

The Role Of Communities Based Initiative In Shaping Climate Action At The Local Level

Deepika Meena

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, India
deepikamimroth@gmail.com

Abstract:

Climate change remains a major challenge to achieving inclusive and sustainable development at all levels. Its negative effects are felt most acutely at the local scale, where vulnerabilities are shaped by context-specific factors such as socio-economic conditions, ecological systems, human and institutional capacities, governance structures, and infrastructure. Across both developing and developed countries, hundreds of millions of people are exposed to the direct and indirect consequences of climate change. Those communities whose livelihoods depend heavily on natural resources face the greatest risks and are therefore disproportionately impacted.

Research indicates that local communities, often working alongside local governments, the private sector, and civil society organizations, are implementing adaptation measures at the community level. These initiatives promote collective responses to climate risks through participatory planning processes that, to some extent, amplify the voices of poor and vulnerable groups. They also encourage the design of cost-effective and socially acceptable solutions that align closely with local development priorities, while fostering stronger partnerships between communities and a diverse range of stakeholders operating at different scales.

Introduction

Climate change is increasingly undermining global efforts to alleviate poverty, intensifying existing development challenges such as deep-rooted inequality, rapid population growth, weak financial systems, and ineffective governance structures. Limited adaptive capacity is eroding access to essential services, including food, water, sanitation, and adequate housing. Rain-fed agriculture—which accounts for around 60 percent of global agricultural production and underpins livelihoods in many least developed countries—is particularly at risk. As a result, many low-income countries are projected to experience significant food shortages by 2025. In urban settings, a growing proportion of low-income households are also highly vulnerable to climate-related shocks and stresses that claim lives, destroy assets, disrupt livelihoods, and reduce incomes. Without swift, inclusive, and climate-responsive development pathways, climate change could push an additional 35 to 122 million people into extreme poverty by 2030.

The consequences of climate change are not confined to low-income countries. Vulnerable populations in high-income nations are also exposed and face considerable challenges in adapting effectively. For instance, hurricanes Harvey and Irma caused nearly USD 200 billion in damages in Texas and Florida, while the 2019–2020 wildfires in Australia resulted in severe losses to ecosystems, wildlife, and human lives. Cities such as London are exposed to multiple climate risks, including extreme rainfall, coastal and tidal flooding, storm surges, droughts, and temperature extremes. Tidal flooding, in particular, poses a significant threat, affecting both affluent and low-income residents, with the poorest households facing disproportionately higher risks.

Although the socio-economic impacts of climate change are evident across sectors and scales, they are felt most acutely by vulnerable communities at the local level. Households and communities are at the forefront of responding to climate impacts, making the need to understand and support local-level adaptation more urgent than ever. Most adaptation solutions are likely to be identified and implemented locally. This does not diminish the shared global responsibility for adaptation; rather, it highlights the concrete needs that must be addressed and the local capacities that should be strengthened to achieve effective adaptation at scale.

At the same time, local and community-based adaptation cannot take place in isolation. Conditions shaped at higher levels of governance often determine whether communities—especially the most marginalized—are able to adapt successfully. These include unequal power relations, distorted market incentives, top-down planning approaches that overlook or conflict with local realities, insecure land tenure, patriarchal social norms, and limited capacity or resources for inclusive decision-making. For community-based adaptation to be sustainable, inclusive, empowering, and genuinely locally led, it is essential to confront and address the systemic drivers of vulnerability that constrain transformative change. Moving beyond narrowly technical solutions toward a more holistic, people-centered approach that prioritizes well-being, needs, and aspirations can significantly enhance the effectiveness of adaptation policies and actions.

Why Local and Community Levels Matter

Local action and community-based adaptation processes (see Box 1 for definitions) are significant for several interrelated reasons. To begin with, they draw on detailed, first-hand knowledge rooted in local experience, contributed by women and men as well as diverse social groups. Such knowledge is essential for the effective design and implementation of adaptation strategies. It helps document and validate historical and observed changes in weather patterns, assess how people, livelihoods, and assets are exposed to climate-related shocks and stresses within broader local development contexts, and highlight social norms—such as gendered reproductive, productive, and social roles—that shape vulnerability. In addition, local knowledge brings attention to existing skills, practices, and resources that communities use to cope with shocks and stresses, which can be mobilized for climate change adaptation.

