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Report from Bangladesh: Turning Local Adaptation Lessons into National Policy

By Heather McGray on April 27, 2011

How can national policies support communities to adapt to climate change?

Across the globe, citizens are working together to safeguard their communities from troubling trends associated with climate change. On the islands of Papua New Guinea, coastal villagers have planted mangroves to stabilize eroding beaches. Along the rivers of Bangladesh, [farmers cultivate floating gardens](#) that can withstand the region's frequent floods. In the semi-arid zones of Rajasthan in India, farmers keep track of the changes in their local weather, and work together to decide how best to manage the shifting risks to their crops. These locally driven innovations – and many, many more – are part of an emerging movement known as “community-based adaptation.”



The village of Goalbari, Bangladesh, where residents are experimenting with floating gardens to weather frequent floods. Photo: Aarjan Dixit, WRI

Recently in Dhaka, Bangladesh, WRI – together with over thirty other organizations – co-sponsored the [Fifth International Conference on Community-based Adaptation](#). Nearly three hundred people attended from around the world, bringing with them stories, strategies, and challenges to inform the theme of the conference: how can we “scale up” community-based adaptation efforts?

WRI hosted a panel session on a central question for scaling up local initiatives: **how can national policies best support community-based adaptation efforts?** While local people must play the leading role in community-based adaptation, national level law, policy, investment and institutional arrangements can play an important facilitating or enabling role.

For example, national policies can create incentives for communities to undertake adaptation, or they may provide resources for community use in adaptation initiatives. National government programs may gather ideas from community-led pilot projects and replicate them through larger initiatives. On the other hand, outdated or maladaptive national initiatives can stifle adaptation or lead to perverse outcomes.

Over 100 people attended WRI's panel to hear stories and recommendations from five speakers. Two panelists provided government perspectives. Mrs. **Nahau Rooney**, Climate Change Chair of the Manus Provincial Government in Papua New Guinea (PNG) described [“PNG Vision 2050,”](#) the nation's over-

arching development strategy, which includes adaptation to climate change as one of its seven “pillars.” Under this pillar, provinces like Manus have developed provincial adaptation strategies that include community projects like the mangrove planting mentioned above.

Mr. **Legesse Gebremeskel**, of Ethiopia’s Federal Environmental Protection Authority, shared a similar story: as part of its national adaptation planning process, Ethiopia piloted a participatory regional planning process in the Afar region that included local-level planning for adaptation to climate change. Lessons from Afar have provided a model for other regions within the country.

From [Plan International](#), panelist Dr. **Nick Hall** presented on the importance of children’s participation in adaptation initiatives. Children face unique threats from climate change; studies have shown that they bear [88 percent of the disease burden of climate change](#). They also can play important roles as agents of change, sometimes taking the lead, ahead of their parents, in actions to reduce disaster risk. Dr. Hall called on climate change policymakers to scale up community-based adaptation by investing in education and by utilizing school systems as a channel for adaptation action.

Mr. **Jeremiah Mushosho** from [ZERO Regional Environmental Organization](#) described a set of linked research, advocacy and training activities that his organization has led in Zimbabwe. He stressed the importance of civil society as an agent for bringing adaptation ideas and lessons from the community level up to national decision-makers and to the public at large. He emphasized ZERO’s experience working through NGO networks and through training initiatives for members of the media.

The final panelist, Dr. **Arivudai Nambi**, shared lessons from the capacity-building work of the [M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation \(MSSRF\)](#), which helped establish community-based weather centers in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh states in India. Farmers have used the weather data gathered to develop “rules of thumb” for when to plant, irrigate, and apply fertilizer, based on local climatic conditions. They are well-placed to adjust these rules as the climate changes, based on their own direct engagement in the local weather centers and in management of the information the centers produce.

Moreover, MSSRF’s advocacy work at the national level has led India’s Ministry of Agriculture to agree, in principle, to support the development of similar local weather centers in villages across the country. MSSRF has also hosted national policy dialogues to share their findings with ministry officials, and have worked actively on the development of official state adaptation action plans.

During the Q&A phase of the WRI panel, much discussion focused on the advocacy process, including methods and strategies for getting lessons on adaptation from the community level to influence national policy. Panelists highlighted the importance of the media in this process, as well as the need for advocacy to be built into a community-based project from the very start. Several panelists suggested taking the view that community-based adaptation is always an experiment, with the aim of drawing lessons that provide a basis for advocacy, which should lead to scaling up through the policy context.

When asked what one action national governments should prioritize in order to scale up community-based adaptation, panelists gave a diverse set of recommendations, including:

- Nick Hall: Listen to children.
- Jeremiah Mushosho: Enact a national adaptation policy.
- Arivudai Nambi: Implement extension programs that spread community lessons on adaptation.

- Legasse Gebremeskel: Build awareness and commitment on climate change among national officials.
- Nahau Rooney: Include province and local adaptation activities in national budgets.

The panel session ended with many audience hands in the air and many remaining issues to discuss. To further explore the many issues raised, WRI will follow up on the panel by working with others from the conference to develop a book chapter addressing national action to support community-based adaptation.

Heather McGray is Senior Associate for Vulnerability and Adaptation in WRI's Climate and Energy Program, and served as facilitator for the session in Dhaka. Together with Research Analyst Aarjan Dixit, whose also [blogged from Bangladesh](#), she designed the session and recruited speakers. Funding from the Dutch and Swedish governments enabled WRI to serve as a co-sponsor of the CBA5 Conference and to support attendance by several developing country participants.

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