

Key points

Locally led adaptation works: where projects are properly evaluated, more than 80% show 'Substantive' or 'Robust' evidence of genuine local leadership and verified impact combined.

The problem is documentation, not practice: most published literature on local adaptation is not designed to capture funding flows, decision-making authority or outcomes rigorously enough to count as strong evidence.

Health-focused adaptation and evidence of what happens after projects end are the two biggest documentation blind spots in every region studied.

The new LLA Evidence and Impact Framework gives funders and policymakers a practical tool to close the gap in documented evidence of LLA effectiveness. It should be a key tool and is usable now, alongside existing monitoring and evaluation systems.

Beyond the principles: does locally led adaptation deliver?

Locally led adaptation (LLA) works, but funders continue to cite a lack of evidence as a barrier to scaling up. New IIED research shows the issue is not whether LLA is effective, but how inconsistently that effectiveness is documented. We developed an LLA Evidence and Impact Framework and applied it to 106 academic and grey literature sources on local-level adaptation. We found that, where projects are properly evaluated, more than 80% show 'Substantive' or 'Robust' evidence of both genuine local leadership and verified impact. This briefing sets out the key findings: where the evidence base is strongest, where the documentation gaps lie, and how funders and policymakers can now deploy the Framework to close those gaps and hold future investments to a clear, transparent evidence standard.

LLA has moved rapidly from the margins to the mainstream of climate policy. The eight Principles for LLA (see Box 1) are now endorsed by more than 150 institutions and countries,¹ and language around localisation appears routinely in funder strategies and increasingly in adaptation plans. But endorsement of the principles has not, to date, translated into scaled-up finance.² A key blocker for increasing funding to LLA approaches, often expressed by funding agencies, is a lack of evidence that LLA is effective and efficient in addressing adaptation needs.³

This briefing summarises the key findings and recommendations from a new IIED study that helps to address this evidence gap. It introduces the LLA Evidence and Impact Framework,⁴ which scores the strength of documented evidence for adaptation that is both locally led and impactful. We outline the first large-scale application of the framework to 106 academic and grey literature documents on local-level adaptation published between 2005 and 2026 and highlight the main

policy-relevant findings and recommendations from this work.⁵

The study's findings illustrate both the extent of existing evidence and the significant gaps in how evidence is captured and communicated.

As policymakers and funders work to scale climate finance and close adaptation gaps, LLA has become an increasingly utilised part of the adaptation finance lexicon, linked to direct access finance mechanisms and community-focused resilience funds. While this shift is welcome, the funding leveraged through LLA-aligned mechanisms remains low. There is also an increasing confluence of locally implemented programmes with locally led approaches — where participation and consultation are assumed to be sufficient justification to label investments as locally led. The LLA Evidence and Impact Framework can help to both identify genuine evidence of LLA practice and impact, and strengthen the case for scaled-up finance for LLA approaches.

The Evidence and Impact Framework and its initial application

The LLA Evidence and Impact Framework assesses evidence under the LLA Principles across two dimensions: process (how an intervention was designed and led) and impact (what changed as a result) across six evidence categories. Each piece of evidence assessed is either scored or marked as not applicable. The combined scores classify the source as

No Evidence, Limited Evidence, Substantive Evidence or Robust Evidence for both process and impact. Crucially, the framework assesses the strength of evidence for LLA, not the overall quality or impact of the underlying investment. A low score means the assessed source does not document a dimension of LLA, not that the project itself failed to deliver intended benefits.

We applied the framework to 106 unique papers spanning 2005 to 2026 and covering a wide geography (the Arctic, the Caribbean, the Pacific, South and Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Latin America and the Middle East) and all sectors covered by the Global Goal on Adaptation, using a mix of human and artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted processes. The exercise had four aims: to map where LLA-aligned evidence exists in the literature; to stress-test

whether the framework can be operationalised consistently across diverse document types; to establish the current status and quality of the LLA evidence base, identifying where robust evidence is strongest, where it is thin, and what biases it carries; and to test the utility of deploying AI models in the application of the framework.

