

A vital approach to the threat climate change poses to the poor

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Helping the millions of poor people at greatest risk from climate change to adapt to its impacts is a daunting task. One new approach that deserves greater support is community-based adaptation (CBA). This briefing paper outlines the concepts behind CBA, shares some early lessons learned, and calls for greater networking, information sharing and support for CBA activities.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) latest report states clearly that climate change is already having discernable impacts. These are disproportionately affecting poor communities — especially those in poor countries.

These impacts are set to intensify, yet the poorest communities are unable to cope with current climatic (and other) shocks, let alone any future risks related to climate change.

It is vital that these communities are helped to adapt to climate change. Some international funding is being made available to support such work, but simply providing governments of poor countries with aid does not mean that it will reach the poor and most vulnerable.

Such communities are often marginalised, remote and receive limited services or support from their governments. Reaching the hundreds of millions of people in them will be an immense challenge for any international or national funding mechanisms.

Community-based adaptation

One approach to the problem that deserves greater support is community-based adaptation (CBA), which can be viewed simply

as an additional (though fairly new) layer of community-based development activities, practices, research and policies.

CBA begins by identifying the communities in the developing world that are most vulnerable to climate change. These are generally very poor, depend on natural resources and occupy areas already prone to shocks such as floods or droughts.

Once a community's vulnerability has been established, using the best available science on climate change impacts, the process of engagement with the communities can begin.

Lessons from the field

CBA is a very recent development but a number of early lessons have already been learned from the limited set of CBA activities done around the world so far. They include:

1. To do any good, outsiders must first gain the trust of the communities they want to help. Normally this would mean spending a long time with the community. But if trusted local intermediaries (e.g. NGOs, community groups or government bodies) are available, it is best to start dialogue with them before moving to the communities themselves.
2. Climate change is an esoteric and initially confusing concept to many. Communication about it must use a community's own language and terms they can understand. This means not only translating scientific texts into local languages but also giving up on the written word altogether and using traditional means of communication such as art and theatre, or modern methods such as video.

KEY MESSAGES:

- **Poor communities in poor countries are most vulnerable to climate change and are already feeling its impacts, but have contributed least to the problem.**
- **Helping them to adapt to climate change is vital, but identifying steps to take and ensuring that this information reaches communities at risk is a major challenge.**
- **Community-based adaptation (CBA) is a tool for achieving this. Important lessons are already emerging from the few pilot projects that have begun.**
- **It is important now to support as many CBA activities as possible and to share the experience and knowledge gained.**
- **IIED and its partners are creating an online CBA network and other opportunities to share knowledge of what works.**

Case study – Cavite City, the Philippines

Cavite City is surrounded by three bays and so is at risk from rising sea levels and tropical cyclones. Other threats linked to climate change include erosion, sedimentation, flooding and saltwater intrusion into groundwater. Poor people are most at risk due to their vulnerability to climatic events and social, economic, technological and institutional factors.

Many autonomous adaptation tactics have positive outcomes, but they are inadequate and not effectively integrated into local development plans. They include accommodating sea-level rise by building houses on stilts; reinforcing the physical structure of houses; moving to safer places during crises; placing sandbags along the shorelines; and engaging in alternative income generating activities.

Some government strategies (relief assistance, resettlement, shoreline protection, etc.) have reduced the vulnerability of coastal households, but the measures are inadequate and costly.

Consultations revealed that communities feel they only have poor to fair human, physical and financial capacities to face the threat of climate change. People expressed significant concern over climate risks, and proposed several adaptation strategies, many of which were non-structural, capacity-building measures. They include:

Improved knowledge management: such as community-based monitoring of changes in coastal areas for input into vulnerability and adaptation assessments; creation of community early warning systems; and documentation, sharing and promotion of traditional knowledge, skills and practices that enhance adaptation.

Policy and institutional reforms: such as developing an integrated coastal zone management plan that includes land and sea use zoning, alternative livelihood development and eco waste management; and providing secure property rights and micro-finance/insurance schemes that enhance the adaptive capacity of vulnerable groups.

Capacity development: through raising awareness; participatory risk and adaptation assessment and planning; alternative livelihood development and creating a multi-sectoral integrated coastal zone management body.

3. When the cooperation of the local intermediary and the community has been obtained, the process of identifying what adaptations are appropriate can start. This requires initial learning about the community's indigenous capacities, knowledge and practices of how to cope with climate hazards in the past. New activities, technologies or practices can then be introduced.

4. Once set up, an adaptation project looks much like any standard development project (e.g. for water harvesting in drought conditions) rather than a stand-alone response to climate change. The difference lies not in what the intervention is but in the inputs to the intervention. It is not what the community is doing but why and with what knowledge. The adaptation element introduces the community to the notion of climate risk and then factors that into their activities. This makes them more resilient both to immediate climate variability and long-term climate change. It should be noted though that the few existing CBA projects are so new that they have hardly been tested for resilience to climate variability let alone to climate change.

5. One important feature of the lessons from CBA so far is that learning itself requires practice. It is not possible to learn the theory of CBA in a university or training workshop and then apply it in the field — the learning comes from the practice itself. Adaptation is a classic case of learning-by-doing or 'action-research'.

6. The theory and practice of CBA are in their infancy but both are likely to grow very rapidly. It is important now to allow as many pilot activities to be carried out as possible and to share the experience and knowledge gained from them. This is a major challenge of networking in real time between practitioners, policymakers, researchers and funders — and the communities at risk.

First steps to sharing and networking

The above lessons were among those shared at the 2nd International Workshop on Community-Based Adaptation in Dhaka, Bangladesh in February 2007.

Delegates heard about communities adapting to heat waves in mountainous areas of India; floods in Bangladesh and Nepal; drought in Kenya; soil salinity in Sri Lanka; and health problems in Zimbabwe (see: <http://www.bcas.net/2nd-cba/index.html>).

Those present also formed the CBA Network to promote the sharing of knowledge on CBA activities from across the world. The web-based network will be up and running later in 2007 (contact beth.henriette@iied.org for details).

Community-based adaptation is also discussed at the two-day Development and Adaptation Days event held each year during the conference of parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (see: <http://www.iied.org/CC/COP12.html>).