Climate action for governance programmes

Strong principles, coherent policies, capable institutions and wide inclusion are needed

Arresting climate change is a major global challenge of our time and cuts across all other development challenges. Ireland is future-proofing its development cooperation by integrating climate action into all areas, so that the poorest and most vulnerable are not left further behind by the climate crisis. This is one of a series of Climate Key Sheets that describe how climate action interacts with pressing development concerns.

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Climate Key Sheet / 5
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Overview

Climate change impacts are multi-dimensional, affecting countries, people and sectors differently, and requiring governance systems to evolve beyond current models. Governance at all levels — international, national and local — must take an integrated and coherent approach that recognises the full scale of the challenge and acts to address it.

Climate actions, for both mitigation and adaptation, happen at country level, by local governments, communities, businesses, non-government organisations and individuals. A 'whole-of-society' approach, in which people well outside government embrace the paradigm shift behind Agenda 2030, is key to achieving policy that tackles development and climate priorities simultaneously. Climate risk assessment and management is needed to inform policy and programme decisions on climate action, and should be gender responsive, capturing disproportionate impacts on women or men to inform adaptation responses.

Despite the theoretical linkages between development frameworks and across sectors, policy coherence and practice is inadequate. Institutional architecture and capabilities for adaptation and mitigation also show gaps at national, regional and local levels. In particular, the most vulnerable groups' voices are missing in climate policymaking processes.

Climate finance mechanisms' efficacy in promoting low-carbon development and building resilience will depend on national institutions' capabilities to prioritise, coordinate and monitor where the costs and benefits of climate action fall, so as to avoid exclusion and marginalisation of vulnerable groups.

Governance matters for climate action because…

Transforming societies' production and consumption patterns to reduce emissions and adapt to climate change needs enhanced governance systems that implement effective policy. Climate change brings uncertainty for people, economies and ecosystems, and strong governance is needed to adequately manage the risks and to reduce the impacts. This is especially important for the poor and most vulnerable, including women and girls. Ensuring distributional justice and equity will require strong and transparent governance systems that promote gender equality and inclusivity. Climate change will stress the economic, social, and political systems that underpin each nation state, and climate action needs institutions and governments that can manage this stress and absorb climate shocks. It is also important to establish good governance of international financial flows, international trade, and Overseas Development Assistance.

Hanoi train street, Vietnam
Credit: Thijs Degenkamp on Unsplash

1. Governance and climate change

Ireland's development cooperation invests in future societies. It addresses global challenges by providing economic opportunities to help prevent future crises, and by supporting innovative responses.

Climate change requires multi-level governance: at international, national and local levels.[1] The Paris Agreement (Article 7 para 5) says climate adaptation action should follow a country-driven, gender-responsive, participatory and fully transparent approach, taking into consideration vulnerable countries, groups, communities and ecosystems. Successful and equitable climate action will depend on having strong governance principles, strong institutions, and sustainable practice at all levels. This enhanced governance capacity is especially needed to ensure the needs of the 'furthest behind' are met first.

2. Global climate governance: complex and slow

Global governance of climate change is posing new challenges that are not being met. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement are yet to deliver the momentum for emissions reductions sufficient to keep global warming to the 2°C target or below. The UNEP 2019 emissions gap report[2] notes that Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to emissions reduction need dramatic strengthening. Countries must increase their NDC ambitions threefold to achieve the well-below 2°C goal and more than fivefold to achieve the 1.5°C goal.

