

Empowering communities to build regional resilience: A case study of the Goulburn Murray Irrigation District in Australia's Murray-Darling Basin

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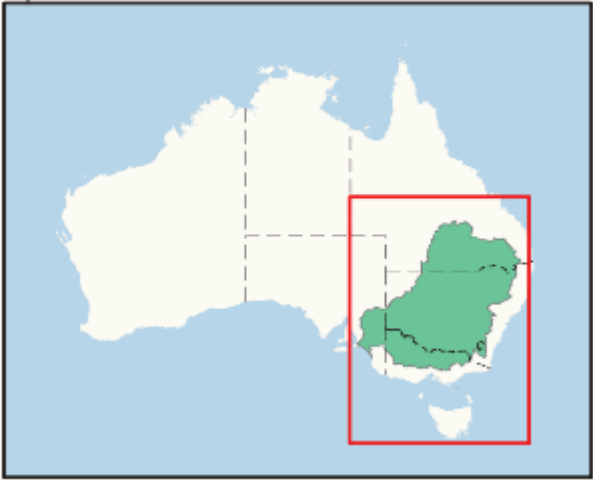


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Aerial photo of the Murray River, Source: Michael Storer

Australia's Murray Darling Basin (MDB)



Photos and map source: Murray Darling Basin Authority



Fish Kills on the Darling River at Menindee

Source: Sydney Morning Herald 2019



Irrigators burning the Guide to the proposed Basin Plan

Source: Sydney Morning Herald 2011



The Darling River in drought

Source: The Guardian 2019

Deliberative democracy: A normative theory that those affected by a decision should have the right, opportunity, and capacity to participate in deliberation about that decision and have a consequential effect on the outcome (Ercau et al. 2019)

Results 1. Community has a critical role in building regional resilience



“[Government] need to understand that communities have the right – have the social justice right to have the resources to do their own planning”

Participant 15, community/private enterprise

Results 2: This role is restricted by current governance arrangements, particularly in making strategic land-use decisions

Renewable energy transition

- Renewable energy as an opportunity
- \$2bn investment in upgrading irrigation infrastructure
- Concerns over the “Swiss cheese effect”
- Victorian Planning Amendment VC161 (state) policy to protect declared irrigation districts

