



# **USAID WORKSHOP SUMMARY ON: CLIMATE CHANGE VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENTS: RECENT APPROACHES AND RESULTS**

**27-28 March 2013; Arlington, VA**

## **OVERVIEW**

Climate change vulnerability and risk assessments are conducted to better understand the exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity of human populations to climate change. An assessment seeks to understand climate change impacts on people and/or natural systems that are the focus of the assessment and their ability to adapt to the impacts over time. They can also be used as a basis for designing and implementing development policies and programs that are responsive to climate change. An options analysis can be conducted to share the assessment findings with key decision-makers and facilitate a process in which they identify and prioritize options for developing policy and programs that increase resilience and decrease vulnerability.

Due to the complex nature of social, institutional, and environmental interactions, assessments have not been widely standardized within sectors or across geographic regions. While identification of best practices is necessary, it remains challenging across diverse sectors and scales.

To understand and advance solutions to these challenges, 41 climate change professionals and development practitioners from academic, for-profit, nonprofit, and government institutions participated in a 'Climate Change Vulnerability Assessments: Recent Approaches and Results' workshop in Arlington, Virginia. Participants reviewed and discussed climate change vulnerability assessment experiences, evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of existing tools and methods, and identified and refined best practices that inform climate change adaptation programming within USAID and among development partners. Participants included representatives from 17 institutions, who presented their assessment approaches and strongly contributed to outcomes.

## **BEST PRACTICES**

The climate change vulnerability and risk assessment experiences presented during the workshop introduced best practices across different sectors and scales. Presented assessments examined a range of sectors, from Feed the Future to biologically diverse ecosystems. Presentations also included assessments at multiple scales, from the Yaque del Sur Watershed in the Dominican Republic to a regional assessment for Central America and the challenges of scaling up assessments.

Climate change assessments make use of tools and methods from a broad set of social, physical, and environmental disciplines, which creates complex management challenges. Defining vulnerability and choosing the appropriate methodology is a critical choice since every assessment is unique and varies greatly depending on purpose, context, and accessibility to relevant data sources. There is no one-size fits all approach to design and implementation. Instead, a customized set of tools, methods, and approaches needs to be developed based on the cultural, socio-economic, and political context of the region being assessed and the intended use of the assessment.

Workshop participants shared successful vulnerability and risk assessment approaches and tools, recognized their common shortcomings, and discussed ways to potentially improve the assessment process and results. Best practices for future climate change vulnerability assessments include the following:

- Assessments should serve as a baseline, with vulnerability being tracked over time — not as a ‘one-off’ exercise;
- The early engagement of key stakeholders — from national-level decision makers to local villages, depending on the scope — is critical to improve understanding of climate change, define the most relevant questions, build support, and foster ownership for the recommendations;
- An analysis of relevant institutions at all levels, as well as their interactions, is necessary to understand the feasibility, and challenges, that need to be addressed to effectively implement climate change adaptation strategies;
- In addition to climate, it is critical that assessments evaluate cultural, socio-economic, political, and bio-physical diversity, in addition to power dynamics among various sectors, social groups, and institutions;
- A systems perspective that distinguishes both non-climatic stressors and climatic stressors, and their interaction, is necessary, because vulnerable communities often face significant stressors that are not directly related to climate change;
- Analysis should build on the best available meteorological data and climate models for climate projections; and
- Complexity and variability around projected climate scenarios, crop process models, and other tools should be communicated to a non-scientific audience and taken into account in discussions around options.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USAID

To enable a more successful assessment process, participants offered the below recommendations to USAID when planning for future climate change vulnerability assessments:

- Work with assessment experts to develop well-defined objectives that focus the scope of work and improve the quality of the options analysis recommendations;
- Effectively coordinate with local institutions to strengthen results and build support for sustained impacts;
- Use the vulnerability assessment process as a mechanism to strengthen donor coordination and enhance programming synergies across sectors and scales;
- Develop and maintain a realistic timeframe for completing a vulnerability assessment;
- Ensure that a participatory options analysis is fully integrated into the assessment design, and share results with appropriate host-country stakeholders; and
- Focus on realistic recommendations based on existing institutional capacity, participatory input, anticipated costs of implementation, and an analysis of impact. Ideally, an options analysis would prioritize the recommendations based on these factors.

## CONCLUSIONS

While key lessons in conducting climate change vulnerability assessments are still emerging, it is clear that assessments are more effective when they are designed to answer specific questions, are based on a clear and focused research framework, engage local decision-makers, generate an evidence base to monitor vulnerability over time, and integrate good governance as a cornerstone to implementing effective options.

*The African and Latin American Resilience to Climate Change (ARCC) Program is a three-year program funded by USAID to provide technical, analytical, and project assistance as well as capacity building to promote adaptation to climate change to improve the ability of vulnerable populations to respond to climate challenges and safeguard economic growth.*

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