

Expanding the Community of Community-Based Adaptation

Key Findings

- **Adaptation to climate change at the local community level can reduce the vulnerability of individuals and households to climate impacts. However, 'community-based' does not mean that communities can adapt entirely on their own to climate variability and change. The success of community-based responses depends on the wider enabling conditions, which are facilitated by external institutions and policies.**
- **The understanding and use of the term 'community-based' needs to be broadened to encompass external trends, processes and pressures. For example, adaptation at the local level can be enabled or obstructed by the wider policy and market contexts within which it takes place.**
- **Not all members of a community are equally vulnerable to climate change. To successfully implement complex adaptation actions, it is important that the term 'community' is understood to include a diverse collection of households and individuals.**
- **Factors that enable some individuals or groups to adapt can hinder others from doing so.**
- **Adaptation is circumstance-specific: there is no one-size-fits-all list of adaptation measures that can be implemented in all locations.**

What is adaptation?

Adaptation is the process of adjusting to new conditions, stresses and natural hazards that result from climate change. Adaptation to climate change takes place in response to *experienced* impacts as well as in anticipation of *expected* impacts. For this reason, adaptation can be a spontaneous process that takes place depending on existing capacity (so-called 'adaptive capacity'), but can also be planned. Both spontaneous and planned adaptation may require additional outside support. Policies, plans and projects exist to facilitate adaptation on all levels, from local to regional.

Community-based adaptation and development

There is growing interest in local-level adaptation – what is known as community-based adaptation (CBA) – because it is at this level that the benefits of adaptation will be most obvious. Adaptation at the local level has clear links with development, because many of the adaptation actions needed at the household and individual level are also high on the sustainable development agenda. CBA is traditionally defined in a narrow way as action that takes place in a community, based on local adaptive capacity. Typically (although many communities are used to dealing with climate variability) their capacity to deal with the rate and scale of impacts of climate change is much more limited. Therefore the main focus of community-based efforts is on building additional adaptive capacity and implementing adaptation responses that are appropriate to the local contexts.





Local-level adaptation links development and vulnerability reduction

A focus on community can help make the direct connection between meeting development needs and improving adaptive capacity. For this reason, the local level is considered to be one of the most effective entry points for adaptation. But at the national level the processes for addressing risk and local development needs are often not sufficiently integrated. This widens the gap between addressing the impacts of climate change and dealing with the processes that are making people more exposed and sensitive to those impacts.

The key to a transition toward successful adaptation lies in reducing people's vulnerability. Empirical evidence shows that in order for an adaptation process to take place, it is necessary to address the underlying causes of vulnerability; in other words, the factors that make people sensitive and exposed to climate-related stress, hazards and change. Vulnerability is closely linked with development and is influenced by many factors, some of which cannot be tackled by community-level actions. These factors include the policy and market context within which CBA takes place. For example, crop choice is closely linked to climatic factors such as precipitation and temperature, but in the case of cash crops is also shaped by national and local markets. When crops are selected on the basis of climatic conditions, they must also have a market value. Furthermore, the ability to move crops to different markets is often vital for local people sell their goods, but may be dependent on the existence of a road and access to transport.

People do respond – but need enabling conditions

Fieldwork in the Hindu-Kush Himalayas shows that, although responses to climate variability and change are taking place within communities, these responses are not isolated from the wider policy and market environment. Not only are communities dependent on their larger political, institutional and financial context, they are also influenced by other communities and cities. For example, seasonal migration to find work is a traditional method of diversifying income and providing insurance for difficult times. For such migration to be a viable response to climate variability and change, 'enabling conditions' must exist, which in this case means sufficient demand for labour in the vicinity.

