



cba**SCALE+**

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Community-Based Adaptation in Southern Africa Is Gaining Momentum.

Here's how to scale it up.

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Community-based adaptation (CBA) is a proven approach to building resilience to climate change. However, despite being around for over 20 years, there are still gaps in the policy context and limited resources available to realize its potential. Why? As part of the CBA SCALE+ project, experts from the International Institute for Sustainable Development reviewed over 50 policy documents from Southern Africa that revealed the gaps and the opportunities.



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According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change¹, community-based adaptation (CBA) can successfully reduce climate risks, thus generating sustainable changes for the most vulnerable communities. However, despite being implemented for over 20 years, the current policy environment and lack of funding for this approach do not support wide adoption.

To better understand why, as part of the CBA Scale+ project, experts from the International Institute for Sustainable Development reviewed 53 policy documents related to climate change, adaptation, climate-sensitive sectors, and sustainable development from the African Union, Mozambique, Southern African Development Community, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

The research showed that only 6% of the 53 policies reviewed explicitly mentioned CBA or locally led adaptation. Of the 16 policies that were reviewed in more depth, there were none that strongly integrated all of the key enabling elements for CBA to be scaled up in the region. However, there are entry points in key policies, and opportunities exist to overcome the gaps, recognizing that adaptation planning is an iterative process.

Community-Based Adaptation: An effective approach

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change notes that approximately 40% of the global population² is now “highly vulnerable” to the harsh realities of climate change. Southern Africa’s ecosystems, communities, and infrastructure face significant risks due to climate change, and the region has already experienced widespread losses and damages. People have always lived with a degree of climate-related risk, but those risks are changing and increasing, and the growing uncertainty is heavily impacting the livelihoods of people in Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.



Without an enabling policy environment, technical and financial resources for adaptation will not reach the communities that most need to build their resilience to climate change.

CBA, an approach aligned with locally led adaptation principles³, has been recognized as an effective way to reduce climate risks and generate sustainable changes for the most vulnerable communities. It involves processes led by local actors, including subnational authorities and local organizations, to engage at-risk communities to understand their experiences with climate change and assess how risks may change in the future. This enables the identification of adaptation priorities designed to reduce the harm from current and future climate conditions, combining local knowledge with scientific climate information. CBA is tailored to local socio-economic contexts and fosters inclusive governance and effective adaptation, as well as trust between governments and communities. Involving marginalized groups in decision making enhances the community's capacity to monitor climate impacts and address the drivers of vulnerability.

Seven Key Policy-Enabling Factors for CBA

Globally, half (51%) of the national adaptation plans (NAPs) submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change as of July 31, 2023, include an explicit reference to CBA⁴, including Mozambique's NAP, and 40% reference locally led adaptation. Despite growing recognition in countries' adaptation plans and the proven potential of CBA, there remain barriers to its implementation at a scale that is in line with the urgency of the climate crisis and the needs of vulnerable communities. Without an enabling policy environment, technical and financial resources for adaptation will not reach the communities that most need to build their resilience to climate change.

Our research, therefore, sought to develop a framework of key enabling factors needed to scale the implementation of CBA. We reviewed existing adaptation frameworks, such as the locally led adaptation principles, as well as others, such as the CARE Adaptation Good Practice Checklist⁵, and considered how they could be reflected at a policy level. We narrowed these down to seven enabling factors that we believe will influence the extent to which CBA is implemented at scale. For each of these factors, specific criteria were identified to assess the extent to which they are present in policy documents.



Figure 1. Seven key enabling factors for CBA Scale



Source: CBA Scale+

Understanding the Existing Policy Environment for CBA in Southern Africa

In order for the CBA Scale+ project to support CBA implementation at scale in Southern Africa, we need to better understand what enabling factors for CBA were or were not included in policies. To this end, our research analyzed climate change, development, and sectoral policy documents from the African Union, Mozambique, Southern Africa Development Community, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Among these, all of the documents mentioned climate change, with 86% mentioning adaptation and/or resilience to at least some extent. This shows some progress in the integration of adaptation in sectoral and development policies.

However, 64% included only passing references to climate change adaptation and/or resilience, and only 6% (three documents) included explicit references to CBA. None of the documents referenced locally led adaptation.

Based on this preliminary analysis, our research explored 16 documents that included a substantial amount of information on adaptation and mentioned subnational levels of governance and/or actors in relation to adaptation. We evaluated these documents against the criteria of our CBA enabling factors framework to assess how well the enabling factors are reflected.

Enabling Implementation of CBA at scale: Gaps and entry points

The review of policy documents revealed both gaps with respect to the enabling factors for CBA and potential entry points for a more systematic approach to move toward implementation at scale.

Gaps in the Enabling Environment for CBA

Integration of Adaptation in Subnational Development Planning

For CBA implementation to reach scale, adaptation needs to be integrated into the subnational development plans that drive the allocation of resources at the local level. This is not widely recognized—just over half of the documents analyzed (56%) established a clear mandate for integrating adaptation in local development planning. Further, this crucial mandate is not highlighted in the Southern Africa Development Community policies analyzed, leaving room for improvement at the regional level.

