Dealing with climate change at the grassroots of development cooperation

by Marius Keller [1]

1. Introduction

In spite of recent political setbacks, climate change has risen to the top of the development agenda over the past few years. Developing countries are being asked to prepare adaptation strategies and billions of dollars in development assistance will be earmarked for their implementation. However, many development practitioners at the grassroots level have remained sceptical of this trend for three main reasons. First, climate change is often seen as a high-level debate on global greenhouse gas emissions that is of little practical relevance on the local level. Second, it is often argued that poor people have too many immediate concerns such as education, health and food security to worry about a problem perceived as distant and uncertain. Third, practitioners often lack the knowledge and means to integrate climate change related issues into their projects and programs with reasonable effort.

These concerns are understandable and legitimate. However, this article argues that it is not only important for development projects and programs to take vulnerability to climate hazards into account, but it is also feasible thanks to a wide range of tools for practitioners that have been developed in recent years. The next section will discuss the relationship between climate change adaptation and development, addressing the first two concerns mentioned above and making the case for mainstreaming climate change adaptation. Then, a few important tools along with their use in the development project cycle will be presented. The remainder of the article discusses opportunities and challenges along with some key success factors for applying these tools.

2. Climate-resilient Development

Central to many development practitioners' scepticism regarding climate change is the notion that the causes and the consequences of global warming have little to do with development at the grassroots. After all, the world's poorest inhabitants have been responsible only for a negligible share of global greenhouse gas emissions, and should therefore not be asked to reduce them. Moreover, climate change is often seen as an environmental issue most relevant to natural resources management projects, but not necessarily to health, education or infrastructure activities.

However, in reality the poor will bear the brunt of the impacts of increasing temperatures and changing weather patterns due to their high vulnerability and limited adaptive capacity. The process of reducing vulnerabilities to climate risks and increasing the capacity to adapt to changes in climatic conditions is closely intertwined with development: Diversifying livelihood strategies, for instance, can render people less vulnerable to specific climate shocks, because any given disaster is unlikely to affect different livelihoods in the same way at the same time. On the other hand, poorly conceived development strategies can make people more vulnerable, for instance if dwellings are built on flood-prone areas. The aim of integrating climate change into development is therefore to achieve development goals in spite of changing climate conditions. In other words, development should become climate-resilient.

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Achieving climate-resilient development must involve a third community of practice: disaster risk reduction. In most cases, adaptation to climate change will begin with reducing the vulnerability to current climate hazards, such as cyclones, floods and droughts. The disaster risk community has been dealing with these for decades, acquired a lot of experience, and developed their own tools for integrating risk reduction into development projects at all levels. Addressing climate change should build on this experience and avoid reinventing the wheel.

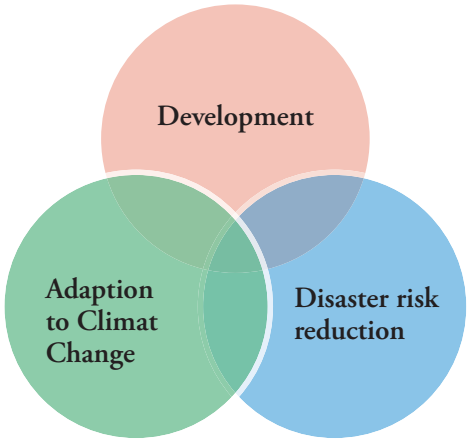

Figure 1: Overlapping communities of practice

Figure 1 shows the intersections between development, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. Experience shows that most humanitarian or development projects lie at the intersection of at least two of the three fields. Most adaptation activities reduce the risk not only of future but also of current climate-related disasters or contribute to development or both. Conversely many risk reduction or development projects also reduce vulnerability to long-term changes in climatic conditions.

