

What is adaptation to climate change?



To reduce people's vulnerability to climate change, CARE focuses on building adaptive capacity and, in some cases, reducing exposure or sensitivity to its impacts. We are also taking steps to ensure our development programs and projects contribute, whenever possible, to strengthening resilience and that they don't inadvertently worsen vulnerabilities. These processes are often called "adaptation to climate change."

Adaptation is defined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as:

Adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities.

The adaptation of human systems is a process that requires the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders at multiple levels and in multiple sectors. It requires analysis of current exposure to climate shocks and stresses, and model-

based analysis of future climate impacts. It demands an understanding of the existing vulnerability of individuals, households and communities, as well as their institutional, political, social and biophysical environments.

Only with this information can effective adaptation strategies be designed and implemented. Monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of activities, as well as sharing knowledge and lessons learnt, are critical components of the adaptation process.

Old wine in new bottles?

There is some debate in the development community as to whether adaptation actually represents anything "new." While it is true that many development projects increase people's adaptive capacity, it is also true that some make people more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

CARE seeks a world of hope, tolerance and social justice, where poverty has been overcome and people live in dignity and security. Due to its impacts on the lives and livelihoods of poor and marginalized people, climate change poses an unprecedented threat to achieving our vision.

This document is one in a series of CARE International Climate Change Briefs, developed for internal learning and communication purposes.



In CARE's view, adaptation to climate change is new because, when implemented properly, it:

- Is designed based on a holistic analysis of people's vulnerability to climate change, examining both current and projected climate risks;
- Has the explicit goal of reducing vulnerability to the impacts of climate change;
- Uses scientific climate information as well as local/traditional climate knowledge for planning;
- Integrates disaster risk management as a fundamental part of the approach;
- Adopts a long-term vision by planning and implementing interventions that enhance resilience to current climate variability, while preparing for anticipated longer-term climatic changes;
- Uses climate risk screening to ensure project activities are resilient to climate impacts; and
- Recognises that context, needs and priorities are dynamic, and therefore incorporates flexibility to manage this.

CARE's approach to adaptation

CARE is tackling the challenge of adaptation to climate change in two key ways:

- Undertaking targeted Community-Based Adaptation (CBA) projects; and
- Integrating climate change adaptation into its work in climate-sensitive sectors.

Community-based adaptation

Community-Based Adaptation (CBA) projects are interventions whose primary objective is to improve the capacity of local communities to adapt to climate change. From CARE's perspective, effective CBA requires an integrated approach that combines traditional knowledge with innovative strategies that not only address current vulnerabilities, but also build people's resilience to face new and dynamic challenges.

To effectively build adaptive capacity, the CBA process should incorporate four interrelated strategies:

- Promotion of climate-resilient livelihoods strategies in combination with income diversification and capacity building for planning and improved risk management;
- Disaster risk reduction strategies to reduce the impact of hazards, particularly on vulnerable households and individuals;
- Capacity development for local civil society and governmental institutions so that they can provide better support to communities, households and individuals in their adaptation efforts; and
- Advocacy and social mobilisation to address the underlying causes of vulnerability, such as poor governance, lack of control over resources, or limited access to basic services.

Recognising the importance of an enabling environment for effective CBA, CARE's approach is not limited to promoting change at the community level. We also aim to inform and influence regional, national and international policies. This process involves evidence-based advocacy, as well as constructive engagement in key decision-making processes.

It should be noted that in some parts of the world, there is significant uncertainty around climate change predictions (for example, we do not know if the Sahel will receive slightly more or slightly less rain in coming decades). When this is the case, adaptation should focus on "no regrets" activities that will increase people's capacity to deal with a range of likely climate change scenarios.

Integrating climate change adaptation

Climate change can seriously affect the outcome of development initiatives aimed at reducing poverty - in some cases, completely negating their benefits. At the same time, development programmes have the potential to increase resilience amongst target populations or, if designed incorrectly, to reduce it.