What the evidence shows

The full research analysis documents the process of constructing and applying the framework, important nuances, and some significant limitations. What follows is a summary of the most immediately policy-relevant findings.

The headline result — that less than 22% of the corpus met the threshold for Robust LLA across both process and impact domains — needs a fuller exploration. At face value, the 22% figure implies weak practice. However, when read alongside document type, it highlights gaps in documentation. We selected the 106 papers through a rigorous screening process from an initial literature review that identified more than 2,600 candidate papers; most of that research was not designed to evidence process and impact rigorously.

Project evaluations, which made up only 39% of the corpus, score highest on both process and impact, with 49% of this sub-category scoring as Robust LLA — rising to 83% for Robust and Substantive combined (see Figure 1). This is in stark contrast to the other document types assessed: case studies (7% Robust, 4% Substantive), policy analysis (0% Robust, 20% Substantive), and conceptual framings (0% for both criteria). Where project evaluations exist, they overwhelmingly show that LLA is happening in practice and that it is impactful.

In terms of geographical spread, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, North America and the Pacific perform strongly with 30–40% of papers in the Robust category. In contrast, South Asia, which had the largest number of papers, only had 5% in the Robust category. This does not necessarily reflect a lack of LLA practice in South Asia, but is again likely a factor of document type, as most of the analysed papers from the region were case studies rather than evaluations. The Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia produced no papers of any classification (likely due at least in part to the English-language only search process), while Europe and East Asia were too thinly covered to identify trends.

When papers examining Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) contexts (34% of the corpus) were assessed in isolation, on average they scored

