Envisioning Resilience:

What we're learning about creative methods for policy dialogue on adaptation

NAP Global Network

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Climate Action for Resilience & Empowerment

Introduction

From its establishment under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2010, the national adaptation plan (NAP) process was envisioned as a participatory process that addresses issues of gender equality and social inclusion. This aim is captured in the guiding principles for the NAP process (Least Developed Countries Expert Group, 2012; UNFCCC, 2011) and in supplementary guidance developed for countries as they move forward on adaptation planning, implementation, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (see for example, NAP Global Network & UNFCCC, 2019). Considerable effort has been invested in establishing coordination mechanisms across sectors and levels of government and, in some cases, to bring non-governmental entities such as private sector actors and civil society organizations into the process. However, considerable challenges remain in ensuring that people who are typically underrepresented in decision making—due to gender inequalities and/or discrimination on the basis of racialization, Indigeneity, disability, or other identity factors—have a voice in NAP processes.

Over the last 2 years, the NAP Global Network has been working with partners in Africa and the Caribbean to create Envisioning Resilience, an initiative that aims to amplify underrepresented women's voices in climate change adaptation planning. Envisioning Resilience was developed in collaboration with Lensational, a non-profit social enterprise that

aims to elevate the voices of women from underrepresented groups and communities using visual storytelling (Lensational, 2023), and more recently with GirlsCARE, a young women-led feminist climate activist movement seeking to support young women and girls through mentorship to enhance their capacity to support and lead in climate action (GirlsCARE, 2023). Together, we have tested and refined an approach involving training for groups of women that enables them to develop visual stories that document their lived experience with climate change and their visions of resilience. The visual stories are then used as a basis for dialogue with adaptation decision-makers in their countries.

The first three phases of Envisioning Resilience were implemented in Ghana, Kenya, and Jamaica. Each country's context presented unique challenges and opportunities, allowing us to learn and further refine the approach. As we prepare to expand and adapt the initiative in the coming years, we wanted to share some of what has been learned so far, in hopes that it helps to build the case for meaningful participation in NAP processes. We also hope to inspire others to use creative means to promote dialogue among decision-makers and people on the front lines of climate change, particularly women and other groups who are often left out of adaptation decision-making processes.

Background

Adaptation to climate change is an ongoing process of assessing and managing risks, adjusting to changes, and taking action to build resilience to future impacts. Confronting the impacts of climate change requires diverse knowledge and perspectives, including Indigenous and local knowledge (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022; Pörtner et al., 2022). Local actors play a key role in driving adaptation efforts that are effective and sustainable (Mfitumukiza et al., 2020; Pörtner et al., 2022), and learning is at the centre of adaptation (IPCC, 2022; Pörtner et al., 2022), requiring processes that enhance adaptive capacity through dialogue and co-production of knowledge.

All of these aspects of adaptation are addressed in the UNFCCC process—for example, in the Paris Agreement, which calls for adaptation action to be participatory and gender responsive, consider vulnerable groups and communities, and incorporate Indigenous and local knowledge (UNFCCC, 2015). The Action for Climate Empowerment agenda under the UNFCCC acknowledges the importance of public participation in climate action (UNFCCC, 2015, 2021; UNFCCC Subsidiary Body for Implementation, 2012). The UNFCCC Gender Action Plan recognizes that "full, meaningful, and equal participation and leadership of women … is vital for achieving long-term climate goals" (UNFCCC, 2019, p. 1).

Given their participatory and iterative nature, NAP processes represent a key opportunity to facilitate the meaningful engagement of diverse actors in adaptation decision making (Least Developed Countries Expert Group, 2012; UNFCCC, 2011). Countries are working to put this into practice: almost three quarters of NAP documents submitted to the UNFCCC as of October 2023 include a guiding principle focusing on participation (NAP Trends, 2023). This need is

further validated by the IPCC, which stated with high confidence that adaptation outcomes are more effective and sustainable if they are embedded in inclusive governance systems that prioritize equity and justice. Further, the IPCC emphasizes the importance of co-learning platforms that bring together different stakeholders, with a focus on the meaningful participation of marginalized and vulnerable groups (IPCC, 2022). The evidence base clearly shows that adaptation planning at the national level must be informed by the perspectives of people on the front lines of climate change and grounded in equitable and meaningful participation in decision making.

However, several challenges may pose barriers to inclusive, participatory NAP processes. Even with the best intentions, governments may lack the time, human and financial resources, and skills needed to facilitate meaningful engagement processes that are inclusive of people who face discrimination. There are multiple forms of language barriers, including the inaccessibility of the technical jargon associated with climate change and the challenge of translating relevant information and concepts into local languages. Indigenous and local knowledge may not be viewed as valuable to conversations about climate change (Brondízio et al., 2021; Byskov & Hyams, 2018; Filho et al., 2022). People who are younger and/or lack formal education related to climate change may not be seen as having relevant expertise or may doubt their own ability to contribute (Chan et al., 2020; Singh & Lakhani, 2022; United Nations, 2010).

Creative methods such as visual storytelling can help overcome some of these challenges by providing an innovative way to bring a human face to discussions about adaptation. These images provide a new, authentic view of the issues, which has been found to be powerful in communicating about climate change (Corner et al., 2016). Using images and stories as the basis for policy dialogue enables people affected by climate change—rather than the decision-makers—to set the agenda. Visual stories can help to bridge different knowledge systems and provide a common language to discuss adaptation issues, placing people at the centre and enabling a dialogue that revolves around their lived experiences and priorities for managing climate risks. What is more, images and stories have the power to trigger emotional responses, which is an important lever for changing behaviours (Rare Center for Behaviour & the Environment, 2021).

The Envisioning Resilience Approach

The Envisioning Resilience approach involves working with a small group of women with a demonstrated interest in climate change issues and a desire to develop their skills in photography and storytelling as tools for advocacy. These trainees participate in a program that is collaboratively delivered by a local partner (GirlsCARE, in the case of Jamaica), one or more professional photographers, and the Lensational team, supported by the NAP Global Network. The training program includes the technical aspects of photography, photojournalism principles and approaches, and techniques for effective storytelling. Local partners and external experts contribute knowledge on climate change, helping trainees to understand available scientific information and how it links to their experiences. They also bring insights on the NAP process and opportunities for participation, alongside the NAP Global Network.

Over the course of a few months, the trainees build their skