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'Place-based' planning and governance for drought resilience - Southern Queensland, Australia.

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Abstract

The Australian Government launched the Future Drought Fund (FDF) in 2019 with an initial investment of $3.9 billion and $100 million per annum for program costs (Australian Government, 2024). Under the FDF's core Regional Drought Resilience Planning (RDRP) program, regional communities across Australia have been supported to develop RDRPs including initiatives to build drought resilience through: better planning and preparedness; more effective responses during drought; and actions to build future resilience. In southern Queensland, the program has been jointly funded by the Australian Government and the Queensland Government, and delivered by UniSQ's Institute for Resilient Regions (IRR) using their participatory planning model that was:

- 'Placed-Based' - involving three levels of government, NGOs, civil society, business sector and individuals.
- 'Holistic' - addressing impacts and proposing actions for: people & communities; regional economy; landscape & natural environment; and infrastructure & built environment.
- 'Co-Designed' - both the process and outputs have been created with local stakeholders.
- 'Locally-Voiced': the RDRPs capture the vital stories and knowledge of people in the region as well as data, science and advice from outside 'experts'.

This paper describes the key learnings from IRR's development of RDRPs in southern Queensland. It outlines: the model; the challenges encountered; and the solutions generated to meet these challenges. Lessons from this work should inform future drought resilience initiatives and governance arrangements.

Introduction

The Australian Government launched the Future Drought Fund (FDF) in 2019 with the aim to "…boost drought and climate resilience" by helping: "…farmers and producers to plan, access climate tools, and share resilient farming practices" and "…communities to plan, and fosters rural and regional leaders and networks" (Australian Government, 2024). The core RDRP program aims to move the management of drought from being reactive to proactive. The Institute for Resilient Regions at University of Southern Queensland (IRR) is a consortium member of the Regional Economies Centre of Excellence (RECoE) and is responsible for the design of the state-wide

RDRP program and the delivery across southern Queensland. Thus far, IRR has completed 5 Regional Drought Plans in southern Queensland that include practical and achievable actions to build drought resilience.

Methods

The Queensland Government replicated the regional boundaries of the Regional Resilience Strategies (QRA, 2020) for the RDRP program – 14 regions across the state. Whilst guided by broad instructions from government, IRR developed a co-design model (Mellor, 2022) that actualised the government goals of 'locally-owned, locally-led and co-designed'. The model (see Figure 1.) was highly participatory and included key elements of 'Collective Impact' (e.g. Kania and Kramer, 2011), 'Ethno-Narrative' research (Mellor, 2009) and 'Deliberative Decision-making' (e.g. Fishkin, 2009). Work with regional stakeholders was undertaken by multi-skilled and multi-disciplinary teams and the reiterative co-design process took between 12-18 months per region.

IRR chose to organise the examination of drought under four 'themes' (see Figure 2.): People, Culture & Community; Economy; Landscape & Natural Environment, Infrastructure & Built Environment. After testing with focus groups, a modified versions of Crossman's D-RAMP model (2018) was used to develop actions to: Plan/Prepare for Drought; Respond to Drought; and Build Resilience to Future Droughts (see figure 3.)