The Paris Agreement's Global Goal on Adaptation aims to enhance adaptive capacity, strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability to climate change, thereby contributing to sustainable development in the context of the global temperature goal. However, adaptation policies are not being fully implemented, and there are gaps in their horizontal integration across government sectors.[3]

Significant adaptation and mitigation are urgently required to prevent tragic climate disasters. Effective governance is also important because climate change risks and shocks can exacerbate instability in countries with weak governance structures or dysfunctional institutions.[4] (See also Climate Action and Conflict, in this series). Developing the capacity to cope with current and future climate change, and with the cross-cutting responses it requires, poses significant governance challenges:

- **Meeting responsibilities for achieving the SDGs.** The UN's 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have garnered enormous international enthusiasm. However, the 2030 Agenda is wide-ranging and very ambitious, and multiple risks, including climate change and emerging challenges (such as COVID-19) may add more difficulties. Disadvantaged countries with many poor people will require support that respects their ownership of policymaking.[2] Achieving the SDGs will largely depend on proper coordination and good governance across the globe and by national states.

- **Investing in disaster risk reduction.** The UN's Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR) commits member countries to shift from managing disasters to managing the risk of disasters, and to focus on understanding this multi-dimensional risk, including vulnerability, coping capacity, exposure, nature of hazard and environmental settings. However, local and customary knowledge and approaches in managing risks are being ignored. Top-down approaches have emphasised the global character of the climate crisis, but inclusive policies, mechanisms and responses are needed from local to global levels.[5] However, reviews note that policies are unimplemented and there is poor inter-institutional coordination and information management.[6]

- **Including social benefits in policy decisions.** SDG 16 seeks to progress all the other SDGs, including SDG 13 on climate, through sustainable consumption and production. While governance thinking recognises the economic potential of sustainable consumption and production processes, the social benefits are not well integrated or measured.[7]

3. Governance for national climate action

Despite climate change's global effects, both mitigation and adaptation are undertaken by local governments, communities, businesses, non-government organisations and individuals. The Paris Agreement and the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report on impacts, adaptation and vulnerability to climate change[8] recognises that subnational governments and municipal, city and local authorities are crucial to strengthen local climate resilience and make vital contributions to the long-term global responses to climate change.

Climate-related hazards exacerbate other stressors, often worsening outcomes for livelihoods, especially for people living in poverty. Conflict and fragility also increase vulnerability to climate change in countries where governance systems are weak. Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are more affected and vulnerable due to financial, technical, physical and social constraints.[9]

Well supported national governments can:

- Support systems that build mitigation and adaptation capacities at institutional, project, community, household and individual levels.

- Mainstream climate change adaptation and mitigation into development plans and national policies.

- Mobilise climate and development finance to support adaptation and mitigation priorities.

- Support partnerships with civil society, private sector and universities that can collaboratively strengthen climate action.

Tackling climate change at the national level requires flexible, tailored approaches by governments and other stakeholders, fostering effective institutions that deliver on climate priorities. Where there is a lack of legal accountability, local corruption can undermine economies, diverting resources from where they are most needed.[10] Governments need to renew efforts to move towards the 'peace, justice and strong institutions' envisaged in SDG 16.

4. Civil society in climate governance and accountability

Achieving the 2030 Agenda will take a 'whole-of-society' approach, extending well beyond national governments. Grassroots civil society actions are needed to hold governments to account, expand space for dialogue, push for fundamental rights and democratic freedoms, and ensure the SDGs are implemented to reach the furthest behind first. The Paris Agreement notes that a 'just transition' is imperative. However, large-scale decarbonisation of economies and societies is needed, but such a transition will only be 'just' if it is **environmentally sustainable**, **economically fair** and **socially inclusive**.[11]

The SDG goals and targets[12] highlight the importance of involving stakeholders. SDG 13.b calls for mechanisms that raise capacity for climate change planning and management in LDCs and SIDS, including focusing on women, youth, and local and marginalised communities. SDG 16.6 calls for effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels, while SDG 16.7 requires responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels. SDG 17.17 highlights the need for public, public–private, and civil society partnerships, which can enhance policy coherence for sustainable development called for in SDG 17.14.

