



## **BRIEFING NOTE**

# Progress and Challenges in Achieving Vertical Integration in Adaptation Processes

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## **Introduction**

The quality and effectiveness of a National Adaptation Plan (NAP) process largely depends on the extent to which it represents the realities of climate change at local levels and supports their adaptation efforts. In 2015, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Paris Agreement emphasized the essential role that local actors play in getting adaptation right (UNFCCC, 2015). More recently, grassroots social movements have further advanced the idea that climate justice needs to be an intrinsic element of climate action. A core part of this is creating spaces and opportunities for local voices, experiences, and priorities to shape policy conversations. Against this background, vertical integration, or “the process of creating intentional and strategic linkages between national and sub-national adaptation planning, implementation and monitoring & evaluation” (Dazé et al., 2016, p. 4), is as important as ever in conceptualizing and implementing strategies to adapt to the impacts of climate change.

Sub-national authorities, local organizations, and citizens are crucial in undertaking adaptation efforts because they help align national climate strategies with the needs, perspectives, and aspirations of cities, towns, and communities. Vertical integration is about linking these actors with

decision-makers who are guiding national-level adaptation efforts, thereby creating opportunities for participation in the NAP process by diverse stakeholders. In this way, vertical integration helps ensure inclusivity and representation in adaptation processes.

Recognizing vertical integration as a top priority for NAP processes, in 2016 the NAP Global Network published a guidance note (Dazé et al., 2016) aimed at supporting national governments in linking national and sub-national adaptation processes. Building on its insights, the objective of this briefing note is to reflect on the experiences of several countries with vertical integration since then. We reflect on what is working well, what is proving particularly difficult, and how to move forward. Publishing this note is pertinent now because vertical integration practices are increasingly emerging. We hope it will help identify good practices and provide lessons for countries in their ongoing and future efforts on vertical integration.

## What Is Vertical Integration in NAP Processes?

Vertical integration is relevant throughout the NAP process: that is, in adaptation planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Establishing and nurturing cross-scalar links during these phases supports strong communication, engagement, and representation among all stakeholders.

Fostering these links relies on four key enabling factors, as illustrated in Figure 1:

- Securing financing mechanisms that reach sub-national levels
- Establishing institutional arrangements that support dialogue across scales
- Encouraging the generation and sharing of information among stakeholders
- Developing the capacity of actors at all levels.



Vertical integration is rooted in collaboration.

**Figure 1. Vertical integration in the NAP process**



Source: NAP Global Network, 2021.

Moving from theory to practice is not easy when it comes to vertical integration. With so many NAPs still in their formulation or early implementation stages in a large number of countries, there is as yet insufficient evidence of best practices. However, recognizing the importance of vertical integration, governments are more explicitly and frequently making attempts to integrate adaptation ideas, policies, and practices across national and sub-national levels. As such, this represents an opportune time to reflect on experiences in effectively achieving vertical integration and explore how early lessons can be leveraged to accelerate efforts going forward.

**Why Vertical Integration in NAP Processes?**

Vertical integration in NAP processes is important because it can facilitate an ongoing, constructive exchange between stakeholders across scales. When sub-national actors can navigate the governance landscape mandated to determine adaptation priorities, plans, and actions, they will be more willing and able to contribute to, and feel ownership of, the country's adaptation efforts. By the same token, national governments benefit by having better access to

local knowledge and the involvement of sub-national actors in the implementation of adaptation priorities—nevertheless, to do so, state actors need to gain citizens' trust and make them feel represented by political institutions (Kulin & Johansson Sevä, 2021). Incorporating the views of local actors, particularly minorities and disenfranchised groups, in the adaptation debate is both a fundamental role and an aim of vertical integration in adaptation processes.

A sound vertical integration process also helps align a country's adaptation efforts with UNFCCC principles and those of other sustainable development agendas, such as participation, representation, transparency, and gender responsiveness.

## The Added Benefits of Vertical Integration

In this section, we highlight how vertical integration can advance the key pillars of just and effective NAP processes. Specifically, these are gender equality and gender responsiveness; inclusive knowledge and more balanced power dynamics; and promoting decentralization and participation.

### Gender Equality and Gender Responsiveness

A project or policy that recognizes that women, men, and nonbinary people are impacted differently by climate change—not only as separate groups but also as individuals based on their personal circumstances (age, income, marital status, livelihood)—will be more responsive to people's needs, and hence more effective. The gender dynamics that cause people of different genders to be impacted in distinct ways vary from place to place and are context specific. Designing adaptation policies, as well as planning and implementing the resulting initiatives, should consider these dynamics and use this knowledge to make adaptation more inclusive and representative, thus promoting gender equality.

