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PRIMER

LOCALLY LED ADAPTATION

USAID Climate Adaptation Support Activity

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is a crisis that threatens lives and livelihoods the world over. Local actors are at the forefront of experiencing and addressing the impacts of climate change. They have valuable knowledge, skills, and lived experiences to contribute to and lead climate adaptation action, and to build climate resilience in ways that meet specific challenges and leverage the unique strengths of their countries and communities.

Locally led adaptation (LLA) is an approach that supports local people, institutions, and networks to lead decisions over how, when, and where to adapt and have equitable access to power and resources to supplement local knowledge and expertise.⁶

This primer provides an overview of LLA and its role as an important component of USAID’s commitment to locally led sustainable development and humanitarian action and approaches that address the climate crisis equitably.

This primer is accompanied by a **Guidance Note: Operationalizing the Principles for Locally Led Adaptation**. This guidance document provides entry points and examples to help USAID apply LLA throughout the program cycle.

This document was prepared by the **USAID Climate Adaptation Support Activity (CASA)**, which provides strategic support to USAID Missions, Bureaus, and Operating Units to advance effective adaptation mainstreaming and programming and to scale meaningful change. The content of this document does not necessarily reflect the view of USAID or the United States Government.

Key Concepts & Definitions

Climate adaptation is the process of adjusting to the actual or expected climate to moderate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities. Adaptation interventions seek to strengthen resilience to the unavoidable impacts of climate change.¹

Inclusive development is an equitable development approach built on the understanding that every individual and community, of all diverse identities and experiences, is instrumental in the transformation of their own societies. Their engagement throughout the development process leads to better outcomes.²

Local actors are individuals, organizations, and networks that originate from and are led by people within a given country or region, inclusive of government at national and subnational levels.³

Locally led development is the process in which local actors set their own agendas, develop solutions, and bring the capacity, leadership, and resources to make those solutions a reality.⁴

Maladaptation refers to adaptation efforts that inadvertently increase climate risks.⁵

¹ IPCC, 2021. “Climate Change 2021.”

² USAID, 2023. “Inclusive Development.”

³ USAID, 2022. “Local Capacity Strengthening Policy.”

⁴ USAID, n.d. “What is Locally Led Development? (Fact Sheet).”

⁵ United Nations (UN) Framework Convention on Climate Change, n.d. “Glossary of Key Terms: Maladaptation.”

⁶ World Resources Institute (WRI), n.d. “Locally Led Adaptation.”

WHY LOCALLY LED ADAPTATION?

A critical need exists to scale up contextually appropriate adaptation action that accounts for the needs of the most vulnerable.

Climate impacts associated with hazards such as storms, precipitation extremes, heat, and drought are increasingly severe and frequent. **Marginalized populations and people living in vulnerable conditions often experience the impacts of climate hazards most acutely.** For example:

- ▶ In 2022, more than 160 million children were exposed to prolonged or severe droughts.⁷
- ▶ Currently, climate change and related disasters negatively impact the livelihoods of 370 million Indigenous People. This group often relies more heavily than others on land and climate stability.⁸
- ▶ By 2050, up to 1 billion people could be displaced by environmental hazards. Many of those potentially affected already live in poverty and are particularly vulnerable to displacement as a result.⁹
- ▶ Women and girls are more likely to be impacted by disasters and are less likely to have access to aid, relief, and recovery resources, while facing higher risk of gender-based violence following disaster.¹⁰

Despite growing adaptation investment, the current scale of adaptation finance and existing mechanisms does not meet existing and projected needs. **International adaptation finance to low- and middle-income countries was US\$28.6 billion in 2020, but the costs for these countries to adapt to climate change are expected to be over \$300 billion per year by 2030 and up to \$560 billion by 2050.**¹¹ At-risk and marginalized communities worldwide need urgent and accelerated investment to scale adaptation action and reduce and alleviate climate impacts.

National and subnational governments and local organizations and people often do not have access to the climate risk information, decision-making power, and finance necessary to scale adaptation.