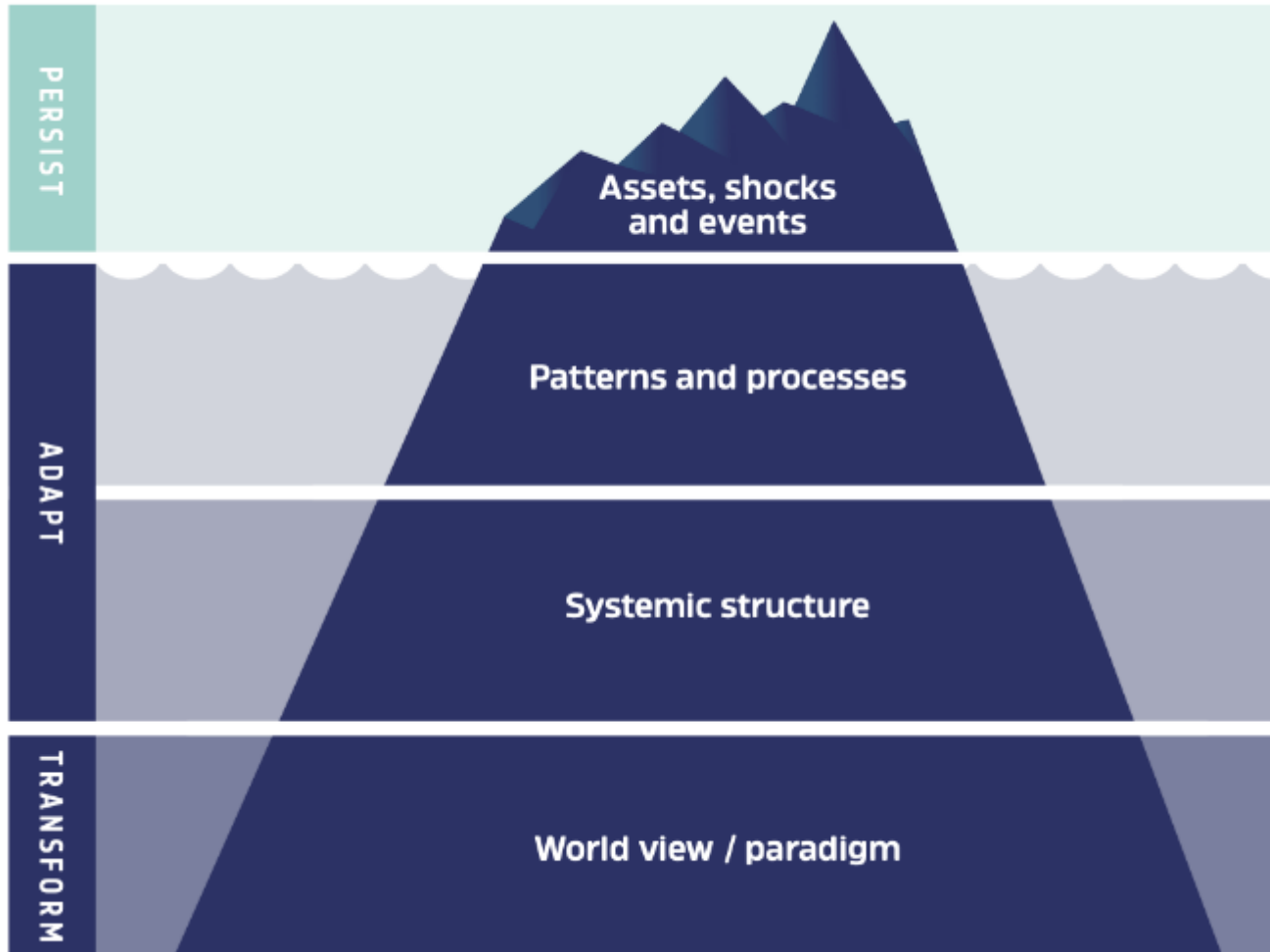
*“Well, if we are going to have our renewables capacity for our community in our area, where are we going to put it?”
And we never had that discussion”*

Participant 15, community/private enterprise

“There’s a really live tension in the region now about solar farms and whether they should be allowed to be developed on irrigation country...every time we take out a thousand hectares of the irrigation district and cover it in glass panels, all of a sudden, the irrigation network’s not being fully utilised.”

Participant 12, community/private enterprise

Results 3: The Resilience Strategy is facing significant challenges due to government short termism and conservative culture



“Just running around up there on top of the iceberg...that doesn’t fix anything. You’ve got to go down and dig deep at the fundamental things that are causing the iceberg to shake and melt.”

Participant 15, community/private enterprise

The Iceberg Model (Goulburn Regional Partnerships 2020)

Results 4: Community development of regional resilience requires support from government to overcome these challenges



“place-based ground-up sort of work that’s been well thought through and well-developed from regions needs to be respected a lot better”

