impact, as 40 per cent of surveyed members reported the most significant change was an increase in knowledge and awareness, skills and confidence, or motivation to take community action (see specific themes and responses in Figure 69).

**Figure 69 | Themed survey responses to "What is the most significant change the Network has achieved for you"**

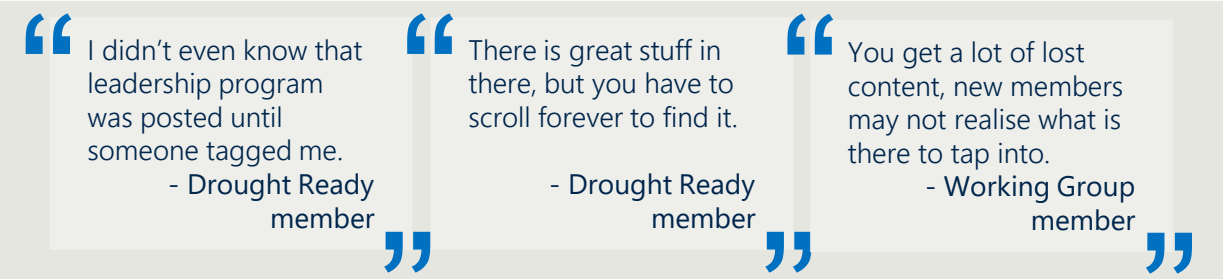
| New knowledge and learning (10) | Increased skills and confidence (4) | Emerging community contribution (6) |
|---|---|---|
| Equipped with new tools to create change. | Confidence in myself and my opinions. | Realising my capacity and strength as a community leader and driver. |

*Source: Drought Ready member survey (n=50), 2025.*

### Resources were most effective when accessible and locally relevant.

**Content accessibility was limited by platform design.** Drought Ready and Working Group members reported difficulties of navigating and accessing content. These challenges were often linked to limited awareness of resources until tagged, and the tendency for valuable material to be overlooked or buried. This reflects the limitations of the Facebook platform's live, open feed, where content is easily missed over time. Figure 70 highlights content navigation and accessibility challenges experienced by members.

**Figure 70 | Navigation and accessibility challenges with the Drought Ready Platform**




*Source: Drought Ready and Working Group member interviews conducted by Nous, 2025.*

**Members valued locally relevant and purpose-driven engagement.** Members reported that the Platform was most effective when content and interactions were locally relevant and purpose driven. Drought Ready met these needs through chat groups and in-person events that provided depth for specific cohorts. One surveyed member reflected, "the sharing of relevant local information and queries with a small group of committed community people has motivated and inspired me to become more actively involved."

Some members found the wider network disconnected from their local context. One reflected, "Drought Ready is too big and most people in it have no connection to my community." These insights highlight the need to balance broad reach with targeted, locally relevant engagement.

"I check the Facebook group and contribute when useful, but it often feels too broad. Smaller, area-focused groups with shared context would be more effective."

**- Drought Ready member**

### 9.3.3 Drought Ready enabled and extended mindset shifts, helping turn reflection into action

Drought Ready has played a pivotal role in sustaining the mindset shifts initiated through the Platform and other elements of the Initiative. This section explores how members broadened their understanding of community challenges, maintained momentum beyond the Leadership Activities and Mentoring Program, and applied insights through local and collaborative initiatives.

#### Drought Ready extended the impact of the Initiative by deepening systems thinking, sustaining mindset shifts, and enabling alumni to lead local action

**Exposure to diverse perspectives helped members think more systemically.** By engaging with viewpoints beyond their communities, members experienced mindset shifts and developed greater system awareness. This helped them better understand complex challenges and identify more collaborative, long-term solutions. Eleven surveyed members identified this exposure as the most significant change achieved by the Network (see Figure 71).

**Figure 71 | Survey responses to "What is the most significant change the Network has achieved for you"**

> Meeting and mingling with different people from across Australia. Learning different perspectives.

> Getting a broader view of people's thoughts, ideas and challenges.

> I am more exposed to people that I may not have come across otherwise and am very interested in their experiences of life in rural NSW.

*Source: Drought Ready member survey conducted by Nous (n=50).*

**Drought Ready helped to sustain mindset shifts beyond other element activities.** The Platform provided a space for ongoing learning, connection and action, extending the impact of programs like Leadership Activities and Mentoring. While mindset shifts were often catalysed through these programs, Drought Ready helped maintain momentum and deepen practice. Working Group members described it as a natural pathway for continued learning. One Mentoring participant shared, "[I am] still in touch with my mentor, we share resources and connections regularly."

