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### **Rethinking governance responses to climate mobility: Incorporating local perspectives into climate change adaptation policies in Africa's vulnerable settings**

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# Rethinking Governance Responses to Climate Mobility: Incorporating Local Perspectives into Climate Change Adaptation Policies in Africa's Vulnerable Settings

## BACKGROUND

In recent years, the discourse around human mobility in the context of climate change has evolved to recognise its multifaceted impacts in regions highly vulnerable to cascading climatic disasters.<sup>1</sup> Africa, characterised by its diverse ecosystems and socio-economic and cultural complexities, faces significant challenges amidst the climate crisis, most notably in situations where climate change impacts on livelihoods and human mobility.

The movement of people presents one response to the changing weather patterns and disruptive environmental events associated with climate change. Recent studies highlight an increasing incidence of climate-related human mobility (mixed with economic, cultural and political factors) across various parts of Africa.<sup>2</sup> Climate-related human mobility reflects, and offers insight into, broader socio-cultural and environmental shifts taking place in the context of the climate crisis. In turn, these necessitate a rethinking of existing adaptation and other governance frameworks to include more inclusive and locally-led perspectives and strategies.

This policy brief argues for a rethinking of the priorities and actions set out in African states' climate mobility and adaptation policies. In particular, it argues for a paradigm shift away from focusing on global trends and top-down adaptation frameworks, to instead focusing on local insights and perspectives. While top-down approaches to adaptation may be ill-suited and lack sensitivity to addressing the dynamics and complexities of climate-related (im)-mobility in the local contexts,<sup>3</sup> more localised approaches – incorporating lived experiences and indigenous knowledge systems – could help ensure more effective adaptation and sustainable livelihoods for individuals and communities in vulnerable settings.

Local perspectives on climate change and adaptation are crucial in understanding the peculiarities of climate change impacts on particular groups and in sensitive settings.<sup>4</sup> Local perspectives provide nuanced information regarding local livelihoods, social and environmental conditions, that could enable more targeted and sustainable governance responses. Incorporating local insights into

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<sup>1</sup> R. Hoffmann, K. Vinke & B. Šedová, 'Strengthening the science-policy interface in the climate migration field' (2023) 61(5) *International Migration* 0020-7985; H. Upadhyay et al, 'Conceptualizing and contextualizing research and policy for links between climate change and migration' (2015) 7(3) *International Journal of Climate Change Strategies and Management* 394; H. Wray, K. Charsley, G. Kolbaşı-Muyan & L. Smith, 'Introduction to Special Issue: Family Migration in Times of Crisis' (2023) 11(3) *Migration Studies* 363.

<sup>2</sup> H.O. Pörtner et al, 'Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change' Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2022) (IPCC); see further N. Nyandiko, 'Incorporating Human Mobility into Disaster Risk Reduction Laws, Policies and Strategies in African States' CMARN *Insights Policy Brief 2/2023* (2023).

<sup>3</sup> D. Conway, R.J. Nicholls, S. Brown et al, 'The need for bottom-up assessments of climate risks and adaptation in climate-sensitive regions' (2019) 9 *Nat. Clim. Chang.* 503.

<sup>4</sup> C. Romankiewicz & M. Doevenspeck, 'Climate and Mobility in the West African Sahel: Conceptualising the Local Dimensions of the Environment and Migration Nexus' in H. Greschke & J. Tischler (eds) *Grounding Global Climate Change* (2015).

**‘The challenge here is that these national actors are not informed or aware of the local needs and expectations in relation to addressing climate immobility. We have had this top-down partnership with the national government. The shortfall however is that we have to align our projects to the national focus, and because they do not understand the needs of the local communities; the national focus often delineates the core need of some of these communities at the frontline of the climate crisis.’**

**Interview with Program Manager, Spring of Life of Foundation, Nigeria, 2023**

national adaptation strategies involves a comprehensive rethinking of the socio-economic processes that underscore the merit of multi-stakeholder partnerships in consultation with local communities. A bottom-up participatory approach ensures that local knowledge, needs and voices inform policy documents that aim to improve livelihood conditions in African communities at the frontline of climate change impacts.

