



# LEARNING BRIEF

Climate & Development  
Knowledge Network

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## Key messages

- Locally led adaptation (LLA) in Africa is fundamentally about who holds decision-making power, ensuring that women, young people, persons with disabilities, older persons, and marginalised groups influence priorities and resource allocation.
- Communities across the region are innovating by combining Indigenous Knowledge, lived experience, and scientific information to navigate climate variability and wider social and economic change, with women and young people often acting as key knowledge holders and mobilisers.
- Effective LLA depends on inclusive governance systems that enable local decision-making, including legal anchoring, predictable and flexible finance, and structured pathways for community voice.
- Adaptation approaches must be agile and socially grounded, particularly in contexts affected by conflict, displacement, and rapid population movement, where static project models quickly become obsolete.
- Scaling LLA is not only about replication (scaling out) but also about deeper systems transformation (scaling deep): embedding gender equality and social inclusion in institutions, shifting power relations, strengthening local leadership, and investing in long-term processes of collaboration and trust.

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## Lessons from a learning workshop on locally led adaptation in Africa

Across Africa, communities have long adapted to climate variability through the mobilisation of local knowledge, collective action and Indigenous practices. Yet these forms of resilience often remain under-recognised in national climate planning and under-supported by adaptation finance mechanisms.

The Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN) programme works to strengthen and empower local and national climate leaders, enabling them to drive meaningful and sustained change within their institutions and communities. In Africa, CDKN delivers climate-resilient development programmes across five priority countries, Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, Namibia and Senegal, and supports five locally led knowledge-to-action projects.



Women weighing harvested Baobab fruit. Photo credit: Micaia

CDKN has been working to close the gap between what communities are already doing and the systems that shape climate governance and investment decisions – emphasising that climate adaptation is most effective when local leadership, inclusive governance, and community-derived knowledge are the starting points for action rather than an afterthought.

It was with this understanding that the [CDKN Africa programme](#) convened 16 partners from across nine African countries in August 2025 to discuss the learnings from their CDKN-supported work. The regional learning workshop created a dedicated space for practitioners, researchers, youth organisations and community leaders to reflect on what LLA actually looks like in practice, and why approaches grounded in community agency are critical. It was a space to reflect on the moments where adaptation is genuinely shaped by communities, and on the systemic barriers that continue to limit inclusion, agency, and long-term resilience. This brief synthesises the learning workshop’s core insight.

The 41 participants also explored the institutional, human and financial resources required to achieve and sustain community-centred approaches at scale.

They reflected on the conditions needed to embed these approaches more widely within governance systems. The workshop honoured the reality that LLA emerges from lived experience, local leadership and the day-to-day negotiation of climate uncertainty, where exposure to impacts is shaped by intersecting social and economic factors.

By bringing partners together across diverse contexts – from conflict-affected settings to pastoralist rangelands, from rural sacred forests to urban settlements – the workshop supported CDKN’s broader strategic aim: to strengthen community agency, bridge local and national governance systems, and deepen regional pathways for climate-resilient development across Africa.

### What LLA looks like in practice

A central lesson from the workshop was that LLA cannot be reduced to a template or checklist. Across contexts as diverse as northern Kenya, southern Ghana, central Mozambique and Western Equatorial in South Sudan, central Benin and northern and southern Cameroon cities, LLA is characterised by local leadership, decision-making rooted in local priorities and lived realities, and community ownership of adaptation pathways.



Participants at the CDKN LLA learning workshop in Machakos, Kenya. Photo credit: CDKN

Participants repeatedly highlighted that communities are not passive recipients of adaptation interventions; they are active agents shaping decisions, mediating risks, and mobilising collective action. In Ghana, mistrust between community members and local authorities had historically impeded climate action. Through facilitated dialogue and co-created “collaborative hubs” – shared spaces for dialogue and joint problem-solving – CDKN-supported climate initiatives in Ghana enabled residents, artists, media actors, and researchers to rebuild relationships and translate climate science into local framings and languages that made sense for each neighbourhood.

