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## Policy pointers

**Local communities** are often acutely aware of how their environment is changing and how best to adapt.

**Parties to any UN deal on climate change** should ensure their communities most vulnerable to climate harms and risks participate actively in shaping government negotiating positions and priorities, and in developing national and local adaptation strategies.

**Climate agreements and plans** must specifically address the most vulnerable communities' needs and include the strongest possible language on social equity and human rights principles and safeguards.

**Effective strategies for amplifying 'vulnerable voices'** include supporting communities to: self-organise; have their knowledge valued; access information; undertake community-led research; negotiate with officials; and secure their rights.

**In particular, supporting community-led 'participatory planning'** can help communities engage with governments on an equal footing to generate effective adaptation strategies and help with monitoring and evaluation.

## Vulnerable communities: getting their needs and knowledge into climate policy

Poor and marginalised communities across the global South are hard hit by climate change. Their voices must be heard by policymakers, planners, researchers and donors involved in climate change negotiations and other global processes. Indeed, any deal agreed at the 21st Conference of Parties (COP21) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) will need to address vulnerable communities' priorities and value their knowledge if viable national, regional and local adaptation strategies are to be implemented. This briefing highlights six tried and tested strategies for overcoming the barriers to community involvement and for ensuring due emphasis to poor and marginalised people's own adaptation needs and ideas for potential solutions.

The world's poorest people often depend heavily on their environment and bear the brunt of climate change, even though they have contributed least to the problem. Climate negotiations have long debated which *nations* are most vulnerable to climate harms and risks, but the most vulnerable *people* are not only found in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs); many live in lower- and middle-income countries. They are not necessarily a distinctive, cohesive or static subset of people. And all vulnerable communities are marked by their own social and cultural differences, political and gender dynamics and power imbalances. Often, these communities include poor, resource-dependent individuals and households and indigenous peoples. This includes residents of urban informal settlements (which are often built on disaster-prone land), mobile pastoralists and itinerant labourers in drylands, and communities living in fragile mountain environments.<sup>1</sup>

Vulnerable communities understand local climate change impacts and what needs to be done, but

they have the least resources and capacity to respond strategically. They often have little say in national decision making, may not always be well-represented by community networks and civil society organisations, and generally remain poorly served by national governments. Some parties to the UNFCCC recognise these challenges and have built up valuable experience of working with vulnerable communities.

Acknowledging the power imbalances that prevail at all levels — from households to global forums — is critical if we are to better understand and address them. Sometimes they are obvious, for example where entrenched elites control formal institutions or own the rights to land and natural resources, or when international negotiations have few representatives from vulnerable communities. But they can also be hidden, such as when inequality is perpetuated through corruption, manipulation or intimidation.

## *Scientific assessments must complement and strengthen, not supersede or weaken, local knowledge*

This briefing outlines effective ways to help get vulnerable voices heard, and acted on, in climate change policy and planning. These are also broadly applicable in other situations such as developing or implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is part of a series of publications in the run up to the UNFCCC's COP21 and can be read alongside the briefing *Vulnerable communities: climate adaptation that works for the poor*.<sup>2</sup>

### Six strategies

#### 1. Support self-organisation

A first step is to engage with existing representative organisations, such as local, regional and national federations of indigenous peoples and the urban poor.

Local organisations can represent several communities and different stakeholders, provide a platform for collective action and identify priorities for local adaptation and external support. But communities may need help to establish local representative organisations, or to get formal legal recognition for their local customary institutions and management systems. That might include support for participatory action-research processes (see below), which allow communities to create their own organisations, ensuring legitimacy and sustainability.

Representative institutions then need to be recognised by governments and integrated into higher levels of planning, implementing and reviewing for adaptation and development initiatives. This must be an ongoing process, ensuring regular involvement. Financial support may be needed, but this must not compromise local institutions' independence and ability to self-organise.

Ensuring local knowledge feeds into higher-level planning is important to ensure policies are effective; in some cases, disconnects between central and local 'government' are undermining national adaptation efforts. Government decentralisation policies can strengthen these links. A good example are the Groupements de Développement Agricole (GDA) in Tunisia, many of which have their own local development and adaptation strategies — even in the most arid and mountainous southern regions of the country.

International processes such as the UNFCCC (where nations are the negotiating parties) need to find new ways to bring diverse vulnerable

voices into their policy and planning processes. There are precedents within the UN system, at least for indigenous peoples: the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has given special emphasis to the International Indigenous Peoples' Biodiversity Forum (IIFB). And in the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, indigenous representatives from seven geographic regions have equal status with governments.

