



Reflections

LESSONS FROM EVALUATIONS

Adapting to climate change in the most vulnerable contexts

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UNDP Niger / Amadou Djibo

The climate adaptation challenge

The most recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change notes with high confidence that “vulnerability is higher in locations with poverty, governance challenges and limited access to basic services and resources, violent conflict and high levels of climate-sensitive livelihoods (e.g., smallholder farmers, pastoralists, fishing communities)”.

Whilst people in these contexts use coping strategies to deal with hazards, short-term decisions to sell assets, reduce food intake or migrate may not be sufficient and can have long-term consequences.

Adapting to climate change is a positive approach to building preparedness for risks whilst promoting development. Many components are similar to good livelihood planning, disaster risk reduction and natural resource management, all of which can contribute to the ability to withstand a threat.

However, climate change brings a unique risk: the uncertainty of how its impacts will manifest locally—at the household, farm or community level—and long after a programme has finished. For those exposed to the worst impacts of climate change, adaptation is, therefore, an ongoing process of building the capacity to make informed changes.

Knowing which strategies are more likely to be effective is crucial to avoid investing in development pathways that may become untenable in the future.

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What can we learn about climate adaptation from evaluations?

Through the Climate Promise, UNDP supports around 100 governments – including 46 least developed countries and 11 small island developing states – in critical areas such as advancing adaptation policy and planning, fostering resilience for food security, safeguarding livelihoods, improving water resource management and coastal adaptation, enhancing climate information and early warning systems and providing integrated climate security. It also offers dedicated support to locally-led, innovative adaptation solutions, with particular emphasis on the most vulnerable populations.

This Reflections paper examines what works, what does not, and what factors and contexts influence the success of interventions supporting climate adaptation, with a view to informing more effective policies and programming.



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EVALUATING CLIMATE RESILIENCE



01 The reality of climate impacts

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The negative impacts of climate change are exacerbating existing development challenges and making solutions harder to implement. Strong programmes properly consider climate risks in their designs, support adaptive capacity early and recognize that those exposed to risks will need to adapt after the support ends.

The most common threats observed in the evaluations were drought and flooding – in some cases within the same locality – and fire, excessive heat and changed disease vectors also caused disruption. Although governments are experienced in dealing with hazards, in many places the recovery window between events has narrowed.

Evaluations pointed to wide-reaching secondary effects on livelihoods, public services, natural resources and infrastructure, and illustrate the reality of a 'polycrisis', where institutions, communities and households may be undermined by a combination of environmental, health, economic and other shocks.

In many contexts, UNDP is supporting countries to consider the influence of climate change across several pre-existing threats, building on its disaster risk reduction programming. In Uganda, for example, UNDP supported government to screen national policies and investments against multiple risks and helped develop the risk analysis tools used by district governments.

In at least five evaluations reviewed, extreme weather had disrupted project implementation, and several others point to unseasonal weather patterns undermining the trials of improved agricultural practices and climate insurance.

These projects found it challenging to build confidence in solutions, and sustainability concerns were raised even where implementation was eventually possible.

The examples demonstrate that general environmental or livelihood improvements should not be mistaken for improved resilience to climate change, as gains can be quickly eroded.



UNDP Somalia

01 The reality of climate impacts

Reflections

Examples of how negative impacts of climate change are exacerbating existing development challenges

PARAGUAY has recently seen the worst drought in half a century, large scale forest fires, the COVID-19 pandemic and flooding; whilst in the **DRC** increased floods, soil erosion and agricultural losses occurred amidst a backdrop of government, donor and community resources already stretched by recurrent cholera, measles and Ebola epidemics.

In **ESWATINI**, the continuing effects of Cyclone Eloise from 2021 were compounded by torrential rains that further devastated infrastructure in 2023. As in **SOUTH AFRICA**, which experienced severe flooding in KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern and Western Cape regions across 2023 and 2022, the impacts were disproportionately felt by marginalized communities, particularly those living in informal housing.