It is assumed that individuals in democracies can meet and associate, free from state impediments.[13] However, the SDG 2019 progress report[7] finds gaps in promoting the rule of law, strengthening institutions and increasing access to justice. It reports the high number of attacks on human rights activists and journalists, which is holding back development (pages 54–55). One in two victims had been working with communities on issues involving land, the environment, poverty, the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples, or the impact of business activities. And, overall, every tenth victim was a woman.

The failure by national states to live up to their international obligation to protect those who stand up for the fundamental rights and freedoms of others, will undermine rights issues including climate justice, depriving millions of their security, rights and opportunities. While globally, demand for transparency, participation and accountability is rising (intensified by expanding digital communications, rapid urbanisation, youth, and women's activism), civil society space is shrinking. National governments are criminalising protest, restricting funding, persecuting opponents, dividing social organisations, pressurising civil society organisations (CSOs), imposing restrictive laws and standards, restricting advertising in independent media and monitoring or cutting off social networks.[14,15] If this trend is not reversed, CSOs in many parts of the world will be unable to promote social, environmental, economic and human rights, while concerns about climate change and rising intergenerational inequality will be suppressed.[16]

5. Climate risks need integrated governance across scales

Better governance of climate risk should enable societies to minimise impacts. Governing global, systemic climate risks clearly requires cohesion

↘ Box 1. Gender equality and climate governance

Gender inequality undermines transformative change. Therefore, from a governance perspective, gender-responsive climate action should be strengthened. The focus should be on women and men's equitable participation in climate action in public and private spheres, recognising that climate impacts may be greater for women. Gender inequality intersects with other vulnerabilities including race, ethnicity, migration, conflict and poverty. An intersectional approach is key in assessing how climate change can exacerbate inequality

While gender equality goals are supported globally, gaps still exist at all levels:

- In several countries, legal frameworks fail to protect women's rights, and women and girls suffer harmful practices that profoundly affect their lives.
- Emerging evidence shows how climate change shocks that increase stress over food security, income and energy needs can exacerbate gender-based violence.
- Women can be powerful agents of change. However, they are under-represented in decision making and leadership at all levels: in UNFCCC bodies, national delegations, locally and at home.

Understanding climate change's gender dimension is key for achieving sustainable development, and should be addressed in risk management, response, evaluation and reporting.

between countries and collaboration among governments, private sector, academia and civil society. But at all levels, institutions need effective and integrated governance so they can identify, assess, manage and communicate risks.[17]

Countries need climate risk assessments at national, sectoral, and local levels to inform development investments. Risk assessments build understanding of hazards, exposure, capacities, and vulnerabilities, thereby helping to address impacts across society. They are needed at all scales because climate change brings cross-cutting impacts for natural and human systems that are increasing in size and complexity. Too often, inadequate cooperation across government, with CSOs and the private sector, and across borders means risks are inadequately governed.

Risk assessments and responses must be used to inform adaptation and mitigation responses within institutional and national policies, strategies and programmes across sectors. Considering past and projected climate can help scenario planning to manage risks and make people, ecosystems and economies more resilient.

Climate funds should address people's needs and priorities, based on good understanding of current and future risks.

Countries need to analyse their institutional capabilities, looking for local and global lessons on where to strengthen capacities so they can better manage the risks to development. Robust monitoring and evaluation systems should track progress and ambition on climate responses and inform adaptive management. Specifically, monitoring and evaluation needs to feed into reporting and accountability mechanisms, so that adaptation and mitigation policy priorities are addressed responsively.

6. Climate risk management and governance in practice

Failure to effectively plan for and manage climate change risks can result in significant damage to infrastructure, businesses, industry, economy, and society in general.[15] Very real practical challenges already face the LDCs and SIDS. However, strategies for reducing exposure and vulnerability to climate hazards can improve livelihoods, economies and ecosystems.[18]

To be effective, climate change responses require well-governed decision making. Responses should fit the type and scale of climate risks to be managed, and might range from no-regrets options, stepwise incremental adaptation, to managed retreats and other transformational changes.[19] Adaptation always needs human and technical resources, particularly if it is to take advantage of any opportunities that climate change brings. Options might include building adaptive capacity or establishing management systems to support interventions.[20]