> "I've learned just how commonly [changemaker workshops] have led to mindset shifts and inspired actions. It strikes me that [Drought Ready] is the natural 'keep learning, keep growing' space after these mindset shifts have already been sparked."
>
> **- Working Group Member**

**Drought Ready provided a pathway for Initiative participants to apply their leadership skills.** The Platform supported continued learning and action, enabling participants to build on leadership development from programs like Changemaker workshops. It reinforced practice through peer learning and offered real-time opportunities to stay engaged. The ARLF Element Lead noted this continuity is "helping to maintain momentum and deepen the leadership impact across regions." Figure 72 illustrates how a Changemaker participant used the Network to action a local initiative.

**Figure 72 | Changemaker participant used Drought Ready to action a local initiative**

**Drought Ready provided a space for Changemaker participants to continue their learning and deliver local action toward Drought preparedness.**

**OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OBSERVED**

**One Drought Ready member joined the Platform to learn about, and contribute to, drought-preparedness.** They joined following a Changemaker workshop, seeking exposure to new knowledge and to learn about other action people are taking in drought preparedness and community resilience.

**They tested a project idea and asked for feedback on potential funding pathways.** Other members quickly connected them with a relevant media contact, enabling direct advice and practical input.

**The Network was effective for progressing their idea.** The member spoke of the benefits of being exposed to a wide variety of people with different backgrounds (see below).

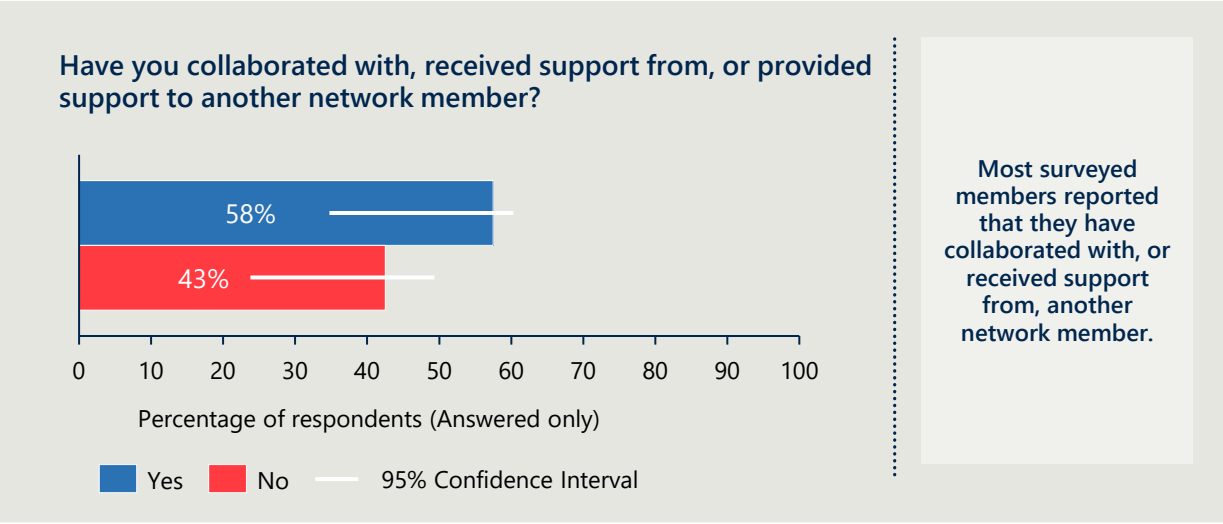
> It was great to get ideas there and having the wide variety of people, like people in the arts and media. It means you get a real mix of people and knowledge.

*Source: Drought Ready member interview conducted by Nous.*

### New and long-standing relationships are beginning to drive collaborative action.

**Relationships formed through Drought Ready are driving collaborative action.** Connections built and nurtured within the Network have contributed to behavioural shifts that are leading to tangible outcomes. Nearly half of surveyed members reported collaborating with or receiving support from another network member (see Figure 73 below).