This policy brief draws upon recent empirical insights from a multi-sited case study conducted in 2023 in four climate-vulnerable communities located in south-eastern and north-central Nigeria<sup>5</sup>. The study explored the lived experiences of male and female young people, as well as other actors, to examine how the challenges and opportunities they face in the context of climate change can inform the development of adaptation strategies that deal with climate-related human mobility.

Overall, this policy brief aims to contribute to climate change adaptation in Africa by offering tangible recommendations to policymakers and other stakeholders about how to better understand and engage with affected local communities. It highlights the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration and an inclusive approach to climate governance. The recommendations in this policy brief aim to develop more inclusive governance approaches that not only address the immediate challenges of climate-related human mobility and adaptation but also provide pathways to more long-term solutions.

## ISSUES

### LACK OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AMONG POLICY MAKERS

Adequate knowledge and understanding of the lived experiences of affected populations is crucial to addressing the complexities of human mobility in the context of climate change. Yet, empirical evidence from Nigeria in 2023 suggests that government agencies and policy makers are mostly uninformed of the impacts that climate change has on communities at the frontline of the climate crisis. For example, evidence from recent IPCC reports indicates that the impacts of climate change across the human and natural worlds will increase in severity over time.<sup>6</sup> However, insights from our empirical

<sup>5</sup> J. Inyama. *Understanding the Impact of Climate Change Enhanced Vulnerability to Natural Hazards & Disasters (CCEVND) on Transnational Migration* PhD Dissertation, Radboud University, The Netherlands (forthcoming, 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) ‘Summary for Policymakers’ (2023) in *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*.

study show policy makers frequently do not understand that climate change impacts are not just environmental, but also socio-economic<sup>5</sup>.

In this context, there is a pressing need for policy makers to better understand how climate change combines with broader social conditions in exposed communities to affect livelihoods, and how these factors contribute to human mobility in different settings.<sup>7</sup> For instance, in some places, the impacts of flooding may be more immediate in farming communities, when compared with pastoral and fishing ones. This kind of knowledge is vital in developing effective short, medium and long-term response plans that reflect the needs of the community.

Where gaps in knowledge exist, addressing them requires a data-driven approach that combines scientific knowledge with indigenous knowledge systems. To this end, engaging with local communities to understand their lived experiences can offer significant insights into local sustainability strategies and time-tested indigenous responses to climatic shocks. In turn, these insights can inform the development of more comprehensive and culturally sensitive local and national policies.

## **INEFFECTIVE POLICIES AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES**

Lack of local knowledge and perspectives can negatively affect a broad range of policy areas, including environmental and development policies. For example, while environmental policies may be designed to protect the ecosystem, if they are not strategically aligned with local livelihood conditions and traditional cultural practices, they can have unintended consequences. In particular, they may fail to acknowledge existing communal rights to natural assets, such as land,<sup>8</sup> or restrict the rural population's access to traditional hunting or farming lands and fishing grounds.<sup>9</sup> This can inadvertently lead to tensions among neighbouring communities that depend on land or other nature-based resources, even leading to violent conflict and triggering displacement of populations at the frontline of the climate crisis.<sup>10</sup> It can also lead to reduced agricultural productivity, pushing

**'We are not involved in any of the processes, discussions, or negotiations aimed at addressing climate change impacts in the community. For example, the government does not consider how the impacts of development policies that result in land grabbing hinder our daily aspirations because we are highly dependent on this land for our livelihood. If I have restricted access to the land, then I can no longer live sustainably in the community. I would like them to take our voices, and aspirations into account when deciding policy responses to address the climate change crisis.'**

**Interview with male youth in Mu community, North-Central Nigeria, 2023**

<sup>7</sup> D.S.G. Baptista et al, 'Climate change and chronic food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa' IMF Department Papers (2022).

<sup>8</sup> S. Vigil, 'Without Rain or Land, Where Will Our People Go? Climate Change, Land Grabbing and Human Mobility. Insights from Senegal and Cambodia' Global governance/politics, climate justice & agrarian/social justice: linkages and challenges (2016).