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Box 1. The LLA principles



Devolving decision making to the lowest appropriate level



Addressing structural inequalities



Providing patient and predictable funding



Investing in local capabilities to leave an institutional legacy



Building a robust understanding of climate risk and uncertainty



Flexible programming and learning



Ensuring transparency and accountability



Collaborative action and investment

Figure 1. Evidence score by paper type

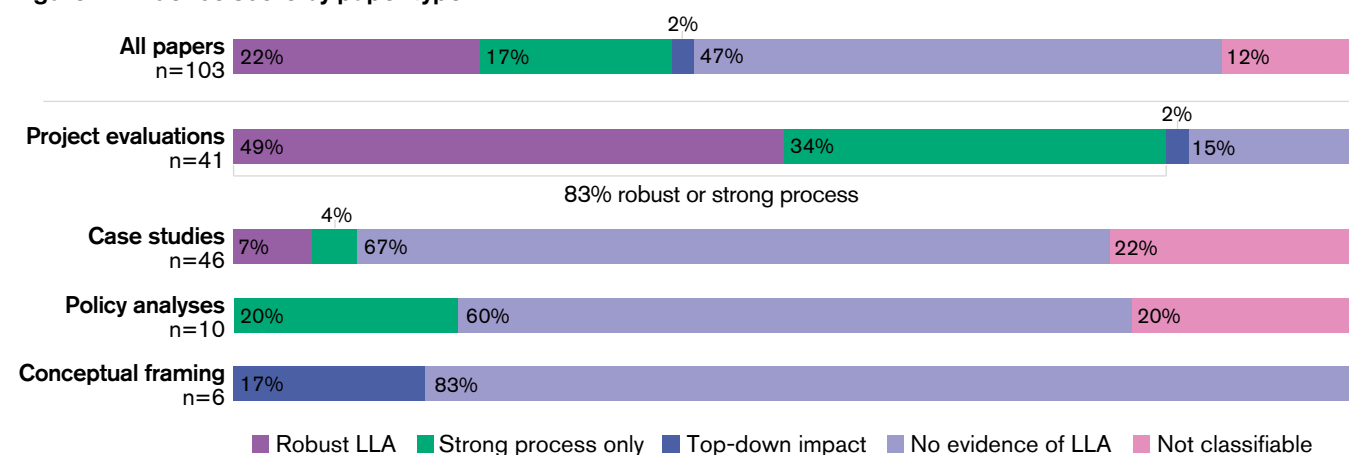
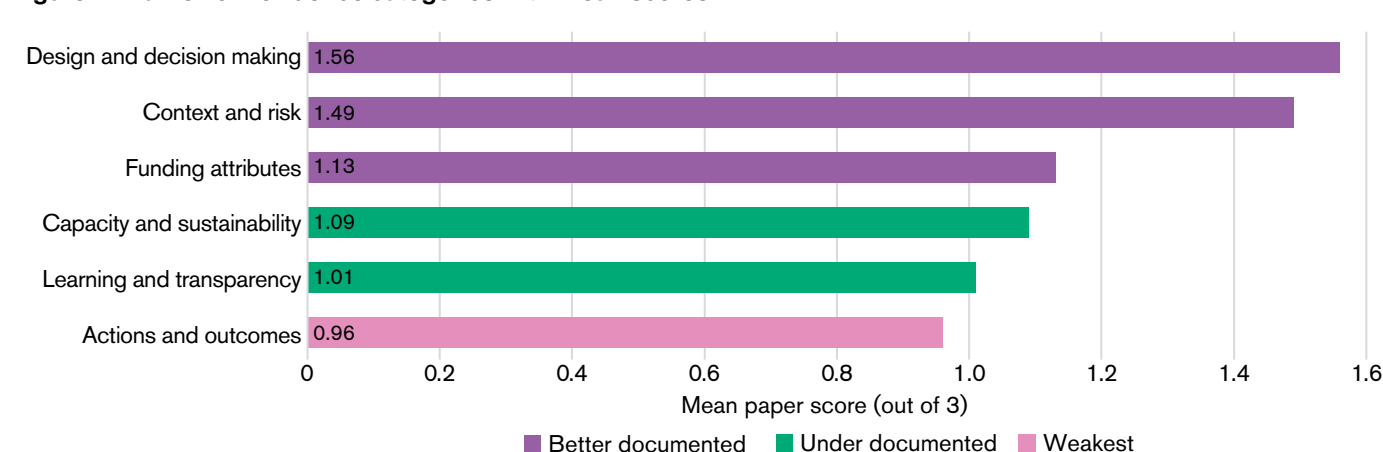


Figure 2. Framework evidence categories with mean scores



lower than papers focused on non-LDC/SIDS contexts for both process and impact. Given the modest sample size (36 papers), the study is careful not to overinterpret this finding, flagging that it could reflect the fact that most funding reaching these countries is structured through donor-led designs and delivered via top-down processes. Alternatively, it could equally reflect the types of projects that have been studied and written about.

Examining papers by sector, health is the clearest gap, with only four papers in the corpus with a health focus, and only one meeting the criteria for Robust LLA. Across all evidence categories, 'Actions and Outcomes' (what was implemented and what changed for whom, including evidence on equity of outcomes) is the weakest, and 'Learning and Transparency' (whether methods, assumptions and decisions were recorded, whether learning was captured in feedback loops and whether reporting was accessible to non-specialist audiences) is second weakest, just slightly above 'Capacity and Sustainability' (post-project sustainability, transfer of capacity to

local institutions and whether the intervention left durable structures in place) (see Figure 2). These findings point to the same funding blind spot: short project cycles and evaluations at immediate project close rather than multi-year follow-ups required to assess whether process change is sustained and whether impacts are long term.

On inclusion, fewer than 25% of papers explicitly documented how gender and intersectional approaches shaped the evidence they generated. Our study reads this primarily as a reporting gap rather than necessarily a practice gap. Participatory methods were prevalent in the corpus, and such approaches are often gender sensitive by design. Making this visible as documented evidence, however, is comparatively rare.