#### 2. Value local knowledge

People living in harsh environments often have knowledge of local climatic conditions and extreme events going back generations, and have developed effective strategies for adaptation and resilience.

Vulnerable people's knowledge and needs should inform local and national adaptation responses, particularly the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) that are the UNFCCC's current focus. Not building on local knowledge brings the risk of maladaptation, or inappropriate responses.

Local and traditional knowledge must also be better-used in assessments such as the IPCC, which remains a key influence on government policymaking. Again, the CBD has set a comparable precedent: the Intergovernmental Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (the equivalent of the IPCC) is developing procedures for working with indigenous and local knowledge.

#### 3. Share information with communities

Vulnerable people are often acutely aware of how their environment is changing and how best to manage this. Access to scientific knowledge — such as climate projections that help farmers plan ahead, or archives of past climate information — can complement and enhance local knowledge, adaptation strategies and capacity.

Information is power, and must be shared in the spirit of co-learning: with scientists learning from, as well as teaching, vulnerable communities. Scientific assessments must complement and strengthen, rather than supersede or weaken, local knowledge and traditional resource management systems, since these are fundamental for resilience and self-reliance.

Information about national climate change and environmental plans must also be available to vulnerable communities, along with information on what legal rights and recourses they have when others damage the environment they depend upon (for example, through water pollution or illegal logging).

#### 4. Strengthen community-led participatory research

Participatory poverty assessments or community-led mapping and enumeration are effective ways to help governments engage with vulnerable communities. For example, community-led disaster risk mapping in the Philippines has been done in partnership with local authorities to identify who is likely to be hardest-hit by a disaster, so as to better target responses.

Community-led research strengthens community capacity and organisation for more effective engagement in policy and planning. It includes participatory plant breeding (PPB), developing community seed banks and local seed networks, and initiatives that strengthen the cultural values underpinning traditional knowledge and biodiversity conservation, for enhanced resilience and social cohesion. Linking traditional knowledge and science can provide effective solutions (see Box 1).

Support for community-led research can revitalise traditional knowledge systems and help conserve resilient local crop varieties and livestock breeds. But these efforts need to be complemented by reforming policies and institutions that undermine traditional knowledge systems and cultural values — for example within agriculture, education, health, decentralisation and land use.

Support may also be needed for community-based monitoring and information systems, for example to monitor the impact of local adaptation projects and government policies or assess carbon and non-carbon benefits from adaptation interventions. And many countries have very poor information on climatic conditions and trends in remote areas. Working with communities to install, maintain and operate meteorological stations can address this.

#### 5. Broker dialogue

NGOs, research institutes and community-based organisations can help vulnerable communities to start dialogues with those who hold power, or to mobilise themselves for collective action, such as peaceful protests. Establishing dialogue can provide opportunities for communities to teach decision-makers how to support their adaptation needs (see Box 2).

Ensuring that policies are not forced on local people without understanding their perspectives is central to such initiatives. Sensitive brokering may be required if the power imbalance is so great that vulnerable communities are unwilling to face locally entrenched elites or policymakers

#### Box 1. Participatory Plant Breeding (PPB) in China

In Guangxi, Southwest China, a PPB programme has helped poor farmers increase resilience and productivity in harsh mountain areas.<sup>3</sup> After 15 years, 20 farmer-preferred maize landraces and 15 rice landraces have been improved and 8 new maize varieties with 15–30 per cent higher yields have been developed. These have spread rapidly to neighbouring villages. In the big spring drought of 2010, most of the maize landraces survived, while most conventionally-bred hybrids died. This PPB programme, led by China's Centre for Agricultural Policy, has been accompanied by Community Support Agriculture, linking farmers to urban consumers. Together, these approaches have revitalised traditional agroecological farming practices, reversed the loss of crop diversity, increased incomes and built social capital, as well as giving scientists access to resilient varieties for future plant breeding.

#### Box 2. Local and official dialogue in Andhra Pradesh, India

In 2012, the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) arranged a simple climate change awareness raising programme in Komaragiri, a village in Andhra Pradesh, India. Local people shared their observations about changing environments. Academics, a government agricultural officer and AIWC staff helped raise awareness about climate change and explained how peoples' observations could be linked to health problems and livelihood changes they had been experiencing. Then AIWC organised a seminar at the district headquarters. Government functionaries from local, state and national levels, academics, villagers, industrialists, health workers etc. attended. The villagers were able to present their problems directly to policy makers, get details about various government schemes and suggest solutions together. Several initiatives emerged to incentivise good management of farming waste and farmers received help to claim these benefits.<sup>4</sup>

directly. Government bodies at all levels from local to international must ensure they are receptive to such brokering opportunities. Brokers or 'boundary institutions' must take care not to edit or change what each party has to say, nor to exert any hidden agenda or to claim to speak on behalf of a vulnerable community without truly representing their needs. But brokers can reduce the power imbalance between communities and officials, for example by setting the agenda for the dialogue.

