



CASE STUDY

Australia: Strengthening Community Engagement and Women's Leadership in Response to Land Degradation Challenges: Corporación Nacional Forestal (CONAF)

Summary

Due to the frequency and severity of droughts, along with the amplification of climate change, Australia faces increasing challenges. To address this, an initiative known as Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative (HRCPI) was launched by the Future Drought Fund. The initiative helps support women and communities in building sustainable land management (SLM) practices, and also drought resilience. Furthermore, HRCPI is able to foster leadership and social resilience in drought-prone areas through programs such as mentoring, grants, learning networks and access to expertise. As of now, over 580,000 AUD in grants have been distributed, with 16 women-led projects supported

Background

Australia is increasingly affected by climate-induced droughts, threatening agricultural productivity, environmental sustainability and social cohesion. Droughts have become more frequent and severe, affecting rural communities' economic, social and environmental well-being. Furthermore, in this context, women in agriculture are disproportionately affected due to traditional gender roles, limited access to resources, and underrepresentation in leadership. Due to this, the Future Drought Fund established the Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative (HRCPI). This initiative aims to support not only drought preparedness but also leadership development, particularly among women in rural communities, to strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability.

Actions taken

The HRCPI was launched as a collaborative, multi-pronged response backed by AUD 29.6 million and partnerships with the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR) and the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF). Its objectives include enhancing community resilience, building leadership capacity (particularly for women), and promoting sustainable drought adaptation Practices.

The initiative includes five key program elements:

1. Community Impact Program - funding of up to AUD 500,000 per region to develop co-designed local projects.
2. Small Network Grants - up to AUD 50,000 to support local networking and collaboration.
3. National Mentoring Program - a 12-month program matching mentors with mentees, particularly focusing on women's leadership.
4. National Learning Network - a peer-support network for knowledge-sharing.
5. National Expertise Pool - an online platform giving access to specialist knowledge.

Stakeholders included federal departments, rural organizations, local associations, and community leaders. Projects were prioritized based on local need, feasibility, and capacity for social impact. Digital platforms, Facebook groups, and co-design methodologies were used to engage and support participants

Outcomes

The HRCPI made significant progress in building social and leadership capacity in drought-prone regions:

- Over 580,000 AUD was invested to support women leaders
- 159/250 mentoring participants were women, helping build resilience and leadership in local drought response
- Social capital and networks were strengthened, enhancing the ability to cope with the drought impacts
- The community projects improved collaboration and access to resources

However, challenges and gaps remain including:

- A broader evaluation being in progress to identify unaddressed needs
- Long-term sustainability and project funding uncertainty
- Lack of sufficient access to resources in some communities or facing institutional barriers to engagement

Sustainability prospects are promising due to engagement, mentoring systems, and access to ongoing learning platforms. The outcomes have potential national policy implications, and has also had a positive influence on leadership representation and capacity building for women in agriculture

Lessons Learned

Targeted support for women is transformative: Empowering women through mentorship and funding will help build local leadership and also promote long-term sustainability

Social capital is crucial: Strong networks and community collaboration can significantly enhance resilience and the capacity to manage drought impacts

Local engagement drives success: to ensure effectiveness and local ownership of drought resilience strategies, it could be worthwhile creating co-designed and community-specific projects

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Organisation

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification - UNCCD, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations - FAO

Year

2024

Country

Australia

Region

Oceania

Keywords

Drought resilience , Sustainable Land Management (SLM) , Climate Change Adaptation , Leadership development , Community empowerment , Capacity Building , Rural resilience , Gender , Women , Women's Leadership
Language English

Related IWRM Tools

Integrated Drought Management Plans

Source URL: <https://waterknowledgehub.org/case-study/australia-strengthening-community-engagement-and-womens-leadership-response-land>