

Equitable urban climate adaptation: the importance of structural considerations

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INTRODUCTION

Structural factors that significantly influence vulnerability to climate change create considerable challenges for climate change adaptation in informal and low-income formal settlements in sub-Saharan African cities, a context with pressing inequality issues.

Climate shocks and stresses have a disproportionate impact on marginalised groups. The World Bank (n.d). highlights this, noting, “Female-headed households, children, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and ethnic minorities, landless tenants, migrant workers, displaced persons, sexual and gender minorities, older people, and other socially marginalized groups” are particularly at risk from climate change. Neither individual choices, nor knowledge, nor desire to take adaptation action are the root cause of this.

“The root causes of [marginalised groups’] vulnerability lie in a combination of their geographical locations; their financial, socio-economic, cultural, and gender status; and their access to resources, services, decision making power, and justice.”

(World Bank, n.d.)

These structural factors are therefore responsible, to a large extent, for the varying levels of adaptive capacity of different groups within society.

Practitioners and academics have first-hand experience with the difficulties of attempting to address climate change adaptation in highly vulnerable urban informal and low-income formal communities. In interacting with these communities, it quickly becomes clear that many of the adaptation challenges that they face go far beyond the scope or mandate of climate adaptation practitioners to address.

Based on experience and discussions held during a workshop in Cape Town in September 2022, this brief considers processes and approaches required to address structural factors in equitable urban climate adaptation and outlines five key policy recommendations.

KEY FINDINGS

Mapping existing adaptation actions can highlight which groups are being targeted, by whom, and in which sector.

Community engagement must go beyond the obvious to identify invisible and often neglected stakeholders.

Adaptation interventions should address historical injustice, present needs, as well as past/present trauma.

Adopt a holistic approach to adaptation and mainstream adaptation programmes into social/economic development interventions. This can help to ensure climate adaptation programmes include climate vulnerability.

Adaptation programmes must consider structural factors that create barriers to implementation.

Workshop report:

[Equitable Urban Climate Adaptation](#)

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The global climate crisis requires inclusive efforts that recognise and respond to the unique and intersectional human vulnerabilities found in urban areas. In sub-Saharan Africa, around 60% of the population lives in urban informal settlements, resulting in greater risk and vulnerability to climate change and limited access to climate adaptation capacity (Pörtner, H.-O, 2022). Informal settlements are heterogeneous, and there is not one precise definition, but there are common elements of deficiency - planning, shelter, access to public services, legal titles of property, etc (Satterthwaite et al. 2020). Due to inequality, “[c]limate impacts on urban population health, livelihoods and well-being are felt disproportionately, with the most economically and socially marginalised being most affected (high confidence).” (Pörtner, H.-O, 2022, p 54).

With many sub-Saharan African cities already acting and others wanting to act to adapt to climate change, the realities of informal settlements that continue to rapidly expand (Awumbila, 2017) must inform equitable adaptation. Given the rapid expansion and concentration of human vulnerabilities in African urban informal settlements, the response to climate change adaptation theory and practice has been slow, and there is a gap that needs to be filled (Ziervogel et al, 2022). In the face of this challenge, practitioners and academics were brought together for a workshop on equitable urban climate adaptation in September 2022.

As part of the workshop, the authors discussed a central theme of “Structural Considerations for an Equitable Urban Climate Adaptation”, building on their experience as practitioners (from community leadership to public policy) and academics (from researching to lecturing), their different disciplines, and their different backgrounds.

The workshop also highlighted **four key themes** for working towards equitable urban adaptation:

1. **Structural considerations**
2. **Context and reality**
3. **Quality of relationships**
4. **Knowledge brokers**

What does it mean for climate adaptation to be equitable?

“Equity is understood as ensuring that everyone has their basic needs met and equal access to public services, resources and other well-being opportunities.

As such, equity in adaptation involves recognising and addressing structural vulnerabilities and marginalisation. It means adaptation responses must be sensitive to local contexts, ensure meaningful inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised populations, and involve empowering bottom-up processes which are supported by top-down resources and institutions.”

[ACDI Workshop Participants, September 2022](#)



Photo | Panel discussion and participant presentations at the workshop in Cape Town

UNPACKING THE RESEARCH

Structural considerations involve entrenched unfairness and bias that may exist within institutions, social groups, etc, and result in some people being advantaged, while others are marginalised, producing ‘winners’ and ‘losers’.

As part of the ongoing debates on the consideration of the process and approaches required to address structural factors in equitable climate adaptation, we identified various themes, elements, and issues that influence the ability for government, civil society, and other actors to address this challenge (see Shi, 2021 for the United States of America debates for an example).