A crucial aspect of this approach is recognizing how intersecting factors such as age, marital status, ethnicity, gender, and social class influence the ways individuals—and even members of the same household—experience risks and respond to them. These identity dimensions interact with wider influences, including social norms, market forces, laws, and public policies, to shape both vulnerability to climate change and adaptive capacity. Valuing and integrating these diverse forms of local knowledge into adaptation planning can enhance the inclusiveness, acceptance, and long-term sustainability of solutions, while also strengthening community ownership.

Second, effective adaptation must address the uncertainty inherent in climate risks in ways that are sensitive to specific places. Locally driven adaptation enables communities to pursue flexible and incremental responses that deliver immediate development benefits, while remaining adaptable to future changes in the intensity and frequency of climate hazards.

Third, local and community-based adaptation measures are typically embedded within broader local development priorities. For communities experiencing poverty, climate change, disaster risks, vulnerability, and development challenges are often perceived as interconnected and inseparable, requiring integrated responses rather than isolated interventions.

As a result, locally grounded adaptation approaches are more likely to deliver multiple benefits at once, including poverty reduction and more inclusive patterns of socio-economic development.

Fourth, the economic returns from community-based adaptation initiatives often exceed their implementation costs and can generate three distinct types of benefits: reducing damages and losses caused by climate-related shocks and stresses; enabling greater development opportunities by lowering overall risk; and producing additional co-benefits, such as improvements in health, education, and overall well-being.

Finally, when community-based adaptation is implemented alongside broader governance reforms that encourage collaboration among formal and customary institutions, intermediaries, and a wide range of local actors, it can lead to more equitable and sustainable outcomes. Such approaches are particularly effective

when they ensure the meaningful participation of the poorest and most vulnerable groups in decision-making processes. Key reforms include strengthening local governance systems—such as decentralization—to support bottom-up planning and budgeting. At higher governance levels, reforms are also needed to address entrenched social norms, structural lock-ins, and harmful subsidy regimes. Equally important is the adoption of innovative and genuinely participatory methods that bring marginalized voices into mainstream processes, shifting communities from passive recipients of interventions to active leaders of development. This transformation is essential for advancing the ambitious goals of the 2030 agenda.

Although global adaptation planning has traditionally concentrated on the national scale—most notably through instruments such as National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs)—there is growing recognition of the importance of planning at the local level. Increasingly, planning frameworks are emerging that emphasize resource mobilization, coordination of activities, information exchange, and the creation of institutional mechanisms to support local action and community-based adaptation (CBA).

In countries such as **Nepal** and **Bangladesh**, adaptation planning is being advanced through locally driven coordination, collective learning, and mobilization, with strong backing from an active NGO sector. Nepal, in particular, has introduced Local Adaptation Plans of Action (LAPAs), which aim to promote shared ownership and gender-inclusive decision-making centered on local needs and capacities. The LAPA process has contributed to strengthening adaptive capacity at the local level and has supported experiential learning through the involvement of community-based facilitators. In Bangladesh, efforts are underway to scale up lessons learned from local adaptation planning and integrate them into national-level NAPAs.

Adaptation Stages	Key Enabling Factors
Planning	Financing
Implementation	Capacity Development
Monitoring & Evaluation	Institutional Arrangements
	Information Sharing

South Africa, sector-specific adaptation planning initiatives have been pursued since 2010, further illustrating the gradual shift toward more localized approaches. At the international level, the creation of the **International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI)**—a global network dedicated to advancing local climate action—has played a significant role in promoting community-based adaptation planning. For instance, with support from ICLEI’s Cities for Climate Protection program, municipal authorities in **Prince George** have been engaged in community-level climate adaptation planning since 2007, demonstrating how transnational networks can facilitate locally grounded responses to climate change.

Source: Adapted from NAP Global Network (Angie Dazé, Hayley Price-Kelly, and Nikola Rass)

Conclusion

local action and community-based initiatives must be locally driven to ensure that adaptation efforts and related financing genuinely reflect the priorities and needs of those most vulnerable to climate change impacts, while also promoting equity and social justice. Advancing toward locally led adaptation requires the devolution of decision-making authority in ways that strengthen ownership of adaptation processes and outcomes at both household and community level.

These examples of local-level adaptation planning demonstrate how community engagement can form a strong foundation for designing adaptation programs that are closely aligned with local priorities and realities. Their effectiveness depends largely on the use of participatory approaches that convene a wide range of stakeholders—including both decision-makers and marginalized groups—to ensure that diverse perspectives are incorporated. Such processes support the co-creation of adaptation solutions that are inclusive and equitable, while also strengthening local ownership, agency, and capacities.

Reference

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