International adaptation finance flows to developing countries are estimated to be five to ten times below existing needs, **and the level of global climate finance dedicated to local entities was estimated to be less**

than 10 percent between 2003 and 2016.¹² Of this 10 percent, just over half was for adaptation efforts.¹³ This gap in climate adaptation finance at the local level is exacerbated by current mechanisms for delivering global climate finance. Donor-based financing mechanisms have complex requirements for accreditation, access, and oversight that can be barriers for local organizations. Lengthy proposal or disbursement processes can mean donor funds are less responsive to urgent local needs.¹⁴ Donors often drive decisions governing climate adaptation finance and programming, relying on international technical experts rather than placing those who are experiencing climate impacts at the center of financial decision-making.

A recent World Resources Institute (WRI) review of adaptation programs and projects found that local actors are still predominantly recipients of adaptation interventions instead of leaders in decision-making around the finance, design, and implementation of those activities that will affect them.¹⁵ **By not adequately including and centering local actors in decision-making processes, traditional adaptation programs often inadvertently reinforce power imbalances and exacerbate vulnerabilities at the local level.** The needs, voices, and priorities of critical populations (e.g., Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, LGBTQI+, and other marginalized and/or underrepresented groups) are often overlooked, and these groups are not recognized as agents of change. Only 20 percent of verified adaptation finance efforts prior to 2021 included women in decision-making roles, and the number was significantly lower for disabled populations, youth, and Indigenous Peoples.¹⁶ This dynamic creates a gap between local actors' priorities and the activities that receive financial investments. This is especially evident when monitoring, evaluation, and learning efforts exclude local actors and/or critical populations and consequently do not evaluate the quality of climate finance or programming based on alignment with locally identified needs and priorities.

In addition to funding and decision-making, **national and subnational governments and local organizations and people often are missing the critical climate data and sensory information needed to understand risks and plan for effective climate adaptation.** In Africa in 2022,

⁷ UN Convention to Combat Desertification, 2022. "[Drought in Numbers.](#)"

⁸ Filho et al. 2021. "[Impacts of Climate Change to African Indigenous Communities.](#)"

⁹ UN Migration, 2023. "[A Complex Nexus.](#)"

¹⁰ UN Women, n.d. "[Disaster Risk Reduction.](#)"

¹¹ UN Environment Programme, 2022. "[Adaptation Gap Report.](#)"

¹² UN Environment Programme, 2022.

¹³ International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), 2017. "[Delivering Real Change: Getting International Climate Finance to the Local Level.](#)"

¹⁴ IIED, 2017.

¹⁵ WRI and the Global Commission on Adaptation, 2021. "[Locally Led Climate Adaptation: What is Needed to Accelerate Action and Support?](#)"

¹⁶ IIED, 2021. "[Follow the Money: Tracking Least Developed Countries' Adaptation Finance to the Local Level.](#)"

fewer than 30 percent of countries provided national climate projection information and over 60 percent of the population was not covered by climate and disaster early warning systems.¹⁷ However, a robust understanding of climate risk requires not only accessible and accurate scientific climate information but also inclusion of local, traditional, and Indigenous knowledge. Local actors have valuable perspectives and the knowledge needed to advance adaptation action. Communities often trust and understand this local knowledge, but it is infrequently recognized or incorporated into adaptation programs and activities.

Local actors are uniquely positioned to lead and scale up adaptation action.

Though there are many barriers to local access to adaptation finance and information, the countries, communities, and individuals experiencing acute climate impacts are already innovating and adapting, utilizing available tools and

resources. Adaptation activities underway include adoption of drought-tolerant agricultural practices, shifts in work hours to accommodate extreme heat, utilization of flood- and storm-resilient building measures, and development of early warning systems for disaster events. Because the economies, livelihoods, and health of local communities all depend on surrounding ecosystems, water resources, and weather and precipitation patterns, local actors intimately understand the systems that climate change disrupts. They know the intricacies of their geography and infrastructure, and where existing vulnerabilities and power dynamics could play a role in exacerbating or alleviating climate impacts. As such, **local actors have valuable knowledge, skills, and lived experiences to contribute to and lead climate adaptation planning and to drive culturally appropriate, sustainable solutions that are efficient and effective.**

Adaptation activities should account for—and address—inequities in climate vulnerability as well as local access to finance, information, and decision-making. A locally led approach can help achieve more effective, efficient, and sustainable adaptation action.

WHAT IS LOCALLY LED ADAPTATION?

A locally led approach to climate adaptation helps to amplify existing local adaptation action and knowledge, address existing power imbalances, and fill finance and information gaps while centering local actors.

