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NOVEMBER 2011

opinion

Adaptation: resources now to plan and implement

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Wealthy nations have committed to support developing countries to establish National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) that identify long-term priorities for responding to climate change challenges. But how and when will this support be given? Past experience suggests that national adaptation planning in expectation of future international funding is fraught with difficulties. Contributors to fast-start climate finance should release funds to developing countries straight away. These funds must be sufficient to plan longer-term adaptation strategies as well as implement immediate priorities. Equally importantly, recipients of these funds must decide for themselves how best to spend it.

At the 2010 international climate negotiations in Mexico, all parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adopted the Cancun Adaptation Framework. The framework includes, among other things, a requirement for all countries to develop a National Plan of Action (NAP) that identifies medium- and long-term needs and priorities for adapting to climate change, and outlines strategies and activities to address these. The NAPs of the developing countries will be supported with funds from richer countries.

The details of how NAPs will be designed and implemented are still being thrashed out and will be discussed during the forthcoming UN negotiations in Durban, South Africa. A mix of 18 country governments and international organisations has already submitted their views and suggestions to the UNFCCC to inform the Durban meeting.

The big questions for NAPs centre on how they will be funded and implemented in developing countries. These countries are the most vulnerable to climate change and its impacts and need immediate adaptation funding. They cannot afford to sit tight through the laborious and time-consuming process of preparing and approving a NAP before they receive funds to prevent harm in climate-vulnerable communities. Neither should they have to.

Past mistakes

Wealthy parties to the UNFCCC have promised to finance NAPs in developing countries. But it is not clear when the money will come through. From past experience, the default option being considered is to give out enough money to prepare NAPs, but then wait to hand over funds for implementation until some time after priority projects have been identified and submitted to the UN.

It's not the first time that the 48 least developed countries (LDCs) have been asked to write an adaptation plan so that urgent projects can be funded through the UNFCCC. Experience tells us that planning in expectation of future funding is fraught with problems.

At the 2001 UN negotiations in Marrakesh, Morocco, the LDC Fund was established to sponsor the preparation and implementation of National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs). This fund, which is managed by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and dependent on voluntary contributions from wealthy nations, gave each LDC approximately US$200,000 to conduct a NAPA to identify 'urgent and immediate' adaptation projects.

The expectation at the time was that as soon as priority projects were identified, the LDC Fund would co-fund

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implementation. Almost all 48 of the LDCs have completed and submitted their NAPAs to the UNFCCC. This in itself is a considerable achievement that merits recognition and support.

And yet today a decade later, the funds disbursed are inadequate for the adaptation tasks and most countries are still waiting for the resources to address their most pressing adaptation needs. This has caused a major gap between planning and implementation that has given rise to suspicion and scepticism between developing and developed countries.

A question of time and power

In part, the problem has been one of time. It takes time to create detailed adaptation plans — particularly for poorer countries that face complex climate adaptation needs and sometimes lack critical institutional, technical and policy capacities to respond to climate change impacts. Timor-Leste, for example, did not submit its NAPA until September 2011. Meanwhile, the climate change costs clock is ticking and in most vulnerable countries and communities, adaptation action is needed now.

The problem is also one of decision-making power. A major cause of delay in implementing NAPAs was that LDCs had no real authority to decide for themselves how best to spend adaptation funds. Instead, it was the GEF that assessed individual adaptation projects within NAPAs and decided whether they merited funding. And even the GEF could not be approached directly. Individual countries have to go through intermediary 'implementing agencies' such as the World Bank or the UN Development Programme. This approach has proved problematic and ineffective. Although NAPAs provided a list of priority actions, they were only designed to generate brief project outlines some of which were inadequate as a basis for evaluation. The problem was subsequently tackled by providing LDCs with extra funds to prepare full project documents, and several of these have since been financed through the LDC Fund.

But progress has been slow. The approach refuses LDCs the sole right to decide what projects are urgent and immediate, and how to spend money to carry them out. International principles for aid effectiveness — reflected in the Paris Declaration of 2005 and built on many years of assessing the successes and failures in aid delivery — underline the importance of promoting national ownership and leadership of both resource allocation and decision processes to ensure that multi- and bilateral funds are used effectively and reach those most in need.

Developing countries increasingly emphasise the need for more ownership in adaptation finance, calling for 'direct access' funds, where money flows directly to countries rather than through multilateral agencies. This kind of approach would not only reflect lessons learnt in aid effectiveness but would also go a long way in reducing the gap between planning and implementation and in rebuilding confidence in climate finance.

Decisions for Durban

As negotiators in Durban sit down to chart a course for NAPs, it is vital that they build on the experiences gained through the NAPA process and learn from past successes and failures. In practice, this means agreeing to two things.

First, if the developed countries are genuinely committed to helping developing countries adapt to adverse climate change impacts, they must pledge an adequate and transparent amount of funding upfront for both carrying out the NAP as well as implementing priority adaptation responses.

LDCs already have long lists of actionable priorities that can be developed into investment plans. And other countries can have the same relatively easily. It is vital that developing long-term adaptation plans in NAPs does not delay implementing initiatives that address the urgent needs identified in NAPAs.

Second, if developing countries are to truly address the most pressing needs of their most vulnerable communities, they must be given ownership of adaptation finance and allowed to prioritise actions and projects for themselves.

One option for achieving these twin goals is for those countries that have promised 'fast-start' finance for adaptation to pledge enough money to give each LDC at least US$20 million to simultaneously begin developing their NAP, while also implementing their highest priority adaptation projects as defined by them and identified in their NAPA.

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) is an independent, nonprofit research institute working in the field of sustainable development. IIED provides expertise and leadership in researching and achieving sustainable development at local, national, regional and global levels. This opinion paper has been produced with the generous support of Danida (Denmark), DFID (UK), DGIS (the Netherlands), Irish Aid, Norad (Norway) and Sida (Sweden).

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