6.1 Using climate risk management (CRM) at national and local levels

A first adaptation step is to reduce vulnerability and exposure to current climate variability. One strategy is to adopt actions that also benefit other objectives. Social protection can be a 'low regrets' investment if it supports poverty alleviation while also reducing climate vulnerability.[21] However, climate adaptive social protection initiatives are not designed to challenge underlying structural causes of risk (See Climate Action For Adaptive Social Protection, in this series). Other practical first steps can include:[22]

- **Integrating climate risk management into adaptation policy and planning.** Risk assessments should inform policies including National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and NDCs and should support mainstreaming of adaptation and mitigation responses in national development plans and programmes.

- **Developing strategic policy frameworks for risk management and tools to help govern critical risks.** National institutions can usefully coordinate a wide range of actors, including CSOs, private sector, communities and individuals as they identify, mitigate, prepare for and respond to complex risks affecting various sectors.

- **Understanding climate risks to the most vulnerable.** Local climate risk management should analyse risks to people, livelihoods and ecosystems. It must be participatory and include local people, women and other socially excluded groups so their experiences inform adaptation options.

- **Creating coherent development planning at country-level.** Disaster risk response and climate change planning should be linked, especially when considering extreme weather events and preventive risk management.

7. Governance of climate finance

International, national and local sources of climate finance are crucial for developing countries to adapt to and mitigate climate change. How effectively they promote low-carbon development and resilience will depend on national institutions' capacity to prioritise and coordinate, and to monitor and ensure costs and benefits do not reinforce vulnerabilities or exclusions.[23]

Governments and private entities have piloted approaches to mobilise and channel climate finance, at various scales. However the resources available do not match the climate ambition. The climate finance system is failing to get money to those that need it most; only 18% reaches LDCs, and from 2003–2016, under 10% of all global climate funds was earmarked for local action. Most climate and development finance flows through layers of intermediation, reducing its amount, speed and flexibility before it reaches delivery partners. Top-down decision making means adaptation projects are not

↘ Box 2. Least Developed Countries Initiative for Adaptation and Resilience (LIFE-AR)

The Government of Ireland has committed €1 million as part of initial support for the Least Developed Countries Initiative for Adaptation and Resilience (LIFE-AR). LIFE-AR aims for all Least Developed Countries to be on climate-resilient development pathways by 2030, and to graduate from LDC status and deliver net-zero emissions by 2050.

LIFE-AR is an LDC-led, LDC-owned initiative to develop a long-term vision for delivering a climate-resilient future where LDCs align with and deliver the SDGs, Paris Agreement, Aichi Biodiversity targets and Sendai framework. Its guiding principles are inclusion, participation, justice, equity and leaving no one behind, especially the most fragile LDCs and most vulnerable locations.

LDC commitments

- Use a 'whole-of-society' approach to achieving a low-carbon, climate-resilient future.
- Develop strong climate finance architecture, with at least 70% of flows supporting local-level action by 2030.
- Integrate adaptation, mitigation and resilience into national and local development objectives.
- Strengthen LDC climate capabilities, institutions, knowledge, skills and learning.
- Create more inclusive governance of climate decisions that are centred on transformative gender approaches and social justice.

informed by local experience and do little to tackle underlying causes of vulnerability. Instead, flexible mechanisms, including small grants for women, youth and CSOs working on adaptation and mitigation, are needed to refocus on 'whole-of-society' responses and ensure mechanisms can experiment, finding out what works to address climate risk.[24,25]

8. What to address in your work

Ireland's policy for international development is to engage with key institutions to ensure that poor people's needs are taken into account in national and international policies aimed at promoting sustainable development, promoting gender equality; reducing humanitarian need; prioritising climate action and strengthening governance. Some ways to strengthen climate action and governance interactions at different levels are as follows:

Senior management

- **Support the LDCs and AOSIS groups in pushing for more ambitious climate action** in the UNFCCC negotiations, as well as calling for developed countries to fully implement other related multi-lateral agreements.
- **Focus on sustainable development and climate adaptation for the LDCs and SIDS** through flexible governance and access to long-term climate finance. This will enhance climate action and bring better results for SDGs
- **Support capacity strengthening and participation for developing country delegates** at international negotiations, including for female delegates, who are still under-represented.
- **Channel effective humanitarian assistance to the countries most vulnerable to climate change impacts, and to fragile and conflict-affected states.** The funding should be coherent with long-term development approaches including social protection and climate change adaptation.
- **Trade partnerships in LDCs and SIDS should drive climate-responsive economic development for both Ireland and partner countries** through innovative use of technology, production and consumption.
- **The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should strengthen its climate governance component and increase long-term support to CSOs such as grassroots organisations, women's organisations, and social movements** at the frontline of addressing climate change impacts.
- **Support research and evidence-generation work**, for example by supporting universities (including LDC universities) and think tanks to provide compelling evidence on climate linkages across sectors and policies.

Programme staff in missions

- **Engage with the European Union climate diplomacy** within countries, focusing on the EU delegation's joint coordination, programming and national policy influence.
- **Strengthen bilateral engagements with national governments on building coherence between policies and implementing climate action.** This can be done through bilateral programmes, donor working groups and EU engagements.
- **Invest in strengthening national institutions and use government systems where appropriate.** While several LDC governments have accountability challenges, they still hold the mandate for policy and programme implementation. Long-term support to systems and individual capabilities will improve long-term climate governance.

- **Use country-specific climate risk assessments and conduct sector-specific assessments for mission strategies,** including governance themes to understand how climate change governance can affect policy objectives and design adaptation options for addressing climate risks and shocks.

- **Engage with donor working groups at national level to advocate for accountable governance**, protected civil society space and integrated climate action within accountability and citizen engagement initiatives.

- **Invest in capacity building so embassy staff and implementing partners better understand how to address climate action** in programmes, partnership engagements, national policy engagements and implementation.

- **Review the results frameworks for the mission strategies** to ensure that the outcomes are supporting climate action and stronger institutions that deliver long-term results.

Delivery partners

- **Engage with government policy processes** to ensure issues of equity, rights and climate justice are being addressed.

- **Invest in research to produce credible evidence** that policymakers can use to inform policies and programmes, and to increase citizen's engagement through use of credible evidence.

- **Support policy analysis processes** to better understand how climate policy processes work, the opportunities for policy influence and how climate affects different policies across sectors.