Equitable climate adaptation needs to address the structural inequalities, and the social structures that produce and reproduce them, not only to be more impactful but also to be transformative towards a more equitable situation.

The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report explains how climate change adaptation strategies that address the multidimensional structural inequalities “(...) can reduce inequities in access to resources, assets and services as well as participation in decision making and leadership, and are essential to achieving gender and climate justice (high confidence).” (Pörtner et al (eds.), 2022, p 97).

A non-exhaustive list of processes and approaches required to address structural factors in equitable urban climate adaptation has been developed to promote the conversation with issues and preliminary questions. These include:

- **Climate governance improvement**
- **Mainstreaming climate adaptation in local economic and social development**
- **Representation and participation**
- **Acknowledging and addressing historical and present day injustices through a focus on equitable adaptation**

The [UN-HABITAT Report of the State of African Cities](#) describes the current strategic approach to equitable climate adaptation:

“The unfolding pattern is one of disjointed, dysfunctional and unsustainable urban geographies of inequality and human suffering, with oceans of poverty containing islands of wealth. Socio-economic conditions in African cities are now the most unequal in the world. This situation threatens systemic stability, affecting not only the continuity of cities as socio-political human ecosystems but also entire nations.”

Maseland (ed.), 2010, p2

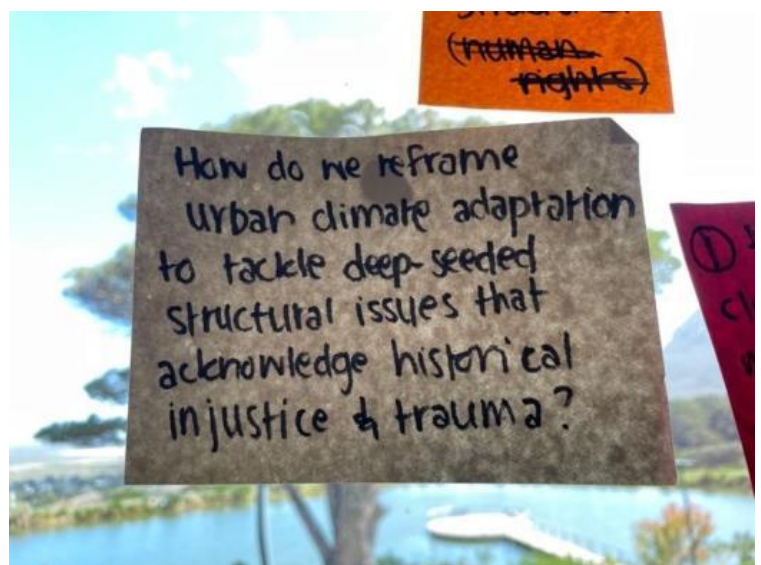


Photo | Organic farm visit and questions co-developed by the participants at the workshop in Cape Town

CLIMATE GOVERNANCE IMPROVEMENT

KEY QUESTION?

How can urban governance activities address climate risk even if this is not what they set out to achieve?

IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS?

Various different actors and processes are involved in climate governance, creating myriad opportunities for redundancy, duplication and repetition of efforts, as well as unaddressed gaps.

- It is helpful to create a map or inventory of which state and non-state actors are already working on the ground or have the potential to work on adaptation to climate change, in what form and to what extent, as well as which actors are involved in work that has intentional or unintentional climate adaptation co-benefits.
- Creating a map or inventory is a process that can help facilitate the development of an appropriate strategy for building coordination between different actors working on similar or corresponding issues.
- A climate governance model is needed that draws on the best aspects of the bottom-up and top-down approaches. This means creating systems of accountability and resourcing from the top-down, which can support and empower bottom-up initiatives.
- All these efforts must be aligned with and incorporated into the country's long-term climate change commitments.

MAINSTREAMING CLIMATE ADAPTATION IN LOCAL ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

KEY QUESTION?

How can we make climate adaptation programmes more responsive to structural socio-economic issues in a way that addresses injustice and supports sustainable livelihoods?

IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS?

Transformation in the context of climate change is understood as “A change in the fundamental attributes of natural and human systems. Transformation could reflect strengthened, altered, or aligned paradigms, goals, or values towards promoting adaptation that supports sustainable development, including poverty reduction” (Field et al. 2014, p5).

Transformative climate action must be included in existing and additional economic development services, projects, and initiatives. Local economic and social initiatives have the potential to promote both equity and adaptation to climate change, as well as to address a number of the structural economic factors that influence climate vulnerability, including poverty and lack of access to services, and social ills such as crime, violence, and social inequality.