3. Tools

More and more development practitioners recognize the importance of climate risks, but often lack the know-how and the time to address them adequately. Fortunately, over the past few years, many bilateral and non-governmental development agencies have developed tools to mainstream climate change adaptation[2], often times based on disaster risk reduction tools. Today, a wide range of handbooks and tools is available for different institutional levels and different points in the project cycle. Figure 2 shows the project cycle and the principal entry points for mainstreaming adaptation to climate change. Whereas some tools are focused on specific components such as prescreening of climate risks and vulnerabilities, others cover most of the mainstreaming process. Some tools are designed for analysing entire programmes, while others are best used to assess individual projects or communities. They also range from generic guidance manuals to step-by-step tools.

Among the most prominent adaptation tools for the project level are CRiSTAL (see box), Tearfund's CEDRA and CARE's CVCA. CRiSTAL helps users to analyze the links between climate risks and livelihoods, and to evaluate the impact of existing development projects on the adaptive capacity of communities. It covers a large part of the mainstreaming process by raising awareness, analyzing climate risks and supporting the design of adaptation options. CEDRA (which stands for Climate change and Environmental Degradation Risk and Adaptation assessment) extends the analysis to other environmental hazards, and covers the entire mainstreaming process including monitoring and evaluation. CARE's Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis handbook (CVCA) offers a framework for analyzing vulnerability and climate risks at different levels and can be applied to entire NGO country programmes. It also offers a series of participatory tools which can help to identify risks and adaptation options with communities. Many other NGOs have developed or are developing their own tools. In Switzerland, HEKS and Bread for All have jointly developed the Participatory Tool on Climate and Disaster Risks, which draws heavily on both CRiSTAL and the CVCA handbook. Some large bilateral donors such as GTZ or USAID have also developed tools, although they tend to address higher levels of decision-making, for instance by helping users to screen entire country programmes.

[2] *To a lesser extent this also applies to mitigation, i.e. reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. However the focus here is on adaptation.*