- **Include climate action in advocacy processes.**

More information

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Notes

Notes

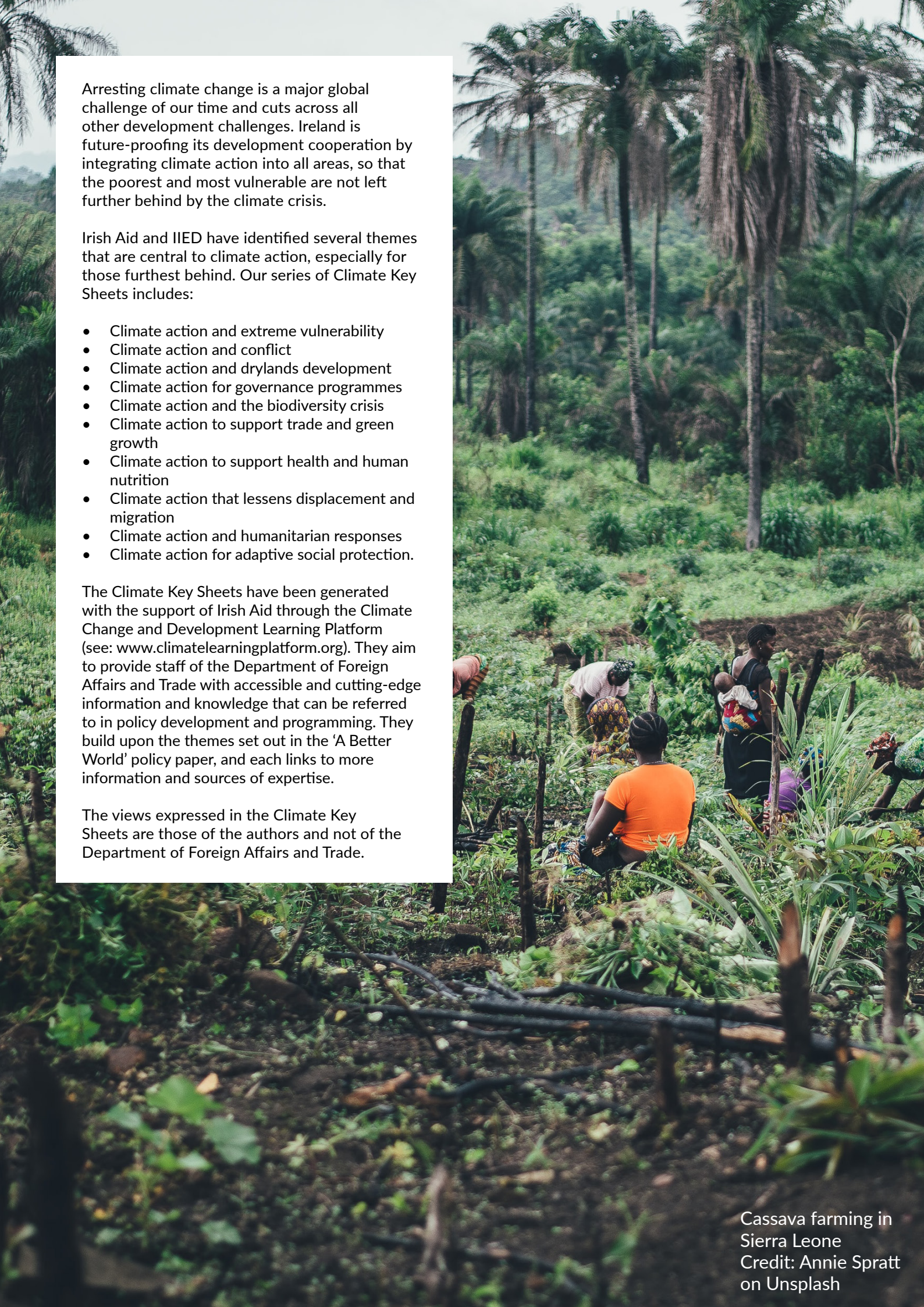
Arresting climate change is a major global challenge of our time and cuts across all other development challenges. Ireland is future-proofing its development cooperation by integrating climate action into all areas, so that the poorest and most vulnerable are not left further behind by the climate crisis.

Irish Aid and IIED have identified several themes that are central to climate action, especially for those furthest behind. Our series of Climate Key Sheets includes:

- Climate action and extreme vulnerability
- Climate action and conflict
- Climate action and drylands development
- Climate action for governance programmes
- Climate action and the biodiversity crisis
- Climate action to support trade and green growth
- Climate action to support health and human nutrition
- Climate action that lessens displacement and migration
- Climate action and humanitarian responses
- Climate action for adaptive social protection.

The Climate Key Sheets have been generated with the support of Irish Aid through the Climate Change and Development Learning Platform (see: www.climatelearningplatform.org). They aim to provide staff of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade with accessible and cutting-edge information and knowledge that can be referred to in policy development and programming. They build upon the themes set out in the 'A Better World' policy paper, and each links to more information and sources of expertise.

The views expressed in the Climate Key Sheets are those of the authors and not of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.



Cassava farming in Sierra Leone
Credit: Annie Spratt on Unsplash