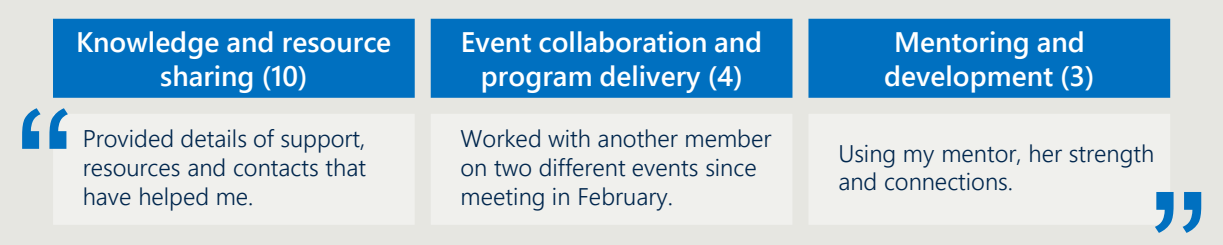
**Figure 73 | Drought Ready member responses to survey question about network collaboration**




*Source: Drought Ready member survey conducted by Nous (n=40). Note there was 40 specific responses to this survey question out of 50 people who filled in the survey.*

Members described leveraging new relationships for mentorship, sharing ideas, and initiating collaborative conversations. These interactions have led to knowledge and resource sharing, joint projects, shared initiatives, and ongoing mentorship. Figure 74 illustrates the types of collaboration enabled by these connections, highlighting the practical impact of relationship-building within the Platform.

**Figure 74 | Themed types of collaboration enabled by Drought Ready connections**




*Source: Drought Ready member survey conducted by Nous (n=50).*

**Drought Ready supported the evolution and maintenance of long-term peer learning relationships.** The Platform helped members maintain and grow connections formed both within and outside the Network. Thirty-eight per cent of surveyed members said it supported long-term relationships. Members described how initial social media interactions evolved into genuine networks, some leading to joint projects. One member shared, "[the long-term relationship] began

via social media posts, then grew into genuine relationships and networks, some even resulting in project collaborations." Others reported community collaborations and joint efforts for project delivery and engagement. These sustained relationships have strengthened collaboration, deepened trust, and extended the impact of the Network beyond individual interactions.

## 9.4 Drought Ready merits continued investment; its impact depends on how it evolves

Drought Ready has proven itself as strategic infrastructure for resilience-building and merits continued investment to evolve, embed and scale. As a national learning network, it connects over 1,400 members, with high engagement and tangible contributions to drought resilience, leadership and community action.

The Platform has extended the reach and impact of other HRCPDI elements, particularly the Changemaker workshops, by sustaining relationships, deepening learning, and catalysing local initiatives. This positions Drought Ready as a key part of a sequenced approach that delivered cumulative benefits and amplifies return on investment. It has helped members broaden their networks, build adaptive capacity, form long-term relationships and take local action. Drought Ready unlocks latent capability, strengthens social capital and drives community-led change.

Between August 2023 and July 2025, HRCPDI investment established a solid impact network. During this time, ARLF and Writers Who curated the Platform and implemented strategies to transition ownership and moderation to members. While the Platform is gaining momentum, its continued success depends on sustained investment and thoughtful design. Without this, momentum will stall, member trust will erode, and the Network's potential will be lost.

**Actions**

- Develop a long-term funding strategy that builds on transitional investment to secure core coordination and content curation functions, while enabling the Platform to evolve, embed and scale sustainably.

### 9.4.1 Four recommendations can maximise Drought Ready's future impact

Drawing on evaluation findings and member feedback, four design features are recommended to maximise Drought Ready's future impact.

#### 1. Clarify the platform's purpose and value proposition to support sustained engagement

As Drought Ready transitions beyond the Initiative, its continued success depends on clearly communicating its evolving purpose while supporting new and existing members to engage meaningfully. New members in particular need clearer guidance on how to navigate the platform and engage meaningfully from the outset. A refreshed value proposition, paired with a structured onboarding experience, will help retain members, attract new participants, and support long-term sustainability.

**Relevant findings:**

9.3.1 The Network achieved strong engagement because of dedicated and effective curation.

9.3.2 Resources were more effective when curated, accessible and locally relevant.

**Actions**

- Co-design a refreshed value proposition with input from key member cohorts (e.g. alumni, regional leaders, young members) to ensure relevance and alignment with evolving needs.
- Update core platform assets, including the "About" Section, pinned posts, and onboarding materials, to reflect the refreshed purpose and strategic direction.
- Continue to refine and track success metrics - such as member engagement, diversity of participation, quality of collaboration, and measurable community impact - to demonstrate value and guide future decision-making.

### 2. Integrate Drought Ready with related programs and infrastructure to amplify impact

Drought Ready's impact is amplified when connected to other HRCPD elements and broader FDF investments. While it sustained momentum for Changemaker participants, integration with other programs was inconsistent. More deliberate sequencing and cross-promotion will create cumulative pathways and reinforce impact.

**Relevant findings:**

9.3.1 Drought Ready membership grew steadily thanks to referrals from other Initiative elements.

9.3.3 Drought Ready extended the impact of the Initiative by deepening systems thinking, sustaining mindset shifts, and enabling alumni to lead local action.