Mechanisms for Collaboration With Civil Society Actors

Adaptation actions will be implemented by a range of actors, including civil society organizations (women's groups, local non-governmental organizations, farmers' cooperatives, etc.) and communities, so it is critical that institutionalized arrangements for adaptation engage these actors and facilitate collaboration among them and with local government authorities. Only 44% of the policies highlight mechanisms for ongoing collaboration with non-governmental actors.

Communicating With Local Actors

Commitments to communicate about adaptation processes to local actors are weak. Only 19% of the documents mention the importance of communicating about adaptation processes to subnational authorities and/or local organizations and communities. This is essential to ensure that local actors are able to participate in and influence adaptation decision making processes, a central aspect of the CBA approach.

Getting Finance to the Local Level

Getting finance to the local level is a priority for CBA actions to be implemented at scale. Half of the policies recognized the need for climate adaptation finance to reach the local level, but only 25% highlighted a mechanism to do so.



Among all the climate change, development, and sectoral policy documents analyzed by our experts, 64% included only passing references to climate change adaptation and/or resilience, and only 6% (three documents) included explicit references to CBA.

Entry Points for Scaling up CBA

Recognition of the Role of Local Actors

Engagement of local actors is at the heart of the CBA approach, and most of the documents analyzed recognized the importance of engaging local communities and/or institutions in the adaptation processes. Most of the policy documents (88%) highlighted subnational authorities as important actors for adaptation, and all but one (94%) also recognized the importance of engaging civil society actors in adaptation planning and action. One of these is Mozambique's NAP, which mentions, for example, the need to mobilize women-led community grassroots organizations in gender assessments to inform adaptation plans. However, there is less emphasis on the leadership of local actors—less than half of the documents (44%) explicitly address this issue.

Alignment With Relevant Policies

Adaptation isn't implemented in isolation—it is closely linked with objectives related to sustainable development and biodiversity, requiring alignment of policies in these different areas to create opportunities for integrated approaches like CBA. All of the policies analyzed acknowledge the linkages between ecosystems, biodiversity, and/or sustainable development and adaptation. Half of the documents elaborate the nature and adaptation linkages, while 40% provide details on linkages with sustainable development. For example, the 8th National Development Plan of Zambia highlights the country's intention to pursue adaptation strategies that promote environmental sustainability.

Capacity Strengthening

Subnational authorities and local actors—including civil society organizations, community-based organizations, and others—need a range of capacities to contribute to scaling up CBA. All but one of the documents analyzed (94%) recognized the need to strengthen the capacities of either subnational authorities or local actors (though only 44% recognized the need to strengthen the capacities of both). For example, the national climate policy of Zimbabwe includes a specific chapter on education, training, and awareness and mentions the capacities of local authorities, farmers, and practitioners working with communities.

Recognition of Diverse Knowledge Systems

Three quarters of the policies reviewed mention local, traditional, or Indigenous knowledge, with most including details on how this knowledge will be used and integrated in adaptation initiatives. This shows great progress in terms of integration. For example, Mozambique's NAP highlights the systematization and documentation of scientific, technical and local knowledge about climate as one of the tasks to be carried out by research institutes. Recognition of the need for different knowledge systems can compel more participatory approaches to adaptation, including CBA.

Commitments to Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

Adaptation is only effective if it generates equitable benefits for people of all genders and social groups, including Indigenous Peoples and youth. A commitment to target adaptation efforts toward the people who need them most can be an important driver for CBA. Most of the documents analyzed (81%) mentioned gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) in relation to adaptation, showing progress on the integration of GESI, and at least one policy per country gave more details on how this could be done. For example, Zambia's NAP used gender and inclusiveness as 2 out of 10 criteria to prioritize their adaptation actions. Building on the strongest policies from each country, other country and Southern Africa Development Community policies should strengthen the integration of GESI.



Where to Go From Here?

CBA has demonstrated its effectiveness in building resilience among vulnerable communities in Southern Africa and beyond. Our analysis underscores that important progress has been made in integrating the enabling factors for CBA in policies, creating entry points that can be used to move toward implementation at scale. At the same time, the gaps reveal that there are significant opportunities to enhance this integration. The explicit recognition of the CBA approach in the policy documents is crucial, as well as increasing financial support to local actors and fostering community-based actors' leadership. With the upcoming updates to nationally determined contributions and the iterative nature of NAPs, there is a promising window to embed CBA more deeply into policy and practice. If we seize that opportunity, we can leverage the strengths of CBA to build resilience where it's needed most and at a scale that reflects both the severity of the climate crisis and the urgent needs of the most vulnerable.

Endnotes

- ¹ [IPCC AR6 WGII Technical Summary, 2022](#)
- ² [IPCC AR6 WGII Summary For Policymakers, 2022](#)
- ³ [World Resources Institute, Principles for Locally Led Adaptation](#)
- ⁴ [NAP Global Network, Progress on Vertical Integration in National Adaptation Plan Processes: Analysis of strategic linkages between national and sub-national levels, 2023](#)
- ⁵ [CARE, Adaptation Good Practice Checklist, 2016](#)

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