In Cameroon, young people participated in a creative artistic residency led by Grand Slam National as part of the CDKN-supported Urban Art for Climate in Cameroon project. Using slam poetry, storytelling and stand-up comedy, alongside training in Indigenous environmental stewardship, they engaged communities in new ways and raised awareness of climate change across several cities, including Yaoundé, Bertoua, Maroua, Kribi, Douala, Ngaoundéré and Garoua. Participants noted that this approach helped make environmental action more engaging and relevant for young audiences, while also rebuilding a sense of collective purpose and community engagement. The initiative further highlighted how traditional knowledge, including local handcrafts, can be revitalised through creative approaches. This demonstrates how LLA can strengthen both social cohesion and climate action by connecting cultural expression, knowledge and community engagement.

In Mozambique, Micaia Foundation, in partnership with Gonzololo Youth Network, worked in districts including Guro, Tambara, Sussundenga and Macossa. Youth groups highlighted a growing intergenerational gap, with younger generations becoming increasingly disconnected from traditional knowledge systems that have historically supported agriculture, climate forecasting, natural resource management and community resilience.

In response, partners developed a “knowledge bank” to document Indigenous farming systems, climate indicators, and adaptation practices. This was complemented by a capability methodology, using visual posters that illustrate everyday positive and harmful environmental behaviours, enabling young people and community members to recognise their own practices and reflect collectively. Participants noted that this approach went beyond awareness-raising, creating a socially grounded pathway to reconnect knowledge systems and shift behaviour.

In South Sudan, decades of conflict and instability have eroded cultural values, weakened education systems, and left many young people vulnerable to exploitation by political actors. Weak governance and limited enforcement of environmental laws have driven displaced populations toward unsustainable practices such as charcoal burning and tree cutting, accelerating ecosystem degradation and worsening climate impacts like prolonged droughts and severe floods. In this fragile context, LLA offers practical, community-driven solutions rooted in local experience.



A Grand Slam creative residency participant using performance to engage young people and raise awareness. Photo credit: Grand Slam National

For example, Youth Empowerment and Development Aid's (YEDA) efforts to establish Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) in Mundri West enable families to pool savings, access loans, and invest in climate-smart farming or small businesses, creating a locally-managed safety net against environmental and social shocks.

Across these examples, the pattern is clear: LLA succeeds when local priorities drive the agenda, and when communities play a central role in defining problems, interpreting knowledge, and shaping solutions. Groups with specific needs and concerns for climate-resilient development, such as young people and women, are often the ones to spearhead change, and devise solutions spurred by their unique perspectives.

### Connecting diverse knowledge systems for local adaptation

One of the strongest cross-cutting themes was the importance of hybrid knowledge systems. Across Africa, communities already hold profound knowledge about weather patterns, soil moisture, seasonality, mobility, and biodiversity and landscape change. But climate change is altering these patterns, and scientific models alone cannot capture this complexity.

Participants showed how meaningful LLA emerges when local, Indigenous and scientific knowledge interact in ways that respect their integrity. Intermediaries help convene dialogue across knowledge systems, facilitate co-production processes, and connect community knowledge with planning and governance mechanisms.

In Kenya's pastoralist regions, Indigenous knowledge meets digital innovation through Nature and People as One's (NaPO) spearheading of the use of the SMART (Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool), supported by CDKN and other partners, adapted to local languages and featuring animal icons to support access for people with low literacy.



Pastoralist herder and member of NaPO's Herders Conservation Network using a GPS device to map key rangeland features. Photo credit: NaPO

Rendille Indigenous community ambassadors, who are concentrated in the north eastern provinces, use it to monitor grazing areas, track wildlife movement, and coordinate seasonal decisions – demonstrating how digital tools work best when embedded in social structures and adapted to local contexts.

In Benin, communities recognise and protect sacred forests as a cornerstone of their spiritual beliefs, cultural identity and customary practices. Beyond their ecological value, these forests embody intergenerational stewardship and social cohesion. They contribute multiple ecosystem services, including water regulation, soil retention and microclimate moderation, that support adaptation to increasing warming and erratic rainfall. Through CDKN support, SURVIE de la Mère et de l'Enfant (Survie), communities' experiential knowledge is increasingly documented alongside scientific research to demonstrate these interconnected cultural and ecological benefits.