A vertically integrated structure that encourages conversations between national, provincial, and local levels of government and non-state actors—and that explores the gender-differentiated impacts and their subsequent responses—can link and unite these various visions and ensure that adaptation is gender-responsive. Sex-disaggregated data combined with a growing understanding of the importance of gender dynamics through participatory gender analyses can help define and reflect gender equality principles in adaptation policies and practice. In Kiribati, for example, a detailed understanding of gender dynamics has helped shape its Joint Implementation Plan for Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management (akin to a NAP) and to mandate its governance in a gender-inclusive manner (Government of Kiribati, 2019).

Concretely, we propose three guiding principles to ensure that the vertical integration process is gender responsive (NAP GN & UNFCCC, 2019):

- Acknowledgement that needs and capacities differ based on a person's gender
- Equal participation and influence in adaptation decision-making processes, regardless of a person's gender
- Equal access to resources (financial and otherwise) resulting from investments in adaptation, regardless of a person's gender

## Inclusive Knowledge and More Balanced Power Dynamics

Governments tend to welcome some types of knowledge more than others in deciding what adaptation measures to prioritize. The convenience of investing in fewer but bigger projects (e.g., infrastructure) rather than in many smaller ones (e.g., community-level capacity-strengthening workshops) is attractive to governments and donor countries for a range of reasons, such as perceived economies of scale, optics, tangibility, and risk tolerance. The same preference applies to funding projects that deliver concrete outputs (e.g., a UNFCCC-mandated report written by a consultant) rather than those whose results may have less obvious politically tangible weight (e.g., a community-based consultation on intra-household relations as a result of climate change impacts).

But these preferences do not always benefit local communities, even if they are the ones who should gain most directly from adaptation investments. On the contrary, and disappointingly, adaptation interventions are frequently framed in a top-down manner that benefits elite groups (Eriksen et al., 2021).

Indeed, existing adaptation power dynamics tend to deprioritize and even undermine the role of local knowledge in adaptation decision making. Such knowledge, however, is tremendously important in ensuring that adaptation initiatives are not only relevant and effective but also representative. Through vertical integration efforts, multi-level structures can be created to encourage a constructive discussion and governance of the objectives and priorities of adaptation projects implemented locally while recognizing the importance and benefit of incorporating them into the “big picture” of a national strategy.

Similarly, creating channels through which local actors can contribute their views on adaptation can help governments reconsider their limited appetite for risk as they become aware of the important contributions of local knowledge to making adaptation investments more effective.

## Promoting Decentralization and Participation

Climate change impacts are most directly realized at the local level, revealing how global changes can cause geographically and socially differentiated risks that call for more locally led adaptation action. As such, a process of decentralization—of shifting decision-making power from the central government to sub-national authorities—can increase the impact and effectiveness of adaptation.

Decentralization does not mean the disappearance of national government from local adaptation efforts. Indeed, national governments have a strong role to play in making adaptation efforts well-coordinated and efficient. They can support the creation of an environment where citizens are able to participate in climate governance, promoting the engagement of disenfranchised and marginalized groups (Ziervogel et al., 2019). Decentralization, after all, is not just about devolving administrative functions but also about strengthening civic participation—a crucial element for successful vertical integration.

# What We Are Learning From Country Experiences With Vertical Integration

While numerous countries have been experimenting for years with the vertical integration of adaptation efforts, collecting case studies on the topic has proven challenging because experiences are ongoing, evolving, and anecdotal. Assessing vertical integration efforts is also complex because what we are looking for is somewhat elusive: a demonstration of how certain adaptation principles, ideas, and, ultimately, actions, flow between sub-national and national levels.

We believe that the following findings will be helpful for **moving vertical integration efforts from theory to practice**.

**1. Enhancing the representation of marginalized groups, including women, in adaptation processes ensures local voices and agendas are adequately represented in national conversations.** These connections can often be facilitated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or other organizations already established in climate change circles. It is important for these brokers to strive to generate a sustained process of engagement and not a one-off opportunity. The latter may fall short of a real opportunity for these marginalized groups to influence adaptation processes and, instead, represent a tokenistic exercise.