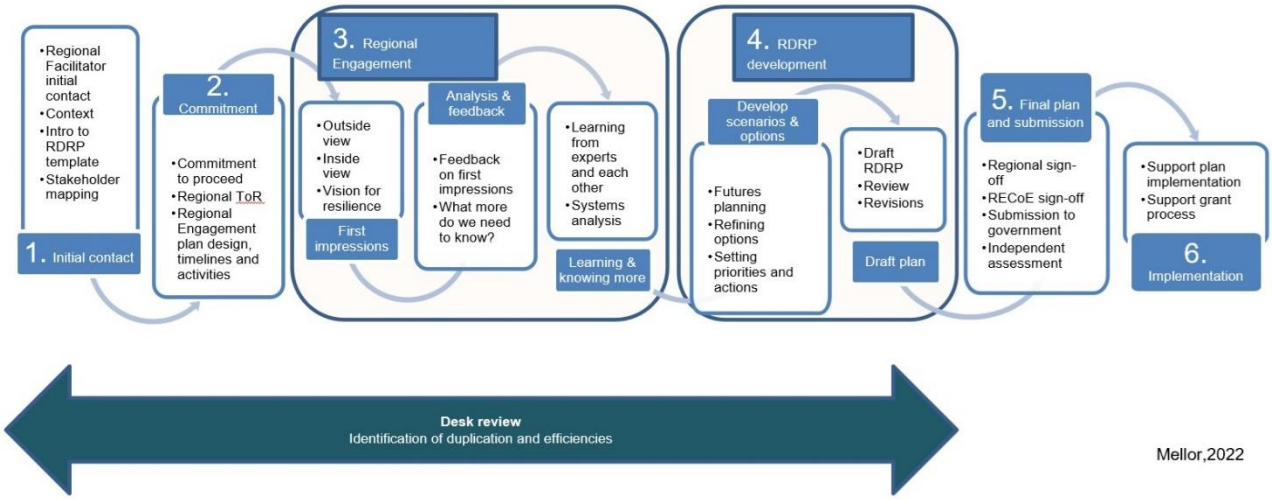

Fig. 1. IRR's participatory and deliberative model of engagement

Fig. 2. Queensland RDRP elements of drought resilience. Source: IRR

Figure 3. Modified D-RAMP Model. (Adapted from Crossman,2018)

Results

There are currently five completed Regional Drought Resilience Plans (RDRPs) for southern Queensland – some awaiting Ministerial approval. The RDRPs are documented 'Plans of Action' and are intended for use by the regions themselves as well as by government decision-makers and potential funders/investors. Our research and involvement in the RDRP project thus far has revealed a number of critical lessons, outlined below.

Drought Resilience Planning is more than just the Plan... it's the Process.

The process of engagement and co-design is a critical factor that: identifies community champions; brings together key stakeholders; provides 'backbone' support; and helps people in regions develop practical actions that meet their priorities. It involves important aspects of 'ethno-narrative' work as people are encouraged to tell stories of drought from their own perspectives and in their own words. They are also supported to explore possible scenarios and 'story-build' their agreed actions for future drought resilience. It requires a reiterative and deliberative process.

Hence, it takes time, it takes patience, and adequate scheduling must allow people 'pauses' and breaks to reflect, consider and learn more in order to make informed decisions.

Every region has its own unique 'Drought Personality' …so drought resilience planning has to be 'place-based'.

This work has revealed that the typography, impacts, and narratives of drought vary significantly from region to region. Climates, topography, hydrology, history as well as the past and present human interactions with the land, combine to create very different 'stories' of drought in different places. Drought amplifies existing place-based issues related to: community health and wellbeing; agricultural and business practices; remoteness; access and infrastructure; competitive (dis)advantage and the capacity of local communities to adapt and innovate. This complexity makes each region unique and requires a place-based approach to drought planning and governance. As noted by one participant, this requires "…*viewing the world from inside out*".

Place-based approaches require multi-disciplinary perspectives and multi-skilled teams.

Drought is not just about water, rainfall or climate. It is not just about the natural environment or human practices on that land. Drought is most beneficially viewed, concurrently, from multiple perspectives – we summarised them into four themes and that model proved practical and appropriate for working with regional stakeholders. This requires that the planning approach draws on a wide range of skills and perspectives. This can often be a challenge for government agencies that are typically organised around a single perspective or function.

Utilising many kinds of knowledge and information to make informed decisions.

Critical to our success has been a commitment to using (and respecting) many sources of knowledge to inform the process and assist communities to make better decisions. We have brought data, science, 'innovations' and so-called 'outside knowledge' into the regions we work with, but also valued the tremendous wealth of 'local knowledge'. Local knowledge has often been 'historical', 'traditional' or 'cultural', and in some cases we have been granted access to knowledge from traditional owners or First Nations people. It is critical to often 'triangulate' pieces of knowledge – in some cases they confirm the local stories, and in others they challenge historical tropes or offer new insights or possibilities. The challenge for scientists, academics, and 'experts' is to be able to communicate or 'package' their knowledge in such a way that it can be a valuable asset to a wide range of people and contribute to better local outcomes.

'Resilience' is hard to define…but that doesn't matter

The World Bank defined resilience as: "…the ability to anticipate, absorb, accommodate or recover from the effects of a hazardous event in a timely and efficient manner" (World Bank, 2019). However, in practice, resilience is much harder to define. For some (government agencies in particular) this is problematic and there are continued efforts from some quarters to define resilience 'more clearly or 'more precisely'. Our approach has been to embrace the lack of precise definition and use the question "What does resilience mean to you?" as a prompt to open valuable local conversations. Those conversations developed into collective, regional understandings of what resilience has meant in the past and what it could mean in the future. That understanding can then lead to developing and deciding on appropriate priorities and actions.

Conclusions

IRR's work on the Regional Drought Resilience Plans has provided not only important outcomes – the RDRPs themselves are now reliable and valued regional assets for future investment in, or decisions about, drought preparedness and resilience – but also highlighted some critical issues that should be considered in future programs related to building resilience to drought and climate variability. The work has also helped shape ideas about the governance processes and structures needed to effectively manage drought in the future.

Acknowledgements
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