Key messages Adaptation

- **Climate change is already happening. Poor and marginalised people are suffering most from its impacts.**
- **The impacts of climate change include an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as floods, droughts and cyclones.**
- **Less dramatic changes - such as rising temperatures and shifts in the timing or amount of annual average rainfall - are equally important because they have a profound impact on the livelihoods and food security of so many people.**
- **Adaptation is critical to protecting tens of millions of poor and marginalised people who are at risk of losing their lives or livelihoods as a result of climate change.**
- **Adaptation efforts must target the needs and priorities of the most vulnerable people.**
- **Adaptation is a process that requires engagement by a wide range of stakeholders at multiple levels.**



Integrating, or “mainstreaming,” climate change adaptation into poverty reduction programming can increase the sustainability impact of development initiatives in sectors such as water, agriculture, livelihoods and health.

Integrating adaptation into development is the process of taking current and projected climate risks into account during project design and/or implementation, and adjusting activities or approaches accordingly. The goal of CARE’s work is, in general, to reduce poverty amongst target populations. By integrating an understanding of climate risk into project cycles, our impacts can become more resilient to climate change. CBA projects are complementary, but different. They target the most vulnerable populations

and explicitly focus on reducing people’s vulnerability to climate change.

Integrating adaptation aims to achieve two major objectives:

- To reduce the risks posed by climate change to project activities, stakeholders and results. This is sometimes referred to as “climate-proofing.”
- To ensure that project or programme activities maximise their contribution to building the adaptive capacity of target populations - and do not inadvertently increase vulnerability to climate change - through interventions designed to build resilience while achieving development goals.

Key messages CARE’s approach

- CARE’s approach to adaptation concentrates on building the adaptive capacity of vulnerable people, communities and societies.
- We focus on creating an enabling environment for adaptation by strengthening local institutions and by linking community-based experience to national, regional and international policy dialogues.
- CARE is developing and implementing CBA projects in vulnerable communities around the world.
- We are integrating adaptation to climate change into our work in climate-sensitive sectors, such as water and agriculture.
- CARE is developing toolkits for CBA and for Integrating Adaptation into Projects to ensure the quality and resiliency of our work.



“Climate-proofing” is primarily concerned with protecting development investments and outcomes from the impacts of climate change. It increases the sustainability of projects by analysing the risks posed by climate change to project activities, stakeholders and results, and then modifying and/or adjusting project designs or implementation plans to mitigate those risks. For example, an increase in the frequency and severity of floods may require water pumps to be built at a higher level to ensure that people can access safe water during and after flood events.

The second objective of integrating adaptation recognises that development activities can build or inadvertently undermine the adaptive capacity of target populations to climate impacts. By analysing vulnerability of these populations to climate change and adjusting project activities to maximise their contribution to adaptive capacity, the benefits of development projects can be significantly increased.

For example, the selection of technologies and crop varieties can make a major difference in the impact of an agricultural project. In a changing climate, the introduction of high-yield, high-input agricultural models can actually increase vulnerability when new seed varieties cannot cope with shifting rainfall patterns and

the purchase of inputs requires credit, leaving farmers in a risky position in the event of crop failure.

In many cases, low-input techniques such as conservation agriculture, along with crop varieties that are suited to current and projected climate conditions, may be more appropriate and sustainable.

Projects should integrate adaptation throughout their cycle, beginning with analysis and following through project design, implementation and the management of knowledge and information. In some cases, there may be opportunities to integrate adaptation into ongoing projects. However, this will depend on the flexibility of a project to adjust its approach, and on the resources available to modify or add activities in response to the climate analysis.

As with CBA projects, integrating adaptation into development should focus on “no regrets” actions. As well, it is important for people who design and implement development initiatives to understand that no project will ever be truly “climate-proof.” The best we can do at CARE is to understand the range of risks a project may be exposed to and mitigate them as best we can.

For more information:

www.careclimatechange.org