

What is adaptation to climate change?



Climate change poses an unprecedented threat to people in developing countries who are already struggling to sustain their livelihoods and maintain food security. CARE is helping the most vulnerable amongst them, especially women and other marginalised groups, adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and participate in building the resilience of their communities and societies.

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.

We focus on building adaptive capacity and, in some cases, reducing people's exposure or sensitivity to the impacts of climate change. CARE is also taking steps to ensure that our development projects/programmes contribute, whenever possible, to strengthening people's resilience and don't

inadvertently worsen vulnerabilities. Both of these processes are fundamental to meeting the global adaptation challenge.

The adaptation of human systems is a process that requires engagement by a wide range of stakeholders acting at multiple levels in nearly all sectors. It requires analysis of current exposure to climate shocks and stresses, as well as model-based analysis of future climate impacts. It demands an understanding of existing vulnerability amongst 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.

For more information on CARE's approach to adaptation, please go to: www.careclimatechange.org/adaptation

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 marginalised people, climate change poses an unprecedented threat to achieving our vision.

This working brief is part of a series that provides insight into CARE's climate change initiatives, experiences and approaches. It was released October 2010.



Old wine in new bottles?

There is some debate as to whether adaptation actually represents anything “new.” When done properly, CARE believes the challenge of adaptation is new and additional to meeting development goals because it:

- Entails holistic analysis of people’s vulnerability to climate change, considering both current and projected risks;
- Is explicitly designed to reduce people’s vulnerability/ build their resilience to the impacts of climate change;
- 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;
- 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 our work in climate-sensitive sectors.

Community-based adaptation

The primary objective of Community-Based Adaptation (CBA) projects is to reduce people’s vulnerability to current and projected impacts of climate change. This requires a substantial emphasis on building adaptive capacity. Indeed, CARE believes that effective CBA necessitates an integrated approach, combining traditional knowledge with innovative strategies, to build local capacity for adaptation to accelerating climatic changes.

Our approach to CBA incorporates 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 strengthening of local civil society and government institutions so that they can more effectively support community, household and individual adaptation efforts; and
- Advocacy and social mobilisation to address the underlying causes of vulnerability, including poor governance, lack of control over resources, limited access to basic services, discrimination and other social injustices.

Climate change is making it even more difficult for women and girls to realise their basic rights, and it is exacerbating inequalities since they are more vulnerable to its impacts than men. Meanwhile, many women are denied access to new information about climate change and participation in important decision-making processes despite having unique skills and vital knowledge to contribute. For all these reasons, and because women are central to the food and livelihood security of their families, CARE’s approach to CBA places a special emphasis on gender equality and women’s empowerment.

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 the many millions of poor and marginalised people who are at risk of losing their lives or livelihoods as a result of climate change.
- International adaptation efforts must target the needs and priorities of the world’s most vulnerable people.
- Adaptation is a process that requires engagement by a wide range of stakeholders acting at multiple levels.



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, undermine it.

Integrating, or "mainstreaming," climate change adaptation in poverty reduction projects increases the sustainability of impacts - especially in highly sensitive sectors such as water, agriculture and health. Integrating adaptation into development entails of taking current and projected climate risks into account during project design and/or implementation, and adjusting activities or approaches accordingly.

Key messages CARE's approach

- CARE's approach to adaptation concentrates on building the adaptive capacity of vulnerable people, communities and societies.
- CARE places a special emphasis on gender equality and women's empowerment in all our adaptation strategies and activities.
- CARE is helping create an enabling environment for adaptation by strengthening local institutions and linking community-based experiences with national, regional and international policy dialogues.
- CARE is integrating adaptation into our work in climate-sensitive sectors, especially water and agriculture.
- CARE has developed Toolkits for CBA and Integrating Adaptation into Development Projects to ensure the quality and resiliency of our work.



CARE's overarching goal is to reduce poverty and build social justice. By factoring climate-related risks into the project cycle, our interventions become more resilient to the impacts of climate change. CBA projects are complementary, but different. They target the world's most vulnerable populations and focus on activities resulting in the greatest direct gains in adaptive capacity.

By integrating adaptation into our development projects and programmes, CARE:

- Reduces the risks that climate change poses to activities, stakeholders and results. This is sometimes referred to as "climate-proofing."
- Maximises the contribution that our interventions make to people's adaptive capacity while minimising their potential to exacerbate vulnerabilities.

"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. By analysing

people's vulnerability to climate change and adjusting project activities to build adaptive capacity, the benefits of development projects can be significantly increased.

For example, choice of technologies and crop varieties can have major consequences for the results of an agricultural project. In a changing climate, the introduction of high-yield, high-input agricultural models can actually increase people's vulnerability if 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 lifecycle, 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.

As with CBA projects, integrating adaptation into development should focus on "no regret" options. Though no project will ever be fully "climate proof," we can understand and effectively reduce the risks to which a project may be exposed.

For more information:

www.careclimatechange.org