



CBA¹⁷

Local solutions inspiring
global action

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CBA17 key messages

The 17th International Conference on Community-Based Adaptation to Climate Change (CBA17) took place in Bangkok, Thailand from 22-25 May 2023. 200 climate adaptation practitioners from over 50 countries gathered in person for a series of workshops on the locally led adaptation principles, exploring how to put them into practice. This year's conference had five cross-sectoral themes to focus discussions on the key issues. The messages that emerged are of value to a range of different organisations — but particularly to donors, international NGOs (INGOs) and community-based organisations in climate-vulnerable contexts.

Decolonising climate action

CBA's newest theme explored how to resolve tensions caused by the colonial legacies that continue to shape adaptation in the global South. Key messages focused on how development actors from the global North can create decolonised partnerships.

- Development agencies and NGOs from former colonial countries continue to shape adaptation programmes. The close relationships between them create barriers for truly local organisations to receive knowledge and funding. They promote assumptions about the value of scientific 'expert' knowledge over local, experiential and Indigenous knowledge — despite evidence for the value of the latter.
- Donors must develop more direct relationships with local organisations that are transparent about the power dynamics that shape decision making. Local organisations could explain their more holistic approach to adaptation that goes beyond the siloed thinking to which INGOs and donors are often tied.
- Decolonised adaptation programmes would create freedom for local organisations to lead decision making — applying adaptive management principles to respond to changes in their own context. This approach would create space for failure that leads to institutionalised learning, not reasons to withhold funding.
- Capacity building models can become two-way — with donors and intermediaries recognising how they can learn from local knowledge and experience. Learning curves may be slower working in these ways, but progress will be real and locally led.

Nature-based solutions

The nature-based solutions (NbS) theme focused on NbS solutions in practice in both urban and rural spaces. Recognising that scaled up solutions are rare, the sessions explored the ongoing challenges in getting NbS to be taken seriously and the routes to wider acceptance in policy and practice.

- NbS often remains as a vague policy commitment. NbS must go beyond adding ponds or trees to urban spaces, or simplistic distinctions between 'green and grey' infrastructure. Poorly considered solutions, particularly in urban spaces, are typically not integrated into planning and development. To get beyond vague policy commitments, governments must set targets and integrate NbS into planning processes to create meaningful funded investment.

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- Barriers to integration of NbS into full-scale planning include misaligned incentives that undermine collaboration and the proliferation of jargon and specialised language that excludes local organisations. Inadequate resources for local governments to seek out and integrate local and Indigenous knowledge reduces awareness of the kinds of solutions available and how they might serve community needs.
- To be successful, NbS needs systematic engagement of different kinds of actors. In urban spaces, governments, communities, engineers and scientists need to work together in partnership with planning. Coordinating institutions are needed to facilitate this kind of collaboration, which hinges on local or Indigenous knowledge combined with scientific innovation and data for both planning and monitoring.

Climate finance

The climate finance theme explored how funders, their intermediaries and local actors that often implement them, function together — and the changes needed to facilitate locally-led action. There were clear links to the decolonising climate action theme, as it is often through the delivery or withholding of finance that colonial legacies play out in practice.

- Donors, intermediaries and local actors must recognise the risks involved in delivering adaptation projects. Donor or finance intermediary fears of fiduciary and reputational risk shape the climate finance system, but local organisations carry reputational risk when funds are late or not renewed, or when complex programmes that they had no chance of co-designing don't work as planned. Risk management strategies can unintentionally generate new risks — for instance working around rather than with local (or national) government undermines long-term sustainability of the activity.
- Openness, particularly by donors, to finding a middle ground that openly recognises and distributes risk fairly should be a first step in any programme. Investing in building trust between donors, intermediaries and local actors as an enabler, a catalyst and as a product generated over time should be a greater priority. Trust can be established through more direct relationships, but also by establishing clear operating procedures for organisations to follow, as well as regular opportunities for dialogue and exchange.
- Recognising and developing home-grown intermediaries from climate-vulnerable countries will facilitate greater representation of local organisations and actors, with deeper understanding of local politics and realities. Consortia for delivery could also include entities that do not have legal status but who may be highly effective connectors to communities and Indigenous knowledge and expertise.
- Existing in-country systems will be there longer than donor projects. Working with them, even though they may be flawed, can reveal opportunities for improvement that will be necessary for large-scale adaptation finance to work sustainably. They also need to acknowledge that things change from the proposal stage to the moment activities are implemented, so more flexibility, regular and better communication, and establishing collaborative processes can enhance the community's capacity according to their needs.
- Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) currently misses learning opportunities due to donor-led decisions. Effective MEL establishes a common understanding between partners of what constitutes success or failure and how to measure it — recognising that donors and communities may have different priorities. Measurement should be in service to meaningful learning that is institutionalised by governments and NGOs.

Building Approaches to Fund Local Solutions with Evidence (BASE)

In its inaugural round of grants, BASE (an Initiative coordinated by Fundación Avina) will finance the development of eight climate solutions for tropical forest management. The innovative approach has three elements that ease the process for local actors while ensuring high quality proposals: (1) applicants choose three different ways of explaining their project's climate rationale, to accommodate diverse or creative explanations; (2) a researcher is hired to work with successful grantees to refine the climate rationale through close collaboration; (3) throughout the application process, BASE offers support to applicants and strengthens their capabilities to navigate climate finance and project development. Find out more information here: <https://baseinitiative.net/registerfirstcallgrants>

Youth leadership

The youth theme stressed the need for advocacy within communities, and stronger, meaningful partnerships of youth (and their organisations) with older generations and other organisations.

- Intergenerational dialogue and meaningful engagement between young people and older generations needs to be encouraged through workshops, public participation forums or knowledge exchanges. Intergenerational partnerships should offer young people mentorship, access to networks, links to funding and capacity building.
- Young people can be valuable assets to their communities, acting as data collectors and supporting citizen science initiatives to understand local needs and perspectives. However, these valuable contributions and efforts also deserve proper remuneration and recognition for sustainable action.
- Digital tools can be powerful ways to both reach young people and amplify their perspectives. Storytelling through digital platforms can facilitate learning and wider understanding of an issue quickly. Social media offers young people a direct route to communicating their message to governments, as well as others in their communities.
- The current system of youth engagement that creates international 'activist rock stars' needs to be balanced with support for youth-led advocacy at the grassroots level. Youth organisations can be highly effective in local contexts with small amounts of funding. Youth activities are typically funded as a small budget line of larger INGO projects, but more dedicated youth programmes could create greater value from youth-led action.

Youth-led advocacy and activism

Plan International Asia Pacific seeks to create safe spaces that enable children and young people to equitably participate. Using games, art, social media and graphics, they aim to build capabilities of young people to engage in advocacy and gender-responsive climate action. Their research has documented how young women advocates are leading climate action and advocacy through sharing knowledge, connecting people, demanding a greater voice and more urgent action, and implementing projects. Find their research report here: <https://plan-international.org/asia-pacific/publications/girls-activism-leadership-climate-justice-asia-pacific>

Innovation for adaptation

The innovation theme focused not just on how technology can support local adaptation, but how new institutional arrangements, finance delivery mechanisms or skills might make adaptation more effective.

- Too much innovation currently seems to be about innovation for its own sake. Proliferating 'pilots' and 'accelerators' identify new developments without enough attention to sustainability or scaling up. This creates unsustainable dependence on approaches that are costly to manage or maintain.

- Enabling environments for innovation (regulatory and financial) are important to foster and grow new approaches or technologies. Engaging local institutions with local understanding is key to ensuring that innovations are relevant to the context, don't create dependency and are affordable to the users. Innovative approaches in addressing barriers associated with the traditional gender roles are needed.
- International intermediaries can act as knowledge brokers that can bring in experience and learning from elsewhere, and amplifiers that can share positive developments and attract investment. They can also convene different kinds of organisations to collaborate and provide targeted, demand-driven skills and capacity support.

Participatory land use mapping

The Raks Thai Foundation has developed an eight-step participatory digital land use mapping process that brings communities and governments together to agree how land should be used. Communities lead the process by using GIS tools to map land plots and boundaries and signify how land should be used. The in-depth knowledge the community brings leads to more effective planning and adaptation decision making. Find out more from: www.raksthai.org

Recognising the needs of differently abled and marginalised groups

- It's important to unpack words such as 'marginalised' and 'disability' early in the design of projects and programmes. Doing so can reduce the tendency to generalise disability into terms that obscure less well-recognised or visible challenges and their specific requirements.
- There are 'low-hanging fruit' that can quickly improve the way disability is recognised. Meeting disability associations or other organisations that represent differently abled people can deepen understanding of how challenges manifest in different contexts. Digital content can quickly be made more accessible through changing design features of websites and slides.
- Education for communities on disabilities is essential to reduce the 'disablers' that undermine their resilience to climate risks. Many problems are driven by attitudes and cultures that marginalise disabled people from planning and decision-making processes or prevent them from articulating their needs.



Participants from around the world get together in person at CBA17, Bangkok, Thailand.
(Photo: IIED)