

Sharing Lessons learnt

ADAPTATION
IN THE LOCAL
CONTEXT

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Understanding the local context

Initiating and supporting local adaptation initiatives requires sound understanding of the complex realities of climate-affected communities. However, outsiders are never fully familiar with the cultural, political, religious, economic or environmental contexts of these communities. Members of climate-affected communities will understand their situation in ways that are shaped by tradition, local hierarchies, ways of knowing and lack of information, and thus be limited in their ability to imagine an improved situation in the future.

Initiatives that are managed by people who are not adequately knowledgeable about the local context are less likely to succeed as a result of shortcomings of planning processes and unanticipated problems such as hijacking of initiatives by powerful interests and rejection or failure of technical solutions.

In order to minimise these possible negative outcomes:

Inform yourself as well as possible about the local context in advance (research, conversations with informants, etc.) so that you are better prepared to integrate new information and knowledge.

- Be aware of your own values, prejudices and the ways in which past experiences have impacted on you so that you can better avoid the limitations that they impose on you. Beware of preconceived ideas about how things are and how they function, because they can mislead you and hide the truth from you.
- When you are facilitating or participating in discussions in the community, bring things to the surface in ways that they can be talked about and examined critically yet constructively, even if they are potentially conflictual.
- Encourage people to draw diagrams, pictures or maps to reflect how people, institutions, processes, things and places relate to one another; then facilitate discussion to enrich the visualisation and to verify the facts or perspectives that it presents.



Women in Bangladesh taking action by planting mangrove seedlings to stabilise the islands- an intricate and complex adaptation challenge. (Photo: B Koelle)

- Motivate people to view things in the light of new facts and perspectives so as to release inspiring ideas.
- Create building blocks for future action by bringing together knowledge and resources so that the most appropriate elements are integrated into plans.

Many useful "rapid appraisal" tools are available if you want to quickly and easily build up some kind of quantified "picture" of local realities, and the PLA Handbook in the Resources section of this book will make these readily available to you. We would advise you to focus on developing a shared and validated common picture of the history and structure of the local community and the ways in which the local natural resources respond to weather events and utilisation. Optimally this should include the complexities of cause and effect in the inter-connected spheres of the social, the economic and the natural environment. Don't let your curiosity and desire for quantified data distract you from the goal: the most valuable information and insights will not be available as quantified data, but as insights that arise from narratives, verified by the sort of triangulation that can take place in interactive processes.

It will be important to elicit and “surface” local and indigenous knowledge about resources that are valued by local people, and to explore how these forms of knowledge link to or contradict other forms of knowledge such as scientific knowledge.

Local communities survive and thrive by using intellectual, cultural, natural and physical resources to earn a livelihood and to enrich their lives socially and culturally. Many of these resources will have been used by people since before recorded history, to support their processes of adapting to climatic extremes. Despite the fact that the communities that you engage with will probably all be marginalised or “disadvantaged” in some way, it is not advisable to launch a participatory process, which calls for participants to articulate their needs. The list will probably be endless and even after prioritising, you and the group will probably be left feeling depressed and without having uncovered anything new. A much better approach is to facilitate a group conversation around available resources. A simple workshop technique would be, for example, to ask participants to map out all of the institutions they have a relationship with (e.g. the local school, the local authority, the church, produce markets, other community associations, etc.). Those with a strong relationship are drawn closer to the centre of the page, those with weak relationships are places at the edges. A discussion can then follow about which of these relationships can be described as “assets”, and which are strategically worth building on. Similarly, one could for instance ask the group to map out the location of water or grazing resources and how these are used. A discussion can follow about which of these “assets” are vulnerable, and if so, what needs to be done to protect them. The resultant picture of the local context populated with “assets” (qualified with comments on what obstacles exist, or what needs to be done to use them more productively) is a much more enlightening and motivating picture than a long list of problems that need to be addressed.

As the facilitator, you will need to guide the discussion around resource mapping while allowing the participants freedom to determine what they think are useful resources. While natural and physical resources will probably be quite evident, don't neglect the less tangible “social assets” like networks, collective and individual skills, community heritage and identity, etc.

Another workshop technique that can help understand the local context is visualisation. A simple form of this process



Understanding the local context also means understanding local ecology and the impact of climate change on local resources and ecosystem services. (Photo: B Koelle)

would be to ask participants to draw a picture or map of their community as they would like to see it, in say 20 years' time. It is advisable to form small homogeneous groups (e.g. women, youth, farmers, traders, etc.) for this task. The discussion that follows can be centred on the differences or similarities that each group presents. It is often surprising how different these future visions are, and for the participants it can be a valuable insight into the priorities of different parts of their community. This material is also a useful reference point for participants to revisit later on in the project's life.

Understanding the local context requires a flexible approach. Not only is the context constantly evolving, but your intervention will also be influencing and further changing it. Avoid comfortable assumptions, and try to keep as well informed as possible, especially as relates to changes that will impact on the processes and initiatives that you are involved in.

You may have opportunity to engage with community members on a social level. This can easily occur if you are spending time in the community and being hosted as a guest. You may also be invited to participate in important events such as funerals or festivals. You could consider engaging in these social activities to get a better



It is important that local adaptation strategies include local livelihoods. The Heiveld Co-operative integrates climate change adaptation into their engagement with members, business management and marketing strategy. (Photo B Koelle)



Local knowledge can often hold the key to successful adaptation strategies - and can be a good starting point to explore new and innovative ways of adapting. (Photo: B Koelle)

understanding of people's lives and realities, and interrogate your assumptions about the community. By doing this, you can shift your relationship with the people from that of beneficiaries to fellow human beings.

Be aware that by participating in social interactions you will be associated in people's minds with those who you have shared this interaction with. This could mean that you are seen as a friend of powerful individuals, which will probably influence your ability to interact on an equal level with others. While there are no recipes here, use your own best judgement to assess what the likely implications are of such social engagement. If necessary, gently disentangle yourself from situations that are becoming fraught with negative associations.

Collating local and scientific knowledge

Why does it matter?

A coherent collation of local and scientific knowledge of the local area that you are planning to work is a bridging step between understanding the local context and establishing priorities around which action plans can be developed. However much of what is described in this section is applicable throughout the term of your relationship with the local community group. What we mean is that throughout the project, new information may emerge that needs to be acknowledged; or new issues may be identified that need to be supported with scientific knowledge.

Participatory action learning is essentially a process of building new knowledge, which is generated and owned by the participants themselves. This new knowledge is the product of planning, exploration and reflection. But before

moving in this direction, it is useful for the group to take stock of what they know about their own environment, and for you to introduce external knowledge that may shed new light. The aim is to ensure that planned actions are well grounded in terms of knowledge about the climate and its impact on natural resources and livelihoods. Please note that we are not talking about using scientific data to develop a "benchmark" here. If you wish to do that (which may be appropriate in certain circumstances), you should consult the appropriate literature.

The following will outline some of the reasons why collating local and scientific knowledge is an important part of the overall process, it will describe some of the principle that you need to apply, and will also give some practical advice about how to go about it.

Sharing relevant local knowledge for adaptation

As a practitioner, you are probably relatively familiar with accessing scientific knowledge. This is generally well documented and available, and you may already be networked into academic and scientific circles.

Local knowledge by contrast is usually built through lived experience and is seldom documented. It needs to be surfaced, reflected on, acknowledged and documented. There are various ways of doing this and your choice of process will depend on the specific context. Ideally it should be done as a participatory exercise rather than questionnaire-type research. For example you could facilitate a workshop which includes asking the participants in small groups, to describe the characteristics of each season as they experience them, and how each season impacts their livelihoods. With farmers, this would raise questions such as the best time to plant, the condition of local streams and rivers, the effect of heat stress on their crops or livestock, etc.



Appropriate adaptation strategies vary from person to person, community to community. Alternative methods of transport may be greener and less expensive, but will not be sustained unless they are locally suitable, affordable and culturally acceptable. (Photo B Koelle)

A further exercise could look in more detail at the negative and positive impacts of these factors on their livelihoods. For example, do summer heat waves have a significant impact on their production? Is the status of the local river important to them, and why? Taking this even further, you could get the group to discuss whether these characteristics have changed over time. Did the river flow more strongly in the past? Have farming practices changed? Depending on the responses, you may want to take the process a step further by getting the group to discuss why this is so. Slowly a picture will emerge of how the group makes meaning of their changing environment.

There are many good reasons why collating local knowledge should be done as a participatory exercise, and should be done at all. Local (or indigenous) knowledge, because it is based on lived experience is often anecdotal and “invisible”. Despite the fact that it may be the basis which guides many of the livelihood strategies of the particular community, it seldom exists in a structured form where it can be debated or tested. It may not even be recognised as “knowledge” by the local community. By revealing and acknowledging it, the process helps to build a sense of self-worth in the group, and of ownership of the process and its outcomes. The sustainability of any outcomes of the project will be enhanced if the community group feels that they have made the decisions on what to do and how to do it, and have faith in their own powers of analysis. Forcing decision-making based on “external” knowledge provided by “experts”, invariably leads to outcomes that are not fully owned, possibly inappropriate, and which will probably be abandoned as soon as the “expert” leaves.

Triangulation and validation of knowledge

We also accept that there are many different ways of seeing and understanding the world. By surfacing and recognising these different world-views, including views based on conventional scientific knowledge, and bringing them to bear on a particular problem or question, the group is able to “triangulate” these different views, discard those that it does not trust, and build further on those that are verified by evidence and experience. As important as it is to acknowledge local knowledge, it is also important not to pose the two forms of knowledge – scientific and local – as opposing each other. Both need to be validated and assessed for their usefulness in building a more complete and trustworthy picture of the dynamics of the problems faced.

We also accept that despite the robustness of scientific knowledge, it may have limited use when applied to a specific local context. For example, one may be able to obtain weather data collected over many years and present this to your community group as a solid, scientifically verified picture of weather patterns in the region. However the actual patterns experienced by the community may be very different because of microclimate considerations or different perspectives of what weather variables are relevant to them (mean annual rainfall vs. seasonal distribution of precipitation).

By recognising local knowledge, integrating it with scientific knowledge, and helping to build local capacity for reflection and analysis, one can provide an isolated or marginalised community with access to a new “language” with which they can engage with the outside world. Integrating these different forms of knowledge can contribute to the development of user-relevant, downscaled climate change projections



Adaptation and beyond is published by Indigo development & change as a contribution towards effective and participatory adaptation to climate change. The contributions are varied and demonstrate the multitude of adaptation options we can draw on.

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