In **Malawi**, efforts have been made to bring the views of small-scale women farmers to the national stage to inform the development of the country's NAP. The aim has been to promote an accurate reflection of local needs in national adaptation policies and plans. This will have benefits in relation to representation but also, it is hoped, in increasing the effectiveness of adaptation efforts. In our example, an established national NGO provided a bridge and legitimacy to a group of small-scale women farmers who lacked formal status or influence in climate change circles. The NGO connected this group to national and international forums, like the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP), showing that navigating institutional structures to make connections across levels of governance is a worthwhile time investment.

A strong institutional infrastructure that feeds the voices of marginalized groups upwards to policy and planning and influences adaptation processes is a fundamental aspect of vertical integration.

**2. Enhancing the representation of marginalized groups, including women, in adaptation processes also increases the accountability of government officials and leads to more tailored and responsive adaptation solutions.** Forming alliances between these marginalized groups and decision-makers is important not only from a rights and representation perspective but also to better target adaptation policies and practice toward vulnerability reduction.

In **Botswana**, during the late 2010s, a series of workshops aimed at identifying climate risks and planning adaptation responses brought together stakeholders from local communities, district planning officers, academics, and national-level decision-makers. The carefully facilitated conversations enabled district and national officials to better understand the challenges faced



Coalition of Women Farmers (COWFA) representatives held meetings with numerous organizations and decision-makers at the UNFCCC COP 21 in Paris in 2015. Photo: CISONECC

by communities—and women in particular—resulting from the increasingly frequent and longer droughts. Direct interaction between decision-makers and citizens (along with the high-level media profile that the event attracted) can likewise reinforce the officials' sense of accountability. In addition, the meetings helped envision the type of responses necessary to help reduce the vulnerability of groups most at risk. The experience led the national government to mandate the same participatory process across all the country's districts (International Development Research Centre, 2020).

It is in the best interest of governmental actors to build alliances with civil society organizations (CSOs) that represent the interests of most affected or marginalized groups—their perspectives can help develop new, urgent ideas needed to build resilience, and together they can find common ground for action.

**3. Decentralization can help make adaptation policies more targeted, but it must be accompanied by resources to enable local governments to succeed.** Indeed, autonomy and power cannot translate into meaningful action without the financial means and technical capacities to back them up.

**Ghana's** process of decentralization is providing valuable opportunities for an empowered role for local-level stakeholders, including political, scientific, and civil society actors. Gradual decentralization has increased stakeholders' power to undertake adaptation and promote good practices upwards. It has led to more effective participation of stakeholders and more autonomy in adaptation decision making at the local level.

However, this progress has also highlighted the need to strengthen the institutional arrangements that should link the local to national levels. Without increasing the allocation of resources to local governments and increasing their capacities (e.g., to better understand climate-related risks and

responses, or to mainstream climate resilience criteria across sectors and local action plans), the potential of decentralization will remain largely untapped (Musah-Surugu et al., 2019). A series of official workshops held in 2018 to promote the elaboration of Ghana's NAP also revealed important shortcomings at the local level that could jeopardize the sound implementation of adaptation actions. These included the insufficient capacity of local government staff and the absence of environmental officers in metropolitan, municipal, and district assemblies (Mensah-Kutin, 2019).

**4. The existence of local institutional structures to promote adaptation is not enough—they must be run justly and with a long-term perspective.** The expectation that Local Adaptation Plans of Action (LAPAs) in **Nepal** would be vehicles for promoting the visions of communities in adaptation action has been only partially met. While progress has been made, the process has been impaired by influence exerted by local elites (e.g., higher castes) and insufficient participation of women (Maharjan, 2019; Vij et al., 2018). Furthermore, the potential of LAPAs has been hindered by a project-based approach and by insufficient funding commitments, both of which have resulted in isolated and uncoordinated adaptation efforts that produced only short-term benefits.

Dovetailing the LAPAs into Nepal's NAP process will be a critical test that highlights the significant challenge of combining the large diversity of local adaptation visions with a national-level big picture of climate resilience. Well-functioning, well-resourced local institutions can help ensure the prioritization of adaptation issues relevant to local and marginalized actors.

This is a challenge well recognized by national authorities, who see the coordination with provincial and local governments as a priority and a make-or-break factor for making adaptation efforts strategic in the context of the country's development (Ministry of Forests and Environment, 2018). Nepal's experience has shown that strong institutional links between local and provincial (sub-national) planning processes are necessary for a sound, effective adaptation.

**5. Limited access to and control over funding at sub-national levels can reduce local governments' and communities' sense of ownership of adaptation initiatives.** Access to adaptation funding is a key challenge globally, with under 10% of international climate finance reaching local levels (Soanes et al., 2017), making adaptation efforts top-down. Increasing the amount of adaptation funding that actually reaches communities—while securing national and multilateral commitments to allow local management and control of resources—can make adaptation initiatives more targeted and representative of people's needs. It can also help strengthen local adaptation projects and build the evidence base and trust in community-backed projects, which will help them scale up.