**Actions**

- Design shared onboarding pathways that introduce participants to the full suite of available programs and supports, helping them understand how Drought Ready fits within a broader resilience-building ecosystem.
- Develop a cross-program integration strategy that maps how Drought Ready connects with other HRCPD elements, Drought Hubs, and FDF investments, identifying opportunities for sequencing, shared outcomes, and mutual reinforcement.
- Monitor integration outcomes to understand how cross-program engagement contributes to member retention, capability building, and community action using insights to refine coordination over time.

### 3. Maintain a decentralised model with consistent moderation, informed by platform data

Peer-led content is a strength of the network, but consistent moderation is essential to sustain engagement and ensure quality. Volunteer-led "Content Captain" roles proved more sustainable than traditional moderation, but professional coordination remains critical infrastructure. A hybrid model will preserve community ownership while ensuring responsiveness. To maximise impact, moderation should be guided by platform analytics to ensure content is relevant, inclusive, and targeted to under-engaged cohorts.

**Relevant findings:**

9.3.1 The Network achieved strong engagement because of dedicated and effective curation.

9.3.2 Resources were most effective when curated, accessible and locally relevant.

**Actions**

- Define the core functions of platform coordination and content curation, including scheduling and promoting content, running complementary activities like Leadership Circles, and supporting volunteer moderators, to ensure these are embedded within a clear and sustainable operating model.
- Use platform analytics to guide moderation and content strategy, including quarterly reviews of engagement metrics (e.g. post reach, reactions, comments), identification of under-engaged cohorts, and tailored outreach to improve inclusivity and relevance.
- Develop a moderation toolkit with templates, scheduling tools, and engagement prompts to support both professional and volunteer moderators in sustaining platform activity.

### 4. Enhance content governance to improve accessibility and member value

Members value localised and technical content but often struggle to find it. As the number of chat groups grows, content becomes harder to navigate and risks being lost. Improving tagging, navigation, and visibility will reduce content fatigue and ensure all members can benefit from the Platform's rich resource base.

**Relevant findings:**

9.3.1 The Network achieved strong engagement because of dedicated and effective curation.

9.3.2 Resources were more effective when curated, accessible and locally relevant.

**Actions**

- Design and implement a centralised "Resource Hub" within the Platform, pinned and regularly updated, that links to guides, webinars, chat groups, and curated collections (e.g. mental wellbeing, disaster preparedness).
- Conduct a content audit to identify high-value resources, commonly accessed materials, and underutilised content using platform analytics to guide decisions on what to resurface or retire.

# 10 Conclusion

The Initiative showed what is possible when communities are trusted to lead. Across regional Australia, local organisations, volunteers and emerging leaders drew on their existing strengths, relationships, knowledge, and lived experience to shape resilience efforts that were inclusive, adaptive and deeply rooted in place. Rather than introducing resilience as something new, the Initiative amplified and built upon the strengths already present in these communities.

The evaluation found that locally led action, inclusive leadership and flexible investment were key enablers of change. Communities reframed drought resilience as a shared journey, one that values relationships as much as resources. While impact varied across regions, the Initiative consistently demonstrated the power of community-led innovation to drive preparedness and social cohesion.

Participants described gaining confidence, forming new networks, and stepping into leadership roles. They moved from waiting for solutions to testing ideas, learning from setbacks and building on each other's strengths. As one participant reflected, "I feel like saying I'm a changemaker gives me the confidence to say I want to do different. Before, I didn't know what that looked like."

These outcomes demonstrate that building agency and decision-making capacity at the local level is key to build drought resilience. The Initiative's layered approach — combining leadership development, mentoring, and grants for community-led action — enabled individuals and organisations to step into decision-making roles, drive local priorities, and collaborate across sectors. This experience presents a key lesson for other federal investments: embedding leadership development, agency-building and place-based decision making in program design will strengthen the effectiveness and sustainability of future investments. These factors ensure that communities are empowered to shape, deliver, and sustain resilience initiatives.

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

The next phase of FDF Communities presents a critical opportunity to build on these foundations. FRRR, ARLF and DAFF are now shaping future investments that can unlock the innovation and impact waiting in communities. To maximise the impact of future investments, the evaluation recommends that programs:

- Coordinate delivery to enable collective impact
- Embed place-based co-design for relevance and uptake
- Balance investment across social and human capital and both physical and digital assets
- Support diverse leadership and inclusive engagement

- Fund pathways for local innovation to scale through connected, flexible and low-barrier grants

These design features provide a blueprint for lasting transformation. The groundwork has been laid and reinforced; the next phase can build on these foundations to unlock innovation and resilience for the challenges ahead.

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