<sup>9</sup> O.A. Somorin, 'Climate impacts, forest-dependent rural livelihoods and adaptation strategies in Africa: A review' (2010). 4(13) *African Journal of Environmental Science and Technology* 903.

<sup>10</sup> D. Calmon, C. Jacovetti and M. Koné, 'Agrarian climate justice as a progressive alternative to climate security: Mali at the intersection of natural resource conflicts' (2021) 42 (12) *Third World Quarterly* 2785.

communities that are highly dependent on nature-based resources to move elsewhere in search of better livelihoods.

In the same vein, developmental policies designed to foster economic growth – for example, large-scale agricultural plants or infrastructure projects – can disrupt traditional livelihoods, resulting in the forced displacement of people. This was evident in one of our fieldwork case-study locations in south-eastern Nigeria in an empirical study conducted in 2023.<sup>5</sup> This not only unsettles traditional livelihood structures, but also cultural identities and social structures. It also often results in an influx of rural populations to urban areas, which in turn leads to the enlargement of urban slums (ghettos) and transnational migration practices.

**‘[W]hen I was growing up, the issues of forest and conservation were taken seriously and preserved by local knowledge. But now these forests have been depleted for economic activities for private benefits. Today communities whose livelihoods are dependent on the forest and wildlife have completely lost them, and the consequence is mass migration out of these rural areas due to climate change impacts, and poor environmental policies that acknowledge the role of communities. State actors must find a way to include community voices in policymaking and utilise their indigenous knowledge in the conservation of rural livelihoods.’**

**Interview with The Global Lead, Women Environmental Programme, 2023**

To ease these challenges, government agencies and policymakers must adopt an inclusive approach to policy formulation across a range of areas, to ensure that such policies reflect, and address, the social realities – including livelihood conditions, cultural dynamics and mobility perspectives – of local communities at the frontlines of climate change. Moreover, such policies should be flexible and tailored to adapt to the needs and living conditions of these communities.

#### **TAKING A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER APPROACH**

A multi-stakeholder approach, that prioritises local perspectives – including lived experience and indigenous knowledge – is fundamental to developing targeted and sustainable adaptation responses to the climate crises. Addressing the current lack of local knowledge among governments and policy makers requires a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach that brings together national and local government agencies, community leaders, NGOs, researchers and private sectors.

Importantly, a multi-stakeholder approach to policy development must engage directly with members from communities at the frontline of the climate crisis. Each community member offers a unique perspective and expertise, making their collective input invaluable in developing effective responses to climate adaptation and mobility. Local indigenous knowledge, as well as traditional infrastructures that support coping mechanisms during climatic disasters, can make important contributions to climate-related policies at the local and national levels.

In practice, a multi-stakeholder approach requires state and non-state actors to work together to establish platforms that bring communities and other stakeholders together. Such platforms should facilitate dialogue, enabling stakeholders to share

knowledge and challenges, brainstorm opportunities and solutions, and participate in the monitoring and evaluation of climate adaptation strategies once implemented. Dialogue between all stakeholders should recognise the different needs and contributions of each, ensuring equal participation of vulnerable populations and incorporating traditional knowledge to ensure contextually relevant adaptation practices.

Ultimately, a multi-stakeholder approach fosters a sense of shared responsibilities and collective action plans that enhance the resilience of rural livelihood in Africa's vulnerable settings.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. National governments and other stakeholders should establish and/or expand multi-stakeholder platforms to facilitate dialogues and increased collaboration between policy makers and affected communities.
2. National governments and other policy makers should adopt a bottom-up participatory approach to fully capture local knowledges, lived experiences, needs and voices at the frontline of climate change impact.
3. National governments and other stakeholders should invest in further scientific research to explore and understand the lived experiences of communities at the frontlines of climate change, and to help generate insights that directly support effective and targeted policy responses.
4. National governments should develop a climate mobility tracking model that identifies how climate change impacts different groups across different communities, to provide contextual insight into the development of specific and targeted climate adaptation measures in Africa's vulnerable settings.