In **Cambodia**, the Local Climate Adaptive Living Facility (LoCAL) funding mechanism has enabled the implementation of over 250 adaptation measures in 85 districts, for a total investment of USD 3.5 million. The effort has also strengthened capacities at district and local levels and integrated climate criteria into sub-national plans and investment programs (De Coninck, 2021; L. Amatucci, personal communication, September 13, 2021). Addressing this imbalance by boosting the availability of adaptation funding at local levels (and increasing the influence of local stakeholders on the allocation of these investments) is critical and aligned with the well-accepted premise that adaptation is local and context specific.



## **6. National leaders can be instrumental in promoting and validating the views of local actors and in creating a constructive flow across levels of governance.**

In Peru, the recovery and application of Indigenous ancestral practices have been spearheaded not only by Indigenous and peasant communities (together with local NGOs) but also by the national government.

In the early 2010s, the ancestral method to harvest rainwater and recharge aquifers, called *qocha*, was piloted to test its effectiveness under the new social and climate realities of the 21st century. In parallel, NGOs commissioned hydro-geological studies to test the approach and assess its suitability. Without Western science adding legitimacy and evidence of effectiveness, the government would most likely have been uninterested in upscaling its implementation. However, this marriage of Indigenous and Western knowledge facilitated the promotion of *qocha* uptake in both practice and policy. The leadership of a newly appointed Vice-Minister of Agriculture at the time was fundamental in promoting Indigenous knowledge and in the subsequent creation of an executive unit within the Ministry of Agriculture, called Sierrazul (L. Angulo, personal communication, August 12, 2020). Sierrazul promotes Indigenous knowledge and the principle of interculturality, and bridges national and local governments.

## **7. Using simple and inclusive language when talking about adaptation invites all stakeholders to contribute their knowledge, forming a vision that is representative of diverse social groups.**

There are important differences in the way people conceptualize adaptation and its intended goals. An adaptation strategy formulated at the national level alone will be incomplete unless it is open to—and willing to incorporate—the perspectives, visions, and sources of knowledge of various stakeholders. A functional approach to land management that prioritizes production and income generation in the short term, for instance, may be at odds with the local or Indigenous principle of landscape stewardship. It is through co-development of strategies and actions that an optimal adaptation response can be conceived.

It is not unusual for national-level policy-makers to misunderstand or pay insufficient attention to the vision and objectives of communities in relation to climate-related challenges. These can be seen as “irrelevant” or disregarded as a sign of “climate illiteracy” of local stakeholders. By the same token, national strategies may appear distant and unconnected to the experiences of local communities, complicating the local ownership of its goals. A balanced interaction of stakeholders across levels of governance can lead to a sound adaptation strategy—one that is both meaningful at local levels and aligned with national priorities.

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Building a qocha. Photo: Martin Laurenceau/Water Alternatives ([CC BY-NC 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/))

**8. Forming diverse partnerships and collaborating in research processes can increase awareness of national-level policy-makers about local realities and encourage the implementation of innovative, well-targeted adaptation actions.** Partnerships between government, research institutions, communities, and CSOs are important because they help fill knowledge gaps and make adaptation agendas more relevant and representative.

A study analyzing the results of a research program implemented in various African countries, for example, found that co-developing action-research initiatives with multiple stakeholders enhances the possibility that research findings are used in policy and practice (Harvey et al., 2021).

These types of inclusive partnerships attract buy-in from policy-makers and can enable local actors, through researchers, to highlight the local-level impacts of climate change on people's lives and livelihoods. This flow is essential for making adaptation efforts relevant at local levels.

## Recommendations

Having explored the theory and practice of facilitating vertical integration, as well as how vertical integration can support broader sustainability goals, this section presents recommendations for doing so.

### **1. Use knowledge brokers to bridge national and local visions of adaptation through constructive dialogue.**

National governments benefit from using knowledge of local actors in national adaptation planning processes. Doing so helps build a strong foundation for the NAP while promoting climate justice.

However, this interaction often presents challenges. On one hand, local actors may find NAP processes to be too big, technical, or abstract for them to care about, and as a result they may

wrongfully perceive that they cannot offer valuable contributions. By the same token, national decision-makers may find local-level input too narrow and context specific to be relevant for inserting in a national frame, and this misjudgment can lead to important gaps in a country's strategy.