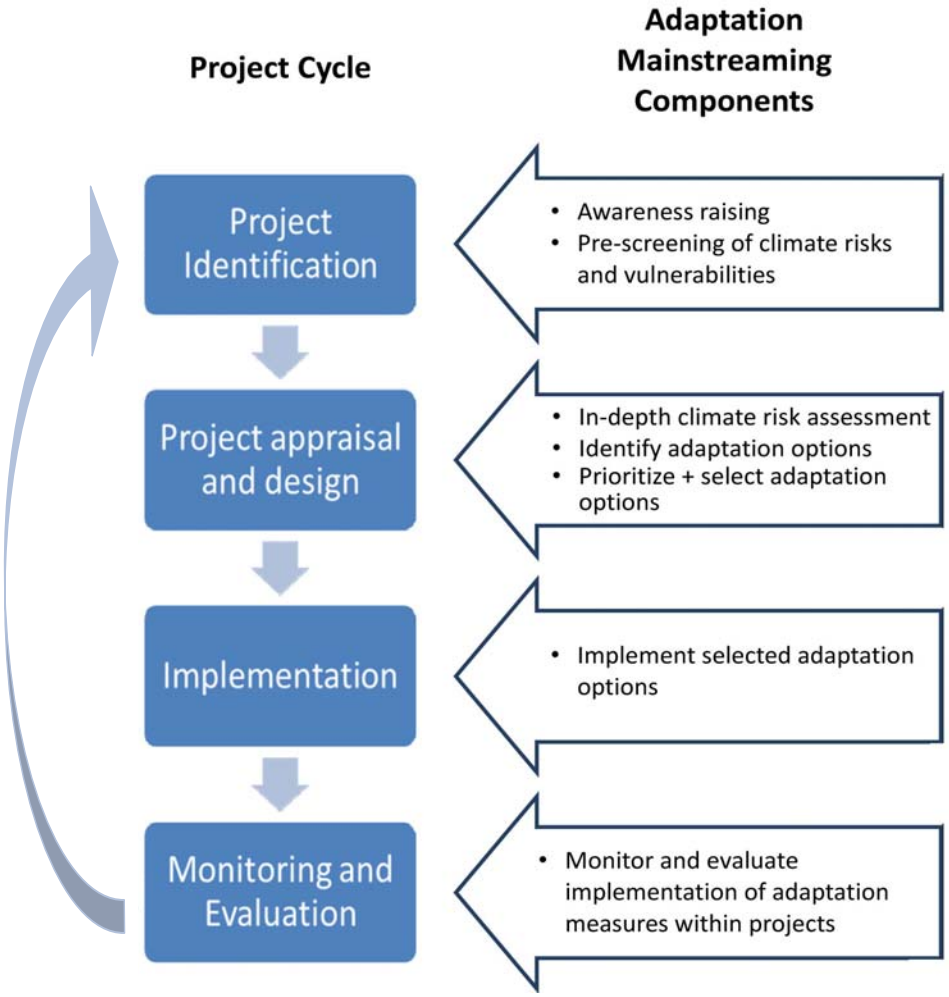

Figure 2: Key entry points for integrating adaptation into development project (adapted from OECD 2009)

That may still sound abstract. In practice, however, tool users quickly see how climate risks already affect their day-to-day work. Applications of CRiSTAL in rural development projects in southern Honduras, for instance, have shown how existing development activities already enhance adaptive capacity. The assessed projects strengthen various local self-help groups, which improves collective action in the face of disasters and changing climatic conditions; they help farmers sell their surplus production, which increases their economic asset base, an important element of resilience in times of climate stress; and they train beneficiaries in soil conservation techniques in order to reduce soil erosion. As eroded soils have less capacity to retain floods, their conservation renders people less vulnerable to heavy rainfall. Screening the project with a tool has also resulted in practical suggestions on how adaptive capacity could be improved further, for instance through livelihood diversification, more drought-resistant crops and further strengthening of community organizations such as emergency committees.

4. Opportunities and Challenges

The example mentioned above shows how the screening results can be relevant for development practice. Climate risks are analysed within the development context, and not as a separate issue. Suggestions for improvements are feasible and context-relevant.

In addition, the analysis can highlight how existing development activities already strengthen adaptive capacity, which can help raise awareness about

CRiSTAL (Community-based Risk Screening Tool – Adaptation and Livelihoods) is a participatory tool based on the sustainable livelihoods framework. It promotes the integration of risk reduction and climate change adaptation into community-level projects by helping users to:

- Understand how current climate hazards and climate change affect a project area and local livelihoods
- Learn how people cope, looking specifically at the resources needed to cope with climate stress
- Assess a project's impact on livelihood resources that are vulnerable to climate risk and/or important to community-level adaptive capacity
- Make adjustments to improve a project's impact on adaptive capacity

The tool follows a series of logically linked analytical steps. Most information is gathered through stakeholder consultations. Only a minimum of secondary scientific information is required as an input. The tool runs on Microsoft Excel in order to allow users to record and summarize the gathered data.

CRiSTAL was jointly developed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), the Swiss Foundation for Development and International Cooperation (Intercooperation) and the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD).

The CRiSTAL website, www.cristaltool.org, contains more useful information including:

- CRiSTAL manuals and brochures in several languages
- Reports on CRiSTAL applications across the globe
- A discussion forum for users

Box 1: CRiSTAL

the links between development and climate and find additional justification for a development agency's interventions. A second opportunity in applying adaptation tools is the involvement of communities. CRiSTAL, CVCA and CEDRA and other tools systematically encourage and guide community consultations as a way for gathering relevant knowledge on climate hazards, their impacts on livelihoods, existing coping strategies, and potential adaptation options. Community participation improves local awareness and knowledge on climate risks, which in itself helps to reduce social barriers to adaptation. Consultations can also enhance communities' sense of ownership of the development interventions. Third, the tools are all flexible in their use, which allows users to pick the parts they deem useful, combine different approaches for their specific purposes, and apply them on different levels.