Ghana's collaborative hubs and Cameroon's slam events showed how diverse actors translated climate and environmental science into culturally meaningful narratives. Participants stressed that "what may work in one place is totally different in another," underscoring that knowledge brokering is a relational practice shaped by geography, identity, and culture.

In South Sudan, young people in Western Equatoria counties prioritise portable, skill-based adaptation approaches and quick income-generating activities. They prefer community-driven climate initiatives, such as reforestation, flood-resilient agriculture, and renewable energy alternatives, which can build practical skills and livelihoods while enhancing resilience in locally appropriate ways. However, major challenges remain, including weak climate adaptation policy, limited policy enforcement due to weak governance systems, and inadequate access to climate finance.

Taken together, these experiences show that LLA is not simply about transferring knowledge from one actor to another. It is about creating spaces where people can reflect, articulate tacit knowledge, share experiences, and co-produce ideas and interventions.

### **Inclusive governance systems and enabling conditions for local leadership**

Throughout the workshop, participants returned to one core insight: LLA cannot be sustained without inclusive governance systems that enable the conditions for local leadership. These systems must do more than decentralise authority; they must create structured spaces where communities can surface the priorities of the most climate-affected and marginalised people, reflect, articulate their priorities, make tacit knowledge explicit, and influence decision-making processes.



Workshop participants playing the “All hands on deck” knowledge brokering game. Photo credit: CDKN

In Benin, the demonstrated adaptation value of sacred forests has strengthened the case for formal legal recognition. With support from Survie, community leaders are urging national lawmakers to grant sacred forests official status, thereby reinforcing their ecological and cultural significance within governance frameworks.

Across countries, participants highlighted the need for predictable, long-term, flexible finance. Communities cannot meaningfully lead adaptation when funding is short-term, rigid, or overly focused on tangible outputs. Investment must also support facilitation, dialogue and collective decision-making processes, the governance foundations that form the backbone of LLA.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) were also identified as critical to strengthening the economic viability of LLA. In coastal and island communities in Senegal, where environmental degradation and limited economic prospects are driving out-migration, community members are creating local discussion platforms to understand coastal change and identify adaptive livelihood opportunities. CDKN’s national partner, ENDA Energie, reflected on how knowledge exchange among entrepreneurs, within and across communities, is helping spur innovation and diversify income sources under changing environmental conditions.

One example comes from Niodior Island, where women’s groups and local organisations are responding to sea-level rise and land degradation caused by saltwater intrusion and mangrove loss through locally driven livelihood initiatives.

### **LLA in conflict-affected contexts**

The workshop highlighted regions where climate adaptation is inseparable from geopolitical instability, conflict, and population mobility. YEDA’s contribution from South Sudan illustrated this clearly.

Participants described how communities face intersecting pressures, including displacement, conflict, flooding, and infrastructure loss, alongside resource competition. In these contexts, adaptation cannot rely on static project design; it must be conflict-aware, mobility-informed, and socially inclusive.

For example, solar-powered irrigation pilots enabled communities to sustain vegetable farming despite increasingly unreliable rainfall patterns that have disrupted traditional planting cycles. Participatory 360° mapping further supported communities in documenting climate risks and planning responses in contexts where displacement, weak infrastructure and limited institutional presence complicate adaptation planning.

Economic resilience emerged as central to LLA in fragile contexts. In 2025, communities across four villages in South Sudan established VSLAs, creating community-led financial safety nets that strengthen livelihoods and help households absorb climate and conflict-related shocks, particularly for women who face barriers to formal finance.

Participants stressed that the deeper impact lies in strengthening community cohesion and collective agency in an environment where institutions are weak, and mobility is central to survival. These experiences underscore a broader lesson: LLA in conflict-affected contexts must integrate climate risk management with social cohesion, economic inclusion, and equitable participation. Without deliberate attention to gender and social inclusion, adaptation efforts risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than building resilience.