People are not passive victims who lack the drive to improve their lives. However, despite humanity's many creative adaptation responses, these are rarely effective unless they are aligned with the development context in which people live. Enabling conditions are needed that allow livelihoods that are more resilient to a changing climate to take root and develop sustainably. National policies and institutions can and do have an important impact on local-level livelihood choices. On the one hand, if local needs and concerns are communicated upwards, national policy can be influenced to better reflect local priorities. On the other hand, if local concerns are ignored or if no channel of communication is open, policy at higher levels can not only be inconsistent with local needs, but also maladaptive – causing vulnerability rather than tackling it. National policies often do not take into account or build on existing capacity to respond, especially if the relevant stakeholders do

not explicitly identify this capacity. Thus, even if responses are taken at a local level, they may not be able to influence the real cause of vulnerability. This can mean that people become trapped in a vicious cycle, struggling to cope with vulnerability without moving towards sustainable adaptation.

Communities are not homogenous

The concept of 'community' is often used to refer to a homogenous collection of people sharing common interests, resources or beliefs that create a common identity. In reality, communities can be composed of many different groups, whose interests may conflict when shared resources are adversely affected. Whether these groups differ ethnically or because of religion or politics, they may all call the same location home but have different functions within that society. When thinking about CBA we must recognise two important dimensions: the link between the community itself and the wider context; and the diversity of the community. Within a community, one group's successful response to drought may be the cause of another group's increased vulnerability to it.

In Central America and Ethiopia, for example, religion serves to translate the impacts of climate variability in a range of ways, meaning that members of the same community belonging to different religions experience natural hazards differently. Cultural norms and traditions also lead to contrasting experiences. In India, members of separate castes perceive hazards differently because of their diverse livelihood activities. Livelihoods, ethnicity and religion also serve to tie people to similar groups located elsewhere, creating a sense of community that spans beyond physical borders. Therefore the term 'community' can mask much of the diversity found in one location, and with it the complexity that this brings in terms of building adaptive capacity.

Because assets are distributed unevenly within a community, broader policy and market processes carry different implications for different groups and individuals. Those who have more physical assets may not depend on a strong social network in order to manage when crops fail. It is this mosaic of conditions, assets and opportunities that determines a community's collective adaptive capacity; but looking at the collective level will not give a good picture of how to build adaptive capacity, which will come down to individuals and households. This is why adaptation actions will vary from



household to household and ultimately from community to community. Consequently, strategies that successfully reduce vulnerability to climate variability and change in one location may not work at all elsewhere, even if many characteristics of the communities appear similar. At present there are inadequate methodological tools to assess whether responses that reduce risk in one location could have the same benefits in another. A useful contribution to knowledge on adaptation to climate change would be an analytical framework to provide such guidance.

'Community' is not the only actor in community-based adaptation

Community-based adaptation has been an important platform for explaining the strong links between adaptation and development. And it should continue to be used as such. But it must be clear that even 'successful' CBA may not function without taking into account the internal dynamics and external enabling conditions that are unique for every community. This means that imposing 'adaptation plans' from the top down runs a high risk of excluding some or all members of a community and providing little benefit for it, or – in the worst case – causing increased vulnerability to climate change. Therefore national adaptation planners must be aware of local dynamics and communicate with local actors and groups to align the enabling environment with the capacity that already exists in communities.



This brief is based on findings emerging from:

Schipper, E.L.F. (2007) 'Climate Change Adaptation and Development: Exploring the Linkages' Tyndall Working Paper No. 107, University of East Anglia: Norwich.

Schipper, E.L.F. 'Religion as an Integral Part of Determining and Reducing Climate Change and Disaster Risk: an Agenda for Research' in Voss, M. (ed.) *Climate Change: The Social Science Perspective*, VS-Verlag: Wiesbaden, Germany (forthcoming).

The Sida-funded project *Too Much, Too Little Water*, managed by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)



Recommendations

Recognise that 'community-based' adaptation implies that local actors are driving the shift towards adaptation, but that adaptation cannot succeed without appropriate external policy and market contexts.

Be cautious of efforts to implement adaptation measures in one community that have worked elsewhere. Such measures may have been successful only because of the enabling conditions, which are never the same for different communities.

Consider that factors which enable adaptation in one situation may constrain it in another. This could vary for the same person from season-to-season, or for different people in the same season due to the changing nature of the variables that drive vulnerability.

Develop methods, tools and/or analytical frameworks to understand whether a measure that works in one place could work in another place.

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