Knowledge brokers play a crucial role in facilitating a cross-scalar (vertical) collaboration of the adaptation efforts led by national governments. This can help prevent possible apathy by both local and national stakeholders—and, alternatively, help garner their commitment to crafting a national adaptation strategy that welcomes and gains from multiple sources of knowledge.

Recognizing the benefits of this joint undertaking will help push a common agenda forward. For instance, understanding local gender dynamics and integrating the implications of these dynamics in policy design can help address gender inequalities at community/urban levels while making adaptation efforts more effective.

Similarly, Western science's legitimization of Indigenous knowledge may be an incentive for national decision-makers and/or international donors to scale up that practice, as Peru's experience with *qochas* has shown. In that case, collaboration increased the chance of uptake and made the adaptation initiative more rounded, rigorous, and ambitious.

## **2. Local authorities and CSOs should be empowered to influence adaptation processes through a functioning institutional setup, stronger mandates, and capacity building.**

By design, vertical integration processes expose power differentials between scales of government and between state and non-state actors. But the richness of these interactions is precisely what can make adaptation measures more meaningful and representative. Vertical integration efforts should aim to encourage opportunities for participation in adaptation planning and implementation processes, carefully navigating power imbalances to enable a negotiation among equals.

One way to navigate power imbalances is by granting mandates to local governments and CSOs in adaptation processes. Peru's Indigenous Climate Platform is an example of officializing Indigenous Peoples' voices in the framing of adaptation priorities. This nascent initiative is worth following as a case study: Will the national government's efforts to incorporate local and Indigenous knowledge in adaptation be accompanied by a long-lasting handover of mandate/power to civil society actors?

Furthermore, it is a fundamental aspect of just adaptation to ensure that funds positively impact disenfranchised populations at the local level and that opportunities are created for adaptation actions to be led by local actors. However, governments frequently do not have the tools to understand and assess the impact, if any, that adaptation finance is having on local communities (Coger et al., 2021). Funding from national governments and global donors would be well invested if it promotes a dynamic enabling environment that supports transparency and collaboration vertically—and consequently prevents the predominance of top-down adaptation decisions.

Similarly, decentralization initiatives should be accompanied by capacity-strengthening programs aimed at local officials. Skilled and resourced local staff will be able to better engage with local communities and facilitate their participation in planning and implementing adaptation. They will also be able to interact more effectively with national government officials.

### **3. Strengthen communication between local and national adaptation processes to overcome the “projectization” of adaptation.**

If links between local adaptation projects and national adaptation plans and policies are not intentionally made, the relevance of these projects will likely remain minimal and the importance of local knowledge in shaping adaptation could be missed by national decision-makers. National governments can turn these discrete actions into puzzle pieces that together tell the country's adaptation story and its next chapters.

To achieve good communication between actors across scales, there needs to be political will and institutions that facilitate it. However, the capacity of government officials at all levels must also be strengthened so that information and knowledge can flow constructively both ways and be put to use. Capacity-strengthening efforts should address biases created by power differentials and misconceptions about the importance of gender, age, ethnicity, and other socially differentiating characteristics in designing adaptation measures.

### **4. Set up systems and partnerships that facilitate access to adaptation-related information and knowledge by policy-makers and non-researchers.**

Research is a critical component of effective adaptation, as it can help reveal the local-level risks, capacities, and vulnerabilities of communities that were unknown to government officials at the national, and even local, level. Research also contributes to understanding systemic flaws that could be preventing effective adaptation. However, despite these virtues, the relationship between government officials, researchers, and communities (citizens) is not always straightforward.

Awareness of the importance of making adaptation research more impact-oriented and more inclusive of the priorities and concerns of state and non-state stakeholders has led to changes in adaptation research in the last decade (see, for example, the Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia<sup>1</sup> or the Future Climate for Africa<sup>2</sup> programs). Encouraging the establishment of trusting, sustained relationships among researchers, governments, and communities is likely to advance the common goal of effective, just adaptation.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cariiaa.net/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://futureclimateafrica.org/>

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Julius Ng'oma (CISONECC)

Kosal Sar (UNCDF LoCAL)

Natalie Watson



**NAP  
Global  
Network**

**Coordinating Climate-Resilient Development**

[www.napglobalnetwork.org](http://www.napglobalnetwork.org)

[info@napglobalnetwork.org](mailto:info@napglobalnetwork.org)

 [@NAP\\_Network](https://twitter.com/NAP_Network)

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