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Engaging local communities for climate change adaptation

It is now a fact that climate change will mostly affect the poor. For example, a World Bank report states that ‘over 96% of [climate change-induced disaster-related deaths in recent years have taken place in developing countries’ (Harrold et al., 2002, p. x). Malnutrition in parts of the horn of Africa, due to prolonged droughts and food scarcity, result in stunting or deaths of children under the age of 5 years (Tirado et al., 2015). [Climate change induced conflicts in the Sahel](#) have also displaced many people, with numbers expected to rise. The local level nature of impacts has led to the realization that communities are key agents in addressing climate change (Grasso & Feola, 2012). This is one the reasons that informed the creation of the [Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform](#) (LCIPP) by the UNFCCC at COP 21 in Paris. One of the reasons for the establishment of this platform is to enable the UNFCCC to engage with local communities and indigenous people. While this is a promising step to ensuring that local voices are heard on international negotiation platforms, it is also essential to understand how community engagement is happening outside of the UNFCCC negotiations. At the upcoming COP 24 in Poland, the LCIPP plans to establish a facilitative working group which would further elevate community engagement in adaptation processes. One key question is the extent to which the LCIPP will be informed by les-

sons from community engagement at lower levels. This piece hopes to highlight some of the issues surrounding community engagement in developing countries.

Community engagement within states

For countries to be able to effectively adapt, then actors at different levels, including the community level, need to be involved. Adaptation actions therefore need to engage communities affected by climate change and include them in the decision-making processes on issues relating to climate change. This engagement takes many forms, from the provision of information about adaptation processes and interventions to engaging these actors and communities in decision-making processes about adaptation actions. Others include raising awareness on climate change within communities, sharing of information about climate change and adaptation actions ongoing in those communities and engaging in local level adaptation with the communities as partners who can contribute towards decision making. They help simplify information about climate change, make knowledge on climate change locally relevant by including local experiences and knowledge and also may result in the inclusion of community actors into decision-making (Sheppard et al., 2011). This is so that adaptation is better able to address the complexities introduced by multiple stakeholders and interests.

Stakeholder consultations have become common in developing countries, as they are considered important for acquiring a 'social licence to operate' (Walsh et al., 2017). While the licence to operate seems to benefit the external actors who implement these projects, the whole stakeholder consultation process can enable communities to acquire information about a forthcoming or present adaptation intervention, stating the problem that the intervention seeks to address as well as the potential outcomes of the intervention. Approaches to community engagement like stakeholder consultation have been cited as key components of adaptation good practice (NWP, 2016). Stakeholder consultation and many other approaches to community engagement do not automatically result in the communities being adequately engaged, as the extent to which they actually engage the community depends on the quality of engagement. Whether communities are adequately engaged depends upon who the stakeholders are, why they are consulted and what the stakeholders gain from the consultation.

The gaps in community engagement

Community engagement can, however, go wrong. For instance, cases may arise where these processes result in communities developing incorrect visions of what adaptation projects seek to achieve (Walsh et al., 2017). This is most common in projects that do not engage communities, but then incorrect approaches to community engagement may exacerbate these visions or fail to reduce them. The incorrect visions can be an understatement, overstatement or total misquotation of project goals by either the *engagers* or the engaged (community). For projects that undergo community consultation, the vision differences result from failure to identify and address these differences. To illustrate, a project may seek to achieve improved maternal health, which is hoped to result in improved household income. Communities may either perceive the project as seeking

to improve the number of children that women can have, reduce it or just increase the amount of income the household is set to get. In the end, this creates false expectations.

The misinformation and the generation of false expectations even in the presence of community engagement is caused by a number of factors. Amongst them is the framing of adaptation as an outcome rather than a process. This treats adaptation as linear, consisting of inputs and outputs and overlooks the socio-economic and political factors that enable successful adaptation. This fails to acknowledge that adaptation is never 'problem-free', hence project goals may not always be achieved (Mimura et al., 2014, p. 874). Problems may arise due to issues like unexpected conflicts, procurement delays for supplies, loss of staff or under-budgeting due to unexpected price shocks. An outcome-based framing of adaptation may also contribute towards a misunderstanding of project goals. For example, it would be incorrect to assume that access to index insurance directly results in improved income. Outcome-based framings of adaptation lead communities to seek instant or quick gratification from adaptation actions.

The framing of adaptation actions as having the potential to produce quick returns can however be done on purpose so as to easily obtain community support on adaptation projects. This is linked to the framing of adaptation as a smooth transition from input to output, where challenges like staff turnover, unsupportive institutions and ineffective procurement systems are either inexistent or identified and addressed in time. Ford et al. (2018, p. 136) writes that '[b]eing realistic, honest, and forthright about ... [uncertainty relating to project] outputs and impacts has the potential to weaken partner interest in collaboration, but partnerships are ultimately more likely to be sustainable'. Additionally, communities may be more likely to accept and participate in interventions that invest in actions

that produce quick tangible outcomes as compared to those that target systemic changes (Ford et al., 2018).

False expectations may result in a perceived failure of adaptation interventions to deliver the expected outcomes. Sources of false expectations include the varied understanding of terms by different actors engaged in adaptation (Levina & Tirpak, 2006). The creation of these false expectations may not be the fault of those managing the projects but may have root causes in the communities themselves. For instance, Ford et al. (2018) discusses the false community expectations for a new project in Uganda that arose when the project leveraged the social capital developed by a previous project. This resulted in the community assuming that the new project would deliver the same outcomes that the previous project had achieved. Communities with unmet expectations may therefore 'lose faith' in adaptation as a response to climate change. The barriers to effective adaptation may also get misdiagnosed where feedback about adaptation projects will often highlight the failure of government agencies to deliver certain outcomes, which may have not been part of the objectives.

Community engagement processes may also fail to produce the expected results when the engagement does not result to communities informing adaptation decision making. For example, this may occur when action points obtained from the engagement process fail to be acted upon by the government (Smith et al., 2016). Additionally, these community engagement processes carry a risk of capture, where local and powerful actors use these processes as stepping stones to get more power and achieve their own interests (Sovacool, 2018). In Vanuatu, for example, Buggy and McNamara (2016) find that community based projects in Pele island, which were informed by community engagement, ended up being controlled by a select number of individuals who would exclude the community.

Community engagement is also a very long iterative process which requires time and financial resource investments. Most adaptation approaches in developing countries have life-spans of 3-5 years and in most cases will not have enough time and money to adequately conduct community engagement and test their effectiveness (Griffin, 2016). The result is lack of progress in the development of community engagement approaches, for example where each approach gets repeatedly piloted by different actors without actually making any improvements.

Conclusion

Climate change contributes towards the 'lived experiences' of people in developing countries. While the concept of 'adaptation good practice' is fairly new (Rissik & Reis, 2013), the importance of community engagement cannot be understated. This enables communities to contribute towards adaptation actions through different approaches that eventually provide them with opportunities to contribute towards adaptation decision making. For example, community engagement can help communities to clarify the objectives of the interventions in order to achieve shared visions for adaptation interventions (Nkoana et al., 2018).

Community engagement is not easy. It involves a range and possibly combination of place and time-specific approaches and interventions, like capacity building activities, stakeholder mapping and engagement. In some cases, these activities may be out of the scope of the projects or interventions. Their contribution towards local level adaptation is however important. Interventions therefore need to invest resources into their design and implementation possibly by leveraging work done by others. This is so that their effectiveness is improved. While LCIPP prepares for COP 24, it is important to think about how the working group will be structured in order to learn from community engagement approaches at lower scales, especially in developing countries.

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