

Warren and its people are integral to the cotton industry. Building resilience in cotton-growing communities is a priority for CRDC.

Supporting change for resilient regional communities

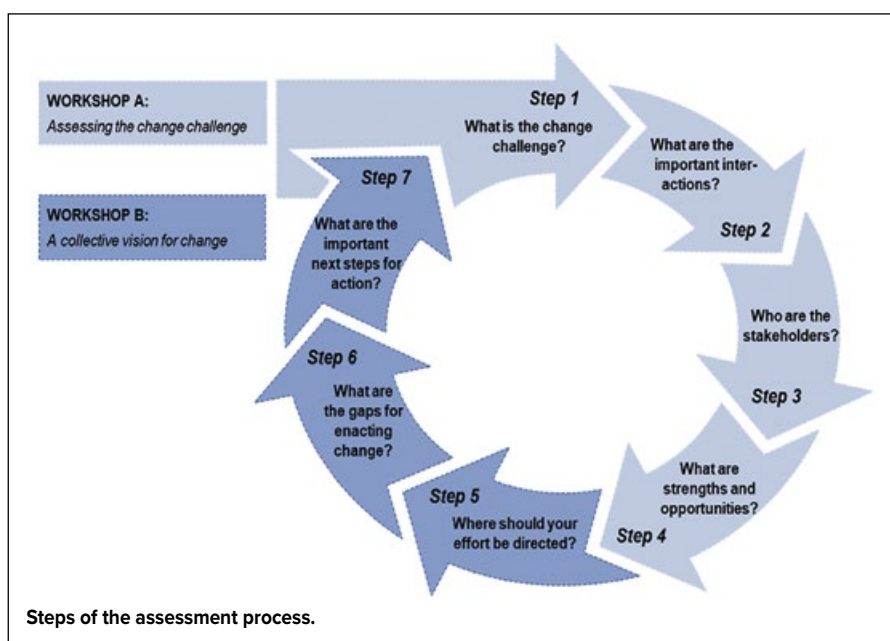
It may sound like a cliché, but it's never been more true: we are living in turbulent times.

People are having to do and respond to things that they perhaps never imagined. Climate, workforce challenges, water policy and technology are evolving at a rapid rates. Each of these present challenges for regional communities and local leaders.

A changing operating environment means we need to develop different skillsets that promote greater collaboration, adaptation and capacity building: we need to be resilient. Fortunately, for many rural, regional and remote communities, these skills are already prevalent. But what is resilience and how do you cultivate it?

In 2016 CRDC initiated a resilience assessment of the Australian cotton industry, which identified resilience as the ability to absorb a shock or change and flourish in spite of change. These drivers of change are pushing the Australian cotton industry towards critical thresholds, leading to significant changes in system dynamics at multiple scales including water availability (farm scale), network connectivity (regional scale) and social licence (industry scale).

This initial resilience assessment did not include how communities are integral to supporting the cotton industry.



The need for rural, regional, remote communities to become self-sufficient is increasing and more than ever, communities need to be able to gather resources, respond, be adaptive and flexible. The question is how?

Researchers have worked closely with communities in Warren and Walgett in NSW and Goondiwindi in South-East Queensland, as case studies to understand what makes regional communities vulnerable, adaptive and resilient, and what support they might require.

The Thresholds for Resilience in Regional Communities project, supported

by CRDC, involved researchers from the Rural Innovation Research Group (RIRG) at the University of Melbourne and the University of New England. Lead researcher, RIRG's Dr Jana-Axinja Paschen, ran two workshops in the towns with community and industry participants including local councils, NSW DPI Resilience Officers, CWAs, Cotton Grower Associations, Local Land Services, growers and business owners. The workshops were adapted for these cotton-growing communities from more than a decade of work by the RIRG and international resilience assessment frameworks.

The participants defined many

shared challenges they currently faced and then focused on identifying their community strengths and assets to develop key opportunities for action. The workshops also helped participants discuss and start to define the roles in supporting community resilience, including community organisations, the cotton industry and other agricultural sectors, local and state government bodies.

A planning tool developed by the research team assisted participants in developing action plans for taking the next steps toward goals they identified.

Areas for action towards building community resilience identified by community participants included:

- ◆ improving networks, communication, and opportunities for new partnerships and decision-making at regional

community, cross-industry and local government levels;

- ◆ establishing local/regional think tanks and forums for community organisations, cross-industry groups and business owners;
- ◆ pursuing a full-time grant writing and project management position located in council to assist with the management of and attaining funding for regional resilience building initiatives;
- ◆ pursuing funding for and running capacity building training for grant writing, marketing, leadership, advocacy, community-level governance skills;
- ◆ strengthening local/regional cross-industry agricultural skills training capacities; and

- ◆ environmental groups working with council and education institutions to raise profile of environmental assets and environmental education opportunities.

A *Resilience Assessment Workbook* for cotton communities was also created through the project, which can be used by other regional communities and groups to build capacity to grapple with complex change challenges that require collaborative action. The workbook will be available through the CRDC and RIRG websites.

For more

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Moving forward in the same direction

Previous NSW Rural Woman of the Year Kate Schwager (pictured) is no stranger to helping build and promote rural communities, however, she says resilience workshops near her home in Walgett in North-West NSW have created new ways of thinking.

The workshops were a part of CRDC-supported research to understand how regional communities deal with change and become resilient. Researchers held meetings in Walgett, Goondiwindi and Warren.

"I initially thought it was a great opportunity for community groups to get together to discuss what was needed to go forward and get through the recent drought," Kate said.

"I think people were a little sceptical and did not quite understand what it was about, but after being given the opportunity to put forward their ideas, most realised how beneficial it is to motivate people to put plans in place that are created by their community, to build its resilience."

Kate says at the second meeting in Walgett attracted many people from outside the region.

"There were lots of comments on how the meetings were a great opportunity for other regions to use the tools created by the researchers



and template for the workshops to find what is missing in their community to go forward," she said.

"More and more communities need to be resilient and be aware of how they are seen by people who travel or move to a community: do they have what is needed by people in their community?"

Kate says with the addition of COVID-19 still hanging over our heads and people moving to rural areas, the template could be used to bring groups together "that normally don't get together". She also believes the

facilitators coming from outside the community was integral.

"It means less friction which can at times be very confronting in small communities, and not helpful," Kate said.

"The success of these meetings is in giving groups an opportunity to see their community in a different light and ask the hard questions of how they can go forward and put ideas together without the infighting that can occur.

"The outcome of these meetings has pushed our council and others to promote the community in a different light.

"More meetings need to be facilitated as this was genuinely a different way of getting outcomes to benefit all involved."

After the first workshop at Walgett, Kate decided to help Walgett with a website, which she set up as part of the Connect North West Group.

"As with the whole network, it is very much community-based work as a large amount of advertising on the network was lost due to the drought.

"The website has been revamped and connected with a business directory, and I'm already getting a lot of calls from that section of the website, even though it's not finished yet!"