However, using mainstreaming tools is not without challenges. First, tools usually require some adjusting before they are applied. While flexibility is an advantage (as described above), adjusting tools requires a sound understanding of the context and key development issues. Second, applying a tool takes time. How much depends on the specific needs of the user, as well as the scale and depth of the analysis; a few days is usually the minimum amount of time needed to assess an individual community. Besides staff time, one should not forget that consultations also take up the valuable time of beneficiaries, who may have already participated in one or several previous consultations, potentially leading to consultation fatigue and frustration over unmet expectations. Third, a certain amount of knowledge and capacity on environment / climate and development issues is required to conduct the analysis. CRiSTAL and other tools do not analyse information for a user; instead they provide frameworks and guidelines for a user to conduct the analysis themselves. A robust assessment usually requires users to understand the basics climate science and their links to local development. Thus in many cases, this calls for some training before a tool is used, an assessment is undertaken.

Fourth, sound communication is crucial. When consulting communities it is important to avoid blaming climate change for everything. Many challenges exist irrespective of global warming, even though it often increases stress. In general, one should not present

the entire exercise as a climate change analysis, but rather put the development of the community at the core and talk about what the local population can actively do to confront climate risks. Fifth, any analysis should be followed by monitoring and evaluation on the implementation of adaptation options, and very few mainstreaming tools provide useful guidance on this issue. Yet monitoring and evaluation of adaptation efforts is important, as there is a risk that the results of a climate risk assessment will not be taken seriously, and that substantial changes will not be made.

This last point is related to the additional challenge of institutional support, without which it is difficult to follow-up on initial assessments and implement adaptation measures. Mainstreaming should therefore not only happen at the project-level, but also at the institutional level. This process is very distinct from the project-level integration of climate risks described above and is not the focus of this article. However, it is worth noting that the development of a project-level mainstreaming tool or the adjustment of an existing tool for the specific purposes of any given organization can be a valuable exercise for raising awareness on climate change within an organization, and create the necessary support for its mainstreaming the issue throughout an entire institution. It goes without saying that good communication, an open and forward-looking institutional culture, and the right mix of incentives are crucial for a sustainable integration of climate risks into an organisations strategy.

5. Conclusions

This article has argued that it is both important and feasible to integrate aspects of climate risk into development projects. Global climate change is already being felt most acutely by vulnerable and poor communities and its impacts threaten the achievement of development objectives. Adaptation, disaster risk reduction and development are therefore highly intertwined concepts that should be treated simultaneously rather than through separate interventions. This is not easy in practice. Yet the recent boom of guidance documents and tools has provided development practitioners with useful support for the mainstreaming of climate change at different organizational levels and different stages of the project cycle. CRiSTAL, Tearfund's CEDRA and CARE's CVCA are among the most prominent tools developed by NGOs.

The use of these tools is practical, context-driven and flexible, fosters participation by communities, increases their ownership of development interventions and creates awareness among both beneficiaries and development agents. There are numerous challenges, though, and they translate into the following success factors:

1. The use of any tool needs to be adapted to local circumstances.
2. Enough time should be allocated for the proper preparation and application of a tool, the implementation of resulting adaptation options, and their monitoring and evaluating.
3. The capacities required to conduct a mainstreaming assessment needs to be built through appropriate trainings.
4. Institutional support for the entire process is crucial, and requires the mainstreaming of climate change at the organizational level.
5. Careful communication is required. Climate risks should neither be oversimplified nor overstated, but be well understood and explained. Local options to confront climate risks should be emphasized and strengthened.

If these conditions can be met, integrating climate change into development projects can contribute directly and sustainably to a reduction of both poverty and vulnerability.

References

OECD 2009: Integrating Climate Change Adaptation into Development Co-operation. Policy Guidance. OECD: Paris.

All articles of the Rural Development News are available on www.agridea-international.ch/RDN