LLA utilizes local knowledge, community engagement, locally appropriate funding mechanisms, equity-centered programming, and context-specific strategies to enhance the ability of communities to adapt to climate impacts. By empowering local actors and recognizing contextual vulnerabilities, adaptation efforts can address historical imbalances of power and be more grounded in the realities of the communities most affected by climate hazards.¹⁸ Recognition by donors, implementing partners, and national and subnational leaders of local people, networks, and organizations as agents of change in adaptation action can help to celebrate and elevate existing local knowledge, skills, and adaptation innovations. In addition, this awareness can make adaptation investments more effective and efficient—increasing local awareness of and investment in adaptation action and avoiding the damaging effects of maladaptation from poorly designed or implemented adaptation efforts.¹⁹

While LLA is not a new concept, it recently gained international recognition with the launch of the eight **Principles for Locally Led Adaptation** at the 2021 Climate Adaptation Summit. The principles guide funding, programming, and practices to support local actors in leading adaptation design, processes, and outcomes. The Global Commission on Adaptation led development of the principles, following years of research and consultation with the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), WRI, and over 50 other stakeholders from across the climate action landscape.²⁰ Along with more than 100 organizations, USAID endorsed the principles at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in 2021 (COP26).

The Principles for Locally Led Adaptation acknowledge the work and leadership of local actors. They seek to guide organizations advancing and funding adaptation to support and scale local efforts further, recognizing that local knowledge, skills, and innovation are key ingredients of successful adaptation action. The principles call for reshaping the current system from a top-down approach to one where local actors are resourced and have decision-making power.

¹⁷ World Meteorological Organization, 2022. [“State of the Climate in Africa 2022.”](#)

¹⁸ WRI, 2022. [“Locally Led Adaptation: From Principles to Practice.”](#)

¹⁹ IIED, n.d. [“Principles for Locally Led Adaptation.”](#)

²⁰ WRI, n.d. [“Principles for Locally Led Adaptation.”](#)

Locally Led Adaptation Can Reduce Costs of Adaptation, Increase Sustainability and Effectiveness, and Support Local Economies.

Local leadership plays a key role in achieving successful and sustainable adaptation action. Integrating local knowledge and ensuring local ownership can decrease the risk of maladaptation and extend the long-term viability of adaptation activities and impacts.

Traditional adaptation approaches such as those led by international entities can be guided by donor priorities and perceptions that fail to recognize the complexities of climate impacts, historical and social context, entangled vulnerabilities, and existing adaptation strategies at the local level. This can create injustices and potentially marginalize further already vulnerable communities, thus reinforcing climate risks.

There are also opportunities for co-benefits and cost-saving approaches with LLA: due to the flexible, crosscutting, and

context-specific nature of a locally led approach to climate adaptation, LLA is often integrated with local economic development and capacity-building efforts to reduce vulnerabilities on multiple fronts.²¹ When local actors have decision-making power over finance, they are often able to implement adaptation programs more effectively, efficiently, and transparently. With recognition of the value of local knowledge surrounding context-specific complexities, existing capacities and networks are leveraged and local actors are included in financial and programmatic decision-making processes. A more inclusive and transparent approach that includes local ownership and knowledge aligns adaptation investment with local aspirations, goals, and needs—keeping costs lower in the long term and reducing risks for private sector investors. This can enable limited climate finance to be spent more effectively, encourage the scale-up of private capital for adaptation, and help avoid the damaging impacts of maladaptation.

DELIVERING LOCALLY LED ADAPTATION

Advancing adaptation activities that are locally led is imperative for effective and equitable climate adaptation. However, doing so is challenging and not without risks. The social, political, and financial systems that create barriers and power imbalances between local actors and international organizations can similarly perpetuate inequities at the local level. Additionally, the existing models of donor and government climate finance are not structured to enable direct access for grassroots and civil society organizations or local private sector entities. **USAID and its partners are working to advance an equitable and inclusive approach to localization and climate adaptation that is mutually supportive and contributes to broader resilience and development goals.**

LLA helps to recognize and address historical imbalances of power and access that have plagued international development and led to maladaptation and dependencies. These include inflexible funding, reinforcement of inequities, and the concentration of decision-making power among funders and international experts. For example, in 2020, loans accounted for 71 percent of public climate finance, potentially increasing long-term dependencies on donors and reinforcing the vulnerabilities of local actors.²² Advancing localization as a development and climate adaptation priority is an opportunity to ensure that “locally led” does not reinforce local power imbalances and that LLA is carried out

equitably and inclusively. Women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ communities, and other disadvantaged and/or marginalized groups are likely to experience greater economic and non-economic losses and damages due to differentiated exposure to climate risks and adaptation deficits. They are equally likely to have less say over how climate finance is distributed and used. In the process of advancing LLA, it is critical to recognize this differential vulnerability and enable these groups to lead local efforts and have ownership over decision-making for adaptation and allocation of adaptation finance.