In arid areas of **UGANDA**, evaluations described the recent impacts of prolonged drought and draw attention to the experience of pastoralist groups whose livelihoods are threatened by increasing water scarcity. Communities recovering from drought in **ETHIOPIA** were further impacted by a locust infestation, amidst wider social tensions over declining pasture. Extended drought in **DJIBOUTI** forced people to abandon rural areas, placing greater stress on urban water supplies and health services.

Evaluations in **COLOMBIA, ETHIOPIA, IRAQ, MALI** and **YEMEN** highlight even more serious threats, explicitly linking climate impacts with diminishing natural resources and the catalysts of conflicts in these countries.

Environmental threats undermined the implementation of a suite of initiatives to improve the climate resilience of health facilities in **KIRIBATI, SOLOMON ISLANDS, TUVALU, VANUATU**. Repeated cyclones reduced the dry season to a 14-16-week window in which the project had to install roof-top solar, water and sanitation blocks and upgrade cold-chain storage amidst higher logistics costs. Even completed works remained vulnerable to saline inundation and cyclones.



Phil Kabuje / UNDP Tanzania

02 Reinforcing local capacities

Helping local groups to map climate risks is an effective entry point, from which communities can be linked to formal support. Adaptive thinking should be fostered to avoid business-as-usual solutions.

Discussing existing challenges has been an effective approach to build awareness of future climate threats with communities and local governments and has helped to plan for adaptive measures.

Through the mapping process, UNDP connected communities to public services. In this way, local groups articulated how they will respond to climate risks, and then accessed improved agricultural support, social protection, insurance and localized forecasts of climate impacts.

The maps and plans often captured the community's contribution to risk mitigation or natural resource management, which can be used to leverage other resources or payments.

This risk-informed, participatory planning provided a foundation for resilience, but the unique, longer-term challenges of climate change were at risk of being deprioritized as communities identified immediate needs in their areas.

Few evaluations referred to the quality of local adaptation plans, but those that do encouraged project staff to promote innovative thinking, in local dialects, so that people have the skills to make different decisions as conditions change.

This may involve diversifying livelihoods so that people can select the most appropriate options for the seasonal forecast or planning infrastructure to be modifiable to changing conditions.



Phil Kabuje / UNDP Tanzania

02 Reinforcing local capacities

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Examples of UNDP support to enabling local-level climate risk mapping and decision-making

In **CUBA**, UNDP connected communities and local government to restore natural flood defenses and rehabilitate the wider ecosystem, integrating risk analysis and community assessments through culturally-adapted tools and inclusion strategies. Similarly, in **GEORGIA**, UNDP enabled sub-national governments in disaster-prone areas to shift their focus towards community-led risk identification and localized development strategies in over 200 communities.

In **PERU**, UNDP connected public services to the 'life plans' of remote groups, which included climate risk mapping and ecosystem restoration.

In **URUGUAY**, UNDP created a rural women's climate change network which brought together 70 women from different regions to equip them with technical knowledge from academia and civil society organization, fostering their participation in climate decision-making processes.

Working with provincial governments in the **DRC**, UNDP helped develop a multi-hazard contingency plan and a flood risk analysis for the West Shore of the Ruzizi River and Lake Tanganyika, which now informs decision-making on measures to mitigate the risks of natural and climate-related disasters.

In **SOUTH AFRICA**, UNDP helped improve the implementation of climate-smart land rehabilitation practices by linking community organizations, government and NGOs, whilst enhancing technical capacity for the management of climate risks among government institutions.

In **NORTH MACEDONIA**, UNDP helped de-restrict access to risk maps so they could be used by communities in flood-prone areas, but its public consultations for local planning of climate initiatives and flood infrastructure were inconsistent and lacked a strategic direction, which limited their ability to support inclusive, community-driven development.

In **THAILAND**, local plans had limited climate focus, despite the project building awareness of climate change and GIS technology amongst subnational government. Without strong emphasis, the plans had largely focused on immediate priorities. In **LAO PDR**, the climate planning process generated a demand for development support that exceeded the resources of the project.

Climate forecasts become relevant when science and observation are integrated in a regularized process and local languages.