Implications for funders and policymakers

These findings point to concrete, immediate actions. Most of the recommendations apply directly to funders, who have the greatest leverage over what gets evaluated and how.

Several findings also require action from national and sub-national policymakers, who set the conditions under which local leadership can or cannot take hold. The following recommendations are ordered by ease of adoption.

1. Fund evaluations, not just delivery. The single clearest lever available to funders (apart from directly supporting LLA programmes) is to commission and support rigorous published evaluations of adaptation programmes with an explicit focus on the key elements of LLA approaches (regardless of whether the review is of an explicitly LLA-focused programme).

2. Treat LDC/SIDS targeting and local ownership as separate issues. Structural prioritisation of the most climate-vulnerable countries is critical, but should not be assumed to automatically result in local leadership. Funders should require evidence of local decision-making authority and direct financial access as separate eligibility criteria from LDC/SIDS status, rather than treating vulnerability targeting as a proxy for local leadership. Policymakers should ensure national adaptation plans specify who holds decision-making power at the local level, not only where funding is geographically directed.

3. Direct new funding (for projects and evaluations) at the biggest gaps: health adaptation everywhere and the low number of evaluations (compared to practice and case studies) in South Asia.

4. Support scaling out of this type of research to other language groups to widen the geographic coverage of the evidence base.

5. Support project implementers to document decision-making processes and funding flows within projects, not just participation as a proxy for local leadership. The strongest evidence in the corpus corroborates local decision-making power through multiple sources (quantitative data, direct testimony, documentation of changes made due to local input) rather than relying on a single claim.

6. Deploy the LLA Evidence and Impact Framework as part of programme monitoring and evaluation systems.

Because the framework assesses the strength of evidence, not project success, it can be applied alongside existing monitoring and evaluation systems, thereby giving policymakers and funders a consistent basis for comparing the evidence quality of LLA approaches across a portfolio.

Our research shows that there is already strong evidence of LLA-aligned practice in the literature. However, the evidence base is uneven across geographies and sectors, and several categories of evidence remain weak. With the LLA Evidence and Impact Framework, we have developed: a structured way of recognising and weighing the evidence; a means of distinguishing an intervention that is genuinely shaped and governed by local actors from one that merely consults them; and a way to tell the difference between a strong claim and a well-documented one. The framework has launched alongside this policy brief and the detailed research report, and is available and deployable by funders, policymakers, intermediaries and project teams. As the body of LLA-specific and aligned programming expands over time, further applications of the LLA Evidence and Impact Framework will yield more interesting results and continue to strengthen the evidence base for LLA as an effective, efficient and sustainable modality for building resilience to the unavoidable impacts of climate change.

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Knowledge Products

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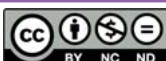


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Notes

¹ Soanes, M, Bahadur, A, Shakya, C, Smith, B, Patel, S, Rumbaitis del Rio, C, Coger, T, Dinshaw, A, Patel, S, Huq, S, Musa, M, Rahman, M, Gupta, S, Dolcemascolo, G and Mann, T (2021) Principles for locally led adaptation. A call to action. IIED, London. www.iied.org/10211iied

² Treichel, P, Joshi, R, Taylor, E, Ridout, M, Mitchell, P and Acuda, A (2025) Locally implemented or locally led? Tracking finance for community climate action. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22674iied / ³ Mitchell, P (2025) Scaling locally led adaptation: closing the rhetoric-reality gap. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22686iied / ⁴ Hassan, A and Mitchell, P (2026) Locally led Adaptation Evidence and Impact Framework. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22780g / ⁵ Hassan, A, Mitchell, P and Acuda, A (2026) Beyond the principles: evidence of whether locally led adaptation works in practice. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22778iied



FIND OUT MORE

Our work on LLA evidence is being undertaken as part of the Generating Ambition for Locally Led Adaptation (GA-LLA) programme. Find out more at www.iied.org/generating-ambition-for-locally-led-adaptation