Participant 12, community/private enterprise

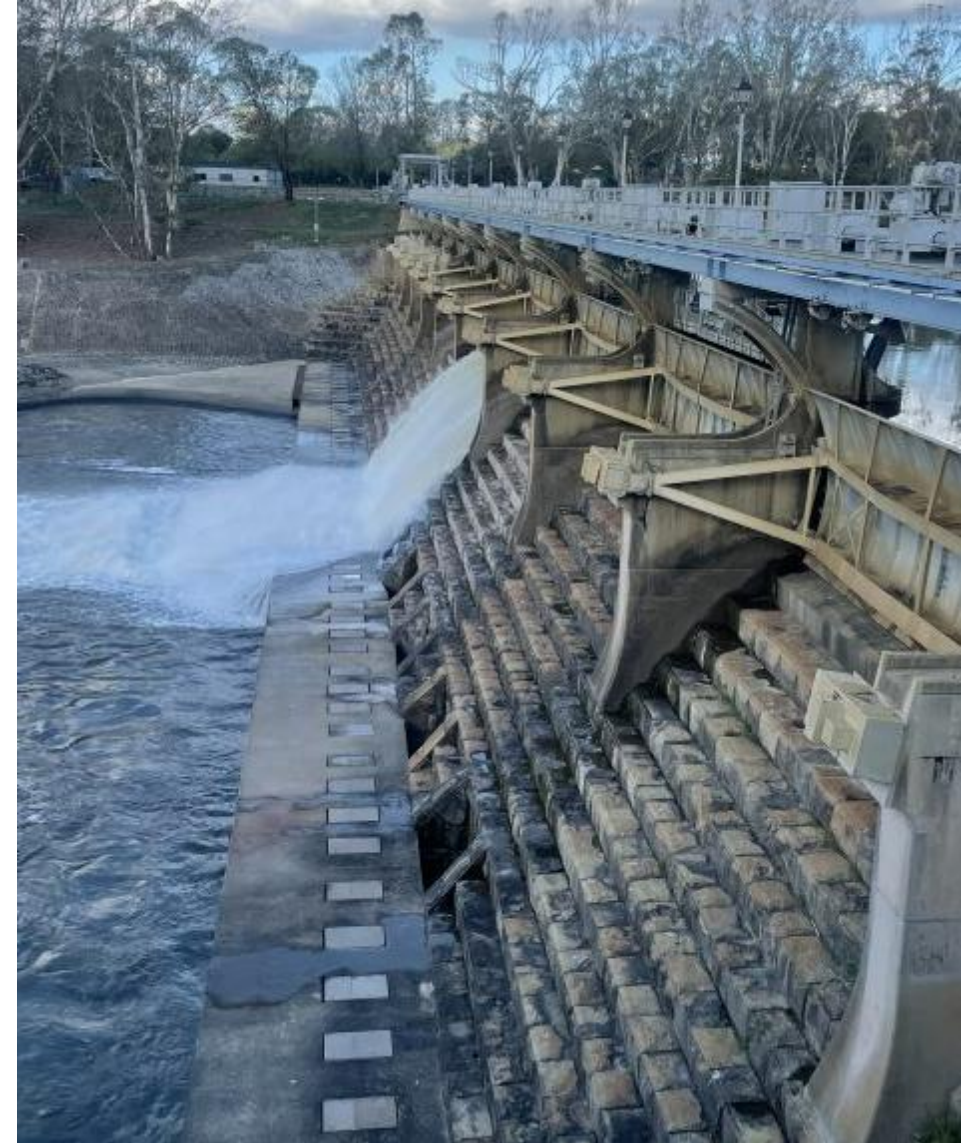
Discussion

1. Participants universally thought communities should be more involved in regional decision-making

- Well-established in literature
 - Increasing effort by government to involve communities
 - More deliberative spaces emerging
- Increasing volume does not necessarily improve quality (Ercan and Hendriks, 2013)
 - Can be tokenistic
 - May reinforce existing power relations
 - Can burden communities with unwanted responsibilities

2. Community involvement is particularly restricted in making strategic land-use decisions

- Historical irrigation dominance in MDB water policy
- Parties with interests in maintaining irrigation can mobilise collective action more easily than those with environmental interests (Marshall and Alexandra, 2016)



Goulburn Weir: First major diversion structure built for irrigation in Australia (1891), located in the GMID
Photo: Ruby Olsson

Discussion

3. The Resilience Strategy is facing significant challenges due to government short termism and conservative culture

- Both government short termism and risk aversion supported by literature
- Government flexibility and adaptation needs to be balanced with the need to maintain due process, accountability and transparency