As such, climate change adaptation interventions should include economic empowerment and social development objectives, as well as an understanding of economic value chains, to help ensure the sustainability and durability of climate change adaptation programs. Conversely, local economic and social development programmes should also incorporate climate adaptation interventions in order to ensure that the various synergies of these work areas can be optimised and utilized.

REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION

KEY QUESTION?

Who are the invisible actors, and how can we surface them and work to ensure that they are included?

IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS?

Implementation of climate change adaptation must aim to maximize representation of the diversity of the community.

- Go beyond the obvious or already established representations and include an in-depth review of who is being left out of the discussions, design, decision-making and implementation. This may mean that existing power structures within communities need to be interrogated to determine if important voices and viewpoints are being left out due to structural factors such as political power, sex, race, age, language.
- Existing local social structures enable communities to be reached who may otherwise not be engaging with issues of climate adaptation. For example, ward committees and forums, neighbourhood watch groups, social activism groups, and local business forums.
- Support local institutions that work with communities to reduce their vulnerability and strengthen their capacities to coordinate more effectively with the government.
- Build trust with local actors and make the benefits of being part of climate adaptation actions explicit to demonstrate the value of participation.
- Community-level capacity building and knowledge co-creation of contextual understandings are also starting points “(...) to confront inequalities and shift dominant power dynamics.” (Ziervogel et al., 2022).
- Differentiated forms and levels of vulnerability within communities also need to be accounted for. These require targeted interventions.
- Throughout the process, ensuring context-specific and equitable action requires time and resources. A key challenge is encouraging inclusivity when *taking part* is an unequal burden for those who are most vulnerable.

ACKNOWLEDGING AND ADDRESSING HISTORICAL AND PRESENT DAY INJUSTICES THROUGH A FOCUS ON EQUITABLE ADAPTATION

KEY QUESTION?

How can climate adaptation programmes tackle deep-seated structural issues as well as acknowledge historical inequality/trauma?

IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS?

Restorative justice approaches must be accompanied by real action and interventions to avoid merely paying lip service to addressing injustice, while at the same time acknowledging that climate adaptation interventions have limited scope and cannot be expected to solve decades or centuries of injustice. In working with vulnerable communities, particularly in countries that have a history of colonialism, war, and structural inequality (e.g. Apartheid), it is inevitable that climate adaptation programmes will surface feelings of injustice among participants as well as the very real downstream impacts of historical injustice on present day living circumstances. Climate adaptation practitioners should therefore commit to learning from the principles of restorative justice and the need to acknowledge injustice. In doing so, safe physical, mental, and emotional spaces must be fostered within adaptation programmes so that participants can work to process and reflect on the relationships between inequality and the impacts of climate change. This requires practitioners to be trauma-informed and able to set aside time to have these important conversations.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Five key policy recommendations were developed.

Map existing adaptation actions and identify targeted groups. There is a need to map existing adaptation actions to highlight which groups are being targeted, by whom, and in which sector. This can help reveal repeated efforts or duplication that suggests the need for improved coordination, identify gaps such as effective but unsupported adaptation actions, and identify neglected groups and/or areas.

Community engagement needs to go beyond the obvious to identify invisible and often neglected stakeholders. Community engagement in adaptation implementation and climate assemblies needs to go beyond the most obvious representation, to uncover and ensure the inclusion and participation of the invisible stakeholders within groups, particularly marginalised groups such as women, youth, people with disabilities, elderly people and, LGBTQIA+ people.

Adaptation interventions should address historical injustice, present needs, as well as past and present trauma. Adaptation interventions need to address present needs (such as unemployment or lack of access to food or education), create time and space to acknowledge, process, and address historical injustice and past/present trauma. Further, these interventions must appreciate the intersectional nature of vulnerabilities within groups and include socio-economic empowerment outcomes.

A holistic approach to climate adaptation is required. Adaptation programmes and interventions need to be mainstreamed into social and economic development programmes and interventions, rather than being seen as a separate activity. This will help to ensure that programmes that aim to address key structural factors, which impact climate vulnerability are integrated with climate adaptation programmes.

Climate adaptation programmes must acknowledge and consider structural factors that create barriers to implementation. Adaptation programmes must include an assessment of structural factors that create barriers to implementation - for example, poverty or literacy - and ensure that these are properly addressed in the design of interventions.

This policy debate and action field is complex and will grow throughout the twenty first century climate crisis; this brief is an overview.

FURTHER READING

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