The climate crisis occurs concurrently with other global crises, including the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, record biodiversity loss, and continuing conflict and displacement. LLA presents an opportunity for an integrated approach to adaptation and resilience action that also supports efforts to advance equitable transitions to a low-carbon economy, more sustainable livelihoods and robust local economies, and the use of natural resources to promote biodiversity and conservation. **Addressing adaptation and building climate resilience can help local actors achieve other development objectives—**including in the health, water, energy, environment, and natural resources sectors—as well as advance social inclusion and well-being. Taking a climate-resilient approach to all development projects can also enable broader

²¹ See examples in: WRI, 2022. [“Locally Led Adaptation: From Principles to Practice.”](#)

²² Oxfam, 2022. [“Climate Finance Short-Changed.”](#)

adaptation and resilience in the long term. Within this context, international momentum and support for LLA is growing, and the international donor community and many of USAID’s implementing partners and collaborators are making it a priority⁷.

Guided by the Principles for Locally Led Adaptation, there are opportunities to integrate LLA approaches throughout USAID’s planning and programming. An LLA approach helps the Agency achieve goals under a variety of climate and localization policies and strategies. USAID recognizes that local leadership and ownership are essential to foster sustainable and more equitable results across development and humanitarian assistance work, including efforts to address the climate crisis.

LLA supports the foundational principles and goals of USAID’s Climate Strategy 2022–2030 and the Agency’s commitments to localization and inclusive and equitable development. LLA further supports the priorities of the U.S. Government’s President’s Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience (PREPARE), a whole-of-government effort to help more than half a billion people in developing countries adapt to and manage the impacts of climate change.

The accompanying **guidance document** contains specific examples of LLA in practice and a more comprehensive look at the ways in which LLA aligns with USAID’s sustainable development priorities.

Principles for Locally Led Adaptation

1. Devolving decision-making to the lowest appropriate level
2. Addressing structural inequalities faced by women, youth, children, disabled and displaced people, Indigenous Peoples, and marginalized ethnic groups
3. Providing patient and predictable funding that can be accessed more easily
4. Investing in local capabilities to leave an institutional legacy
5. Building a robust understanding of climate risk and uncertainty
6. Flexible programming and learning
7. Ensuring transparency and accountability
8. Collaborative action and investment

RESOURCES

The following selected resources offer opportunities for further learning on LLA and guidance to help USAID and partners integrate LLA into programming.

USAID Resources:

- ▶ [Guidance Note: Operationalizing the Principles for Locally Led Adaptation](#)
- ▶ [Local Capacity Strengthening Policy](#)
- ▶ [USAID Climate Strategy 2022–2030](#)
- ▶ [Acquisition and Assistance Strategy](#)
- ▶ [What is Locally Led Development? \(Fact Sheet\)](#)
- ▶ [Localization at USAID: The Vision and Approach](#)
- ▶ [FY2022 Localization Progress Report](#)
- ▶ [USAID Risk Appetite Statement](#)

External Resources:

- ▶ [PREPARE Action Plan and Helping the World PREPARE](#)
- ▶ [The Good Climate Finance Guide for Investing in Locally Led Adaptation \(IIED\)](#)
- ▶ [The Global Hub on Locally Led Adaptation](#), including the [Lessons from Local Adaptation Practice](#) report and [Scaling Local and Community-Based Adaptation](#) (Global Center on Adaptation)
- ▶ [Locally Led Adaptation: From Principles to Practice \(WRI\)](#)
- ▶ [Locally Led Climate Adaptation: What is Needed to Accelerate Action and Support? \(WRI and Global Commission on Adaptation\)](#)
- ▶ [Principles for Locally Led Adaptation \(IIED\)](#)
- ▶ [Principles for Locally Led Adaptation: A Call to Action \(IIED, BRAC, et al.\)](#)