4. The Resilience Strategy is facing significant challenges due to government short termism and conservative culture

- Raises issues of accountability and legitimacy



The Winton Wetlands, Goulburn Murray Irrigation District
Photo: Ruby Olsson



Conclusion

A farm in the GMID
Photo: Ruby Olsson

The Murray River at the Barmah Choke
Photo: Ruby Olsson



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Thank you

Lake created by the Goulburn Weir, GMID

Photo: Ruby Olsson

Limitations:

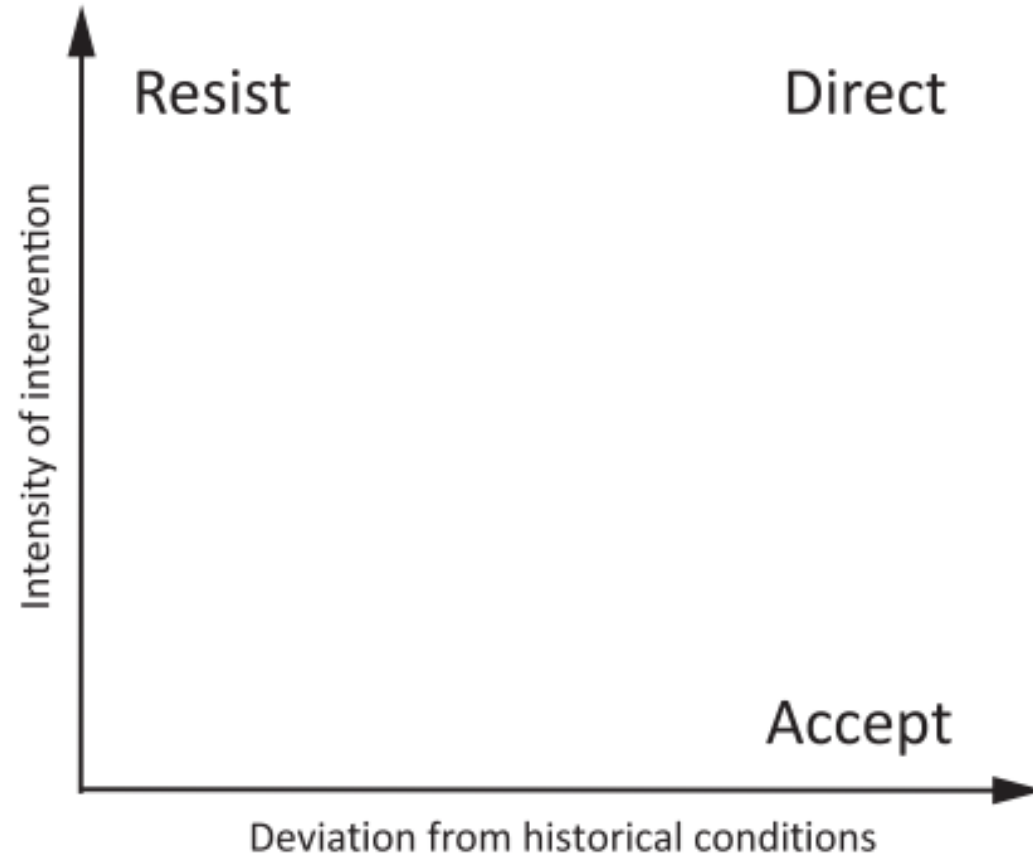
- Small sample size (n=20) of interview participants:
 - Did not interview community members not involved in the Strategy
 - Small representation of government agencies, particularly at local and state level
- Early stages of the Strategy's implementation

Further research:

- Into comparative community-led strategies
- Raises questions including:
 - How might similar strategies be replicated in other MDB regions?
 - How might community-led deliberative spaces help solve Basin-scale issues?

Limitations and Further Research

RAD Frameworks



Five areas for intervention

People from this region have come together to identify “resilience interventions”, which are ways we will try to influence the resilience of our region. These interventions fall into five streams that embody the principles of resilience in real and practical ways.

RESILIENCE IMPLEMENTATION PLAN – FIVE STREAMS

- a) Futures of agriculture 
- b) Learning for change 
- c) Circular economy 
- d) Natural & built assets 
- e) Leadership & coordination 