Reforestation activity, Benin. Photo credit: Survie



YEDA team constructs emergency structures in Western Equatoria. Photo credits: YEDA

## Implications for policy, practice and investment

The lessons from CDKN's workshop carry implications across multiple scales.

### For practitioners and civil society:

Use participatory tools such as risk mapping, and local forums to better understand priorities and power dynamics. Strengthen the leadership of women, young people, people living with disabilities, older people and other marginalised groups. Ensure their participation shapes decision-making. Use culturally relevant approaches, including storytelling, the arts and youth-led platforms, to make climate action more meaningful and help shift social norms. Strengthen existing local institutions. Create new spaces for knowledge-sharing and collective problem-solving where needed. Document lessons learned, including failures. Support cross-country and community exchanges to strengthen regional learning. Build political will through ongoing engagement, advocacy and forums that bring together politicians, experts and communities. Link locally led climate action to national economic development.

### For local governments:

Embed LLA in planning, budgeting, and monitoring processes so that community priorities shape annual plans and resource allocation; ensure that the most climate-affected people within communities benefit equitably from adaptation efforts; strengthen subnational climate finance mechanisms to channel funding toward community-defined investments; and institutionalise participatory structures, such as public forums and consultation processes, while investing in facilitation capacity to support inclusive decision-making.

### For national governments:

Legislate and finance decentralised adaptation frameworks that clarify roles and budget flows across levels of government; integrate LLA into National Adaptation Plans (NAPs),

Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), and National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs); and formally recognise community institutions through legal or policy mechanisms that enable meaningful participation in planning and funding processes.

### For donors and development partners:

Provide long-term, flexible funding that supports evolving adaptation pathways rather than short project cycles; value governance and trust-building processes alongside technical outputs; and align funding with decentralised systems, ensuring resources reach subnational levels and support institutions that connect communities to decision-making and finance.

### For regional bodies:

Embed LLA principles, including inclusive and local decision-making, and direct access to finance, within harmonised regional and continental frameworks. Facilitate peer learning platforms that enable governments, practitioners and communities to exchange practical experience on LLA implementation, including subnational finance, participatory planning and community-led governance. Support the replication and institutionalisation of effective locally led models across countries.



CDKN LLA workshop participants at the weir dam site visit in Machakos, Kenya. Photo credit: CDKN

## Conclusion

LLA's success depends not only on what it achieves, but on how it is achieved. Our understanding of LLA as equitable, community-led adaptation places leadership, participation and inclusive decision-making at its core. These processes are not ends in themselves, but the means through which adaptation can reach those most affected by climate change and respond to the diverse needs and priorities within communities. This aspect will be explored further in a forthcoming CDKN report.

The learning workshop affirmed that African communities are not simply adapting – they are leading. Their ingenuity, local knowledge, and collective action form the backbone of climate resilience across the continent. As donors, governments, practitioners and researchers work to scale LLA, the lesson is clear: invest in people, in relationships, in governance systems, and in long-term processes that allow communities to lead their own adaptation journeys, especially in the diverse social groups that have varying capabilities, needs and priorities.

LLA is not a project model. Rather, it is a transformation in how we understand leadership, knowledge, and power in climate action. Africa is already showing the way.



Pastoralist herder and member of NaPO's Herders Conservation Network. Photo credit: Arash Ghoddousi

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Cover photo: Participants engaging in round table discussions at the CDKN LLA learning workshop in Kenya, Photo credit: CDKN

## Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN)

The Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN) is a global Southern-led programme founded in 2010. The programme is managed by SouthSouthNorth, and implemented in partnership with Fundación Futuro Latinoamericano and ICLEI South Asia. CDKN works to improve the wellbeing of the most climate-affected people in the Global South, especially marginalised groups, through transformative climate-resilient action. We work in partnership with the public, civil society and private sectors to mobilise knowledge, leadership and capacity in the Global South from local to global levels.



Participants at the CDKN LLA learning workshop in Machakos, Kenya. Photo credit: CDKN



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