#### 6. Secure rights

The IPCC notes that "climate-resilient development pathways will have only marginal effects on poverty reduction, unless structural inequalities are addressed".<sup>1</sup> Rights entitle people to a voice and to the resources they need for subsistence and adaptation. Vulnerable communities need secure rights to their lands, natural resources, common property resources, forests, housing, traditional knowledge, seeds, and to self-determination. Upholding these principles at the local level requires a robust understanding of the cultural context before any action is taken. This includes an awareness of gatekeepers,

gender dynamics, power dynamics and language barriers. It is important to recognise that, although experts working closely with vulnerable communities can explain their perspectives, they do not usually represent communities.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights states that "A safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment is integral to the full enjoyment of a wide range of human rights, including the rights to life, health, food, water and sanitation",<sup>5</sup> while the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples enshrines their rights to hold their own unique worldviews and to maintain their traditional knowledge and customary governance systems for forests and other natural resources. The declaration requires states to obtain free, prior and informed consent before the approval of any project affecting indigenous peoples' lands, territories and other resources; before any relocation; and before adopting legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.<sup>6</sup> The SDGs also provide a framework for promoting vulnerable communities' wellbeing, regardless of ethnicity.

Reforming policies and institutions that undermine vulnerable peoples' resource rights and favour the rich at the expense of the poor will strengthen the voices of vulnerable communities and their capacity to adapt. For example, in the Middle East and North Africa, the Andes and Himalayas, the Caribbean, Australia, and in cities, policy allocation for water often favours more affluent consumers, at the expense of less powerful rural and/or low income users.

Strong language on human rights principles and safeguards needs to be included in the COP21 climate agreement, particularly because many climate change mitigation measures in the land sector make marginalised communities more vulnerable. Future agreements and planning should be interconnected with the UNFCCC REDD+ safeguards, as agreed by the negotiating parties in Cancun, Mexico, at COP16.<sup>7</sup>

Safeguards, grievance mechanisms, full and effective participation of indigenous peoples in decision-making, and direct access to emerging funds such as the Green Climate Fund are needed, and indeed some of these are being elaborated globally and developed within individual countries.

## Looking forward

Vulnerable communities often lead their lives in a way that has value both now and in a climate-constrained future. For example, pastoralists and traditional farmers spread risk over time and space to increase resilience.<sup>8</sup> Working with nature as opposed to against it is a basic requirement of any climate adaptation action, and it is usually local communities who know how to do this best. Local approaches should form the basis of climate adaptation planning and decision making. Adaptation must start with the needs and experiences of people who depend on natural resources and develop from 'bottom-up' approaches through to national and international levels. Adaptation will only work if vulnerable people are included.

Vulnerable communities — which are found not just in the lowest-income countries — need opportunities to build on and share their knowledge, and they need support to undertake participatory research and strengthen their own traditional knowledge systems for adaptation. Parties to any climate deal at UNFCCC COP21 should be required to ensure the active participation of their vulnerable communities, including indigenous people and women, in international negotiations and national adaptation planning.

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## Knowledge Products

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> IPCC (2014) Fifth Assessment Report. Working Group II. Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. [www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2/](http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2/) / <sup>2</sup> Reid, H, *et al.* (2015) Vulnerable communities: climate adaptation that works for the poor. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/17329IIED/> / <sup>3</sup> Song, Y, *et al.* (2015) Emerging biocultural innovations for climate resilience in Southwest China. SIFOR qualitative baseline study. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/G03916.html> / <sup>4</sup> Usha Nair, INFORSE South Asia / AIWC. Extracted from Reid, H, *et al.* (2014) Toolkit 8: Supporting Local Voices. *Climate Change Advocacy toolkits*. IIED, CARE, CAN International. [www.southernvoices.net/en/](http://www.southernvoices.net/en/) / <sup>5</sup> UN, Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment (former Independent Expert on human rights and the environment). [www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Environment/SREnvironment/Pages/SREnvironmentIndex.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Environment/SREnvironment/Pages/SREnvironmentIndex.aspx) / <sup>6</sup> UN (2008) UN Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples. [www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf) / <sup>7</sup> UNFCCC (2011) The Cancun Agreements. <http://cancun.unfccc.int/> / <sup>8</sup> Krätli S (2015) Valuing variability: new perspectives on climate resilient drylands development. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/10128IIED>