Although risk assessments are helpful for planning, they need to be regularly updated with the latest meteorological data.

Accessing the granular data needed to forecast how climate impacts may manifest in a specific geographic area or sector has been a challenge for countries, slowing their shift from disaster response to pre-emptively strengthening resilience capacities.

The evaluations reviewed show different ways in which UNDP supported country capacity to predict and plan for climate impacts, working both with national meteorological departments and local counterparts to build a more comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of the risks.

Programmes combined weather monitoring services with community assessments of natural patterns and found ways to communicate relevant forecasts through radios, SMS and market vendors.

Use of climate information was lower when communication was treated as a one-way process and where the facilitators of meteorological information struggled to maintain the ongoing costs.

In several cases, the success of local weather monitoring was dependent on project resources and expected to cease without other financing options.

UNDP Bangladesh / AB Rashid

03 Improving climate information

Examples of UNDP initiatives supporting climate information systems



UNDP Bangladesh / AB Rashid

03 Improving climate information





04 Avoiding maladaptation

When a new technology is introduced, the intended users need the ability to own, modify or abandon.

Technological advancements offer potential to reduce some of the impacts of climate change. Their introduction, however, requires careful planning as the uncertainty of climate change increases the potential for unintended consequences, especially in contexts that are already fragile.

Although sea walls may reduce erosion on one stretch of coast, they may disrupt fishing patterns in another or create a false sense of security against the scale of future threats.

The evaluations showed the careful choices required when promoting livelihoods in arid areas. Although projects partially mitigated the risks of water depletion by restoring the watershed, each project was found to have limited understanding about extraction rates in the local and surrounding areas.

None of the UNDP projects reviewed promoted a purely technological response to climate impacts, but the extent to which hardware was tailored to the context and supplemented by training that would allow people to adapt these technologies was varied.

Stronger projects were co-designed with the people that may use, or be at risk from, a technology, and have built the capacity of local technicians to provide future maintenance and modification.

Weaker projects overlooked or treated these components superficially, and evaluations criticized them for being overly positive in their initial risk assessments.



UNDP Uzbekistan

04 Avoiding maladaptation

Reflections

Interventions reflecting the need to avoid maladaptation

The approach of tailoring environmental technologies to each community's ambitions for income generation and quality of life was considered one of the most effective components of a forestry project in **HONDURAS** and built strong local ownership of the adaptation initiatives. Field technicians were attached to women's groups and indigenous organizations, reaching groups that are often overlooked by the agricultural extension system.

In **GUINEA BISSAU**, UNDP combined mangrove restoration and man-made infrastructure for coastal protection, learning from the limitations of single measures in previous projects. However, it did not effectively respond to the local sensitivities around land tenure, mangrove access and gender roles raised during community consultations. These risks remained at the end of the project amidst low community awareness of grievance mechanisms. The introduction of coastal protection barriers in **LIBERIA** was accompanied by careful consideration to avoid disturbing fishing patterns and pollution.



In **ETHIOPIA** and **TURKMENISTAN**, the creation of new water-points and irrigation infrastructure risked promoting water-intensive livelihoods that exacerbate droughts. In **UZBEKISTAN**, this unintended consequence arose from an improved early warning system for drought, which led farmers to over-extract water during the dry season when warned about possible water shortages in the coming planting window.

Working in **PACIFIC ISLANDS** brings additional logistical challenges for supply and maintenance of climate technologies at health facilities. However, project weaknesses left low national ownership of initiatives introduced by UNDP, WHO and GEF, and financial savings at health facilities were absorbed into national budgets rather than local capacity.



UNDP / Imen Meliane / Julie Teng

05 Planning to implementation

Implementing national adaptation plans was often blocked by financial and institutional hurdles. Working with central economic ministries helped to incorporate adaptation objectives in departmental budgets, and further tailoring financial innovations could unlock resourcing.

Evaluations show that UNDP continues to provide valuable assistance as countries establish or update their national climate adaptation priorities and plan a coherent response across sectors.

However, in many countries positive policy changes faced significant implementation hurdles that delayed their impact (Eswatini, Cote d'Ivoire, Kosovo, Moldova, Serbia and Uganda). Climate adaptation crosses many ministerial mandates, and action can be diluted without clear leadership for coordination and accountability.

Translating the national climate plan into tangible areas for public and private investment was a common barrier. Even where an investment pipeline was in place, financing adaptation activities remained challenging because resilience initiatives are often smaller in scale, work with poorer groups and have a less clear revenue model than energy or infrastructure projects.

Given the challenges in directing adaptation resources to where they are needed, the IEO's Evaluation of UNDP's Strategic Plan 2022-2025 noted the importance of the progress UNDP had recently made in offering countries new options for funding climate resilience by linking the Integrated National Finance Frameworks to countries' Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement.

Evaluations highlighted UNDP's role in new modalities for mobilizing finance for other forms of climate action. Bond agreements to incentivize emission reductions and the protection of natural resources have not yet been adapted to fund adaptation initiatives but show how innovations can be used to finance previously overlooked social challenges.

Examples of UNDP support for national adaptation planning

In 2024, UNDP **URUGUAY** helped launch the first sovereign sustainability-linked bond in the region, supporting the governance arrangements for the bond and verifying whether the environmental outcomes have been achieved—a prerequisite for unlocking the financial commitments. The bond catalyzed the development of a complementary World Bank loan mechanism, further broadening the financial and institutional impacts. These agreements primarily incentivize emission reductions and the protection of natural resources, rather than direct improvements in adaptation capacities; however, they demonstrate the value of UNDP's national presence and development expertise, which can be expanded to other areas of climate resilience.

In **SERBIA** and **KOSOVO**, UNDP supported the creation of first laws on climate change, but there was weak integration into national budgeting and policy frameworks of various sectors, and the policies faced a lack of institutional capacities and investment planning.

In **MALI**, UNDP's work with the Ministry of Economy and Finance helped to mainstream climate change in macroeconomic policy, fiscal planning, budgeting and public investments, leading to an increased allocation for the environment in the national budget. In **GEORGIA**, UNDP helped develop the conceptual framework and standards for integrating climate considerations into national budgeting processes.

In **COTE D'IVOIRE**, UNDP helped to create a portfolio of 300 potential climate projects, but the government and the private sector requested further UNDP support to mobilize the resources to deliver them. Similarly, in **LIBERIA** the creation of a public-private partnership alliance to address the impacts of climate change had not materialized into significant investment for adaptation at the time of the evaluation.

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06 Private sector

Reflections

Successful programmes have understood business incentives throughout the value chain. Higher incomes can be wiped out by climate shocks, and more attention is needed for those that struggle to enter the market.

Although larger businesses can offer innovations and services that help people adapt to climate change, the value chains for these products remain nascent, especially in developing countries, and gains in protecting the natural resources that people rely on for food, water and livelihoods can be overshadowed by larger-scale extractive activity.

Two IEO thematic evaluations highlighted UNDP's engagement with agricultural businesses to improve the way they use land, which is a priority in many National Adaptation Plans. Later decentralized evaluations of such initiatives called for a closer understanding of the incentives of agribusinesses and signaled that the de-risking analysis of UNDP and FAO was not sufficient on its own to increase investor confidence or to bridge the lack of trust between government and large private businesses in the programme countries.

Smaller enterprises face far greater challenges from climate change; as an integral source of household income, they are now subject to water scarcity and extreme weather events, on top of longer-standing constraints to their profitability.

If smaller enterprises have access to reliable markets for climate-smart products, such as drought-resistance crops or legumes that enrich soil-quality, they can yield benefits for household resilience—improving income, diversifying livelihoods and enhancing natural assets. Evaluations showed that UNDP has enabled enterprises to adopt climate-smart products and show their struggles to sustain new technologies because they have limited access to finance and higher-value markets.

In certain countries, UNDP harnessed the power of individual producers in cooperatives (Bhutan, Cote D'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Eswatini and Uganda). Evaluations showed collectives professionalizing, better positioned in the value chain and taking on new initiatives such as crop insurance, but also recognise that access to successful cooperatives is easier for better-off farmers than for the poorest or for those with disabilities.



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06 Private sector

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Examples of UNDP initiatives engaging small and large enterprises in climate initiatives

In **UZBEKISTAN**, the removal of quotas for cotton production was undermined by the commodity's high export value, which meant large producers continued to draw heavily on river water, which impacted the livelihood of smallholders in drought-prone areas.

In Karamoja, **UGANDA**, UNDP supported women groups to build the business skills required to formally register as cooperatives and agree bulk purchase agreements for climate smart produce with commercial buyers. Although successful as a marketing initiative, the project's climate approach was weak, overlooking the potential for flood, drought and pest outbreaks, which damaged agricultural production during the project lifetime.

In **PARAGUAY**, UNDP incrementally enabled large-scale soybean and beef producers to accept sustainable land practices through a combination of pilot sites, roundtable dialogues and the incentives of certification and increased export demand.

In **BHUTAN**, the sustainability of climate-smart agricultural techniques was considered likely because youth cooperatives had used the lessons to restore land for pasture in remote areas, enabling them to generate regular and more income from existing value chains for dairy products. Positive effects on the local economy grew over a six-year period, and success was attributed to the participatory learning approach, in which the farmers saw the opportunities within their contexts.

In **ETHIOPIA**, UNDP helped organise 1,400 households into 36 cooperatives and linked them to credit unions, enabling the farmers to access over \$600,000 to support alternative livelihoods that increased household incomes and reduced pressure on protected areas.

In **ESWATINI**, the organization's climate smart agriculture work established a revolving fund to assist farmers with capital for purchasing inputs and equipment. Almost 500 farmers accessed the initial loans, but the absence of effective repayment modalities, and poor record management, made it difficult to recover resources in the first funding window, necessitating a re-launch with improved processes.



UNDP Maldives / Ashwa Faheem

07 Evaluating climate resilience

Reflections

Evaluators can more confidently assess whether adaptation support is likely to be effective by viewing resilience as a set of capacities held by those at risk.

Many of the evaluations reviewed for this paper do not capture whether people are better able to adapt to climate change. In some cases, a single indicator – such as the number of people trained on climate smart agricultural techniques or the number of people with increased income – is used to suggest people are more resilient, an issue that stems from the project's logframe in some cases. The limitations of this approach are highlighted by the projects that were disrupted by weather events and the many evaluations that flag climate change as an ongoing risk to sustainability.

The uncertainty of how climate change will affect specific populations has required caution when evaluating how effective support has been in strengthening resilience: the true test of whether adaptation strategies are working is largely seen only after a shock or a stressor has occurred. The evaluations show that well-meaning programmes can lead to maladaptation if they lock people into livelihood strategies or disaster plans that then become untenable.

Evaluators can more confidently assess whether adaptation support is likely to be effective by assessing resilience as a set of capacities held by those at risk, rather than a single improvement.

Country offices can encourage evaluators to assess if UNDP support reinforced people's ability to anticipate, absorb and adapt, particularly for those who may have heightened vulnerability through disability, poverty or social norms.

In using resilience capacities, people draw on their access to a diverse set of financial, natural, livelihood, knowledge, physical and social assets, and programme staff and evaluators can seek to understand the sufficiency of these assets in advance of a hazard.

Assessing to what extent a programme or policy enhances these capacities can help to understand where people may be less vulnerable to a shock, and where gaps may be filled by government or community action.

Reflections

ABOUT

The Reflections series synthesizes lessons from past evaluations and evaluative studies to support organizational learning about what works and what doesn't in different development contexts. The aim of the series is to provide relevant, useful and accessible lessons to UNDP country offices and the wider community of development practitioners.

Development of this paper leveraged a combination of AI-led searches in the UNDP AIDA (Artificial Intelligence for Development Analytics) tool and human-led analysis. This paper is based on 37 UNDP evaluations. It might not reflect recent developments not captured in evaluations.



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