How can you improve adaptive capacity and equity in your climate change adaptation project?

LESSONS FROM PROJECT IMPLEMENTERS IN GHANA, KENYA AND SOUTH AFRICA

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In 2022 we interviewed practitioners from 32 place-based climate change adaptation projects in three African countries to find out if and how their projects worked with equity, and if and how they built both specific and generic adaptive capacity.

The interviews were guided by a composite framework we developed that combines elements from existing frameworks on livelihoods and assets (Natarajan et al., 2020), climate and development (McGray et al., 2007), generic and specific adaptive capacity (Lemos et al. 2013, 2016) and equity (Leach et al., 2018).

We used these interviews to identify the factors and processes that enabled projects to reduce vulnerability, improve livelihoods and adaptive capacity, and address recognition, procedural and distributional equity, while simultaneously reducing climate risk. Based on our analyses, we devised a list of lessons that can be applied when climate change adaptation projects are being designed, and when they are being implemented.

WHEN PROJECTS ARE BEING DESIGNED

1. **Embed Local Experts in the Project Alongside Site-Based Managers**

   To best support locally-led adaptation and equity, prudently engage and embed local community-based organisations, non-governmental organisations and experts in the project, and/or deploy locally-based project managers at the project site.

2. **Jointly Agree on a Set Ethical Principles, and Reflect on Them Continuously**

   To support and empower vulnerable community members and increase transparency and fairness, actively work with a set of ethical principles (focused on equity and justice) that guide project processes and stakeholder engagement. Continuously reflect on these principles throughout the project to prevent unintended consequences from going unnoticed, and to help prevent new inequities from impacting those most vulnerable.

3. **Be Transparent About Project Possibilities (and Limitations)**

   To avoid unrealistic expectations and disappointments, be open about what the project can achieve, and why. Acknowledge that, despite best efforts, some expectations may be created that will not be met. Reflect on this risk at the outset of the project, and throughout the project.

4. **Emphasise Social, Relational and Cultural Dimensions**

   Ensure the project’s social, relational, and cultural aspects are given as much attention, planning and funding as the technical aspects. To improve collective agency and social cohesion in the project, and consequently the long-term sustainability of the project, allocate time and funding to: i) regularly engage community members in participatory processes to strengthen their capacities to recognise and address inequities; ii) work closely with communities to build relationships, trust and collective ownership of the project; iii) create a common language and shared vision among project participants; and iv) foster social learning and support horizontal and vertical social capital (see Lesson 16).

5. **Use Place-Based Integrative Approaches**

   Place-based integrative approaches (e.g., multifunctional landscape approaches, whole value chain approaches) that work across a range of activities, and that reflect peoples’ day-to-day livelihoods, support both generic and specific adaptive capacity. By expanding the range of benefits and beneficiaries, these approaches also increase equity.

6. **Include Local Access to Credit or Capital**

   It is well known that improved access to credit or capital can have significantly positive impacts on livelihood security and poverty alleviation. However, such interventions tend not to be viewed as a response to climate risk and as a result are often neglected in adaptation projects. But savings groups, or other mechanisms to increase access to credit, can greatly enhance generic adaptive capacity, especially of the most vulnerable, and – in turn – support specific adaptive capacity and climate resilience.

7. **Avoid Making Projects Too Ambitious and Spatially Disconnected**

   Projects that are too large and ambitious (cutting across multiple regions and countries, and/or aiming to achieve multiple outcomes in limited time) can become unwieldy, disconnected, and fail to deliver on equity and transformation. Specific attention to adaptive capacity and equity is better achieved in smaller landscape-level (rather than regional) projects that have a strong focus on building local agency whilst linking to local and national policy. See Lessons 15 and 16.

“Make time to listen to the community’s perspective and ... engage them to understand their circumstances so that you’ll be able to support them to change the way they do things.”

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CONDUCT A BASELINE ASSESSMENT OF THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Accurate and robust assessments of the local context are critical for providing essential baseline information for addressing the different dimensions of equity, such as: existing rights, knowledge, practices, and cultural norms (recognition equity); who is vulnerable and contextual constraints (distributional equity), and existing institutions, power dynamics, and hierarchies (procedural equity). See Lesson 4.

PAY ATTENTION TO TIMING AND TIMELINESS

The timing of activities is seldom given adequate attention in projects. Activities are not always appropriately sequenced (particularly in terms of the development of infrastructure), and seasonality is not always considered. Project delays can undermine the way the project is perceived at a local level, and can impact negatively on the very people the project is trying to benefit.

BUILD ON PAST AND CURRENT LOCAL PRACTICES AND KNOWLEDGES

Local people have intimate knowledge of their own context, and in many situations they are the experts who best understand i) what is or has been affecting their farming or landscape, and ii) what practices and adaptation measures are most appropriate and effective. This information is critical to project design and implementation, and can facilitate locally-led adaptation that is responsive to local knowledge, needs and priorities (i.e., ensure recognition equity). Projects should also provide opportunities and spaces for learning and knowledge exchange, and should consider sensitive mechanisms for bringing together different types of knowledge. It is, however, important to balance local knowledge with scientific understandings of the risks and impacts of climate change and, in some cases, what is possible within the bounds of the project.

INTRODUCE NEW PRACTICES AND TECHNOLOGIES ITERATIVELY

Building on local activities, practices, and knowledge while also bringing in some new technologies and practices requires a step-by-step approach. It is important to not overwhelm people. Start with what people do already (see Lesson 10). Then add small improvements to existing ways of doing things (e.g., increasing productivity, saving water). Then acknowledge, share and discuss what the benefits of these changes have been before moving on to other steps.

FIND PRACTICAL WAYS TO SUPPORT PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING

Farmers learn best from each other in social and practical contexts (e.g., through field-based demonstrations, experiments on farmers’ own plots, and exchange visits). These peer-to-peer learning sessions can help to reach more farmers – particularly when paired with virtual information sessions – and can contribute to distributional equity.

BE FLEXIBLE, ADAPTABLE AND RESPONSIVE

It is critical for projects to respond to local issues as they emerge, and to be open to changing direction of the project to ensure it is inclusive and enhances equity. Even small changes, which respond to local realities, (e.g., timing of training and meetings, changes in crop focus) can have significant impacts.

ENCOURAGE INCLUSIVITY IN RELATION TO GENDER AND AGE

While it is critically important for projects to focus on gender equality and women’s empowerment, being gender inclusive – encouraging men (boys, husbands) and women (girls, wives) to work together, even if the main project beneficiaries are women – can have transformative outcomes. This inclusivity can help to avoid or reduce conflict, and to increase resilience, productivity, income, and food security for the entire household.

Adaptation projects should also pay more attention to youth, as they are the social group that will experience the future impacts from climate change. They are also vanguards of change who are typically more willing to adopt and adapt to new ways of doing things (e.g., pursue novel entrepreneurial activities, use new technologies). Find out what they are interested in (it is not necessarily the type of rural development and farming activities that have been promoted to date), and try to involve them in the design and implementation of the project.

SUPPORT, EMPOWER AND CAPACITATE LOCALLY-LED GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Locally-led governance structures/institutions are best for building collective agency and supporting equitable decision making. These institutions could be existing structures such as traditional authorities, women’s groups, associations related to specific activities (e.g., farmers’ associations), or new structures such as Community Adaptation Committees. These local structures can also play an important role in selecting project participants or beneficiaries and in managing any conflicts that may arise during the project. Much depends on the legitimacy and effectiveness of what already exists, which highlights the importance of a baseline understanding of existing governance systems (see Lesson 8).

EXPLORE PARTNERSHIPS FOR COLLECTIVE AGENCY AND SUSTAINABILITY

While projects may be based in a particular place, working across scales though horizontal and vertical integration is essential. This integration promotes effective and long-term partnerships with government and other stakeholders that are critical for the implementation of the project and for its sustainability. Working with the private sector and market actors is also important for enhancing income. Be prudent, however, and ensure that potential partners have sufficient capacity and commitment. When designing projects, allocate funding and time to develop these partnerships, and, where necessary, to build capacity at community level to increase local peoples’ confidence and voice in such partnerships (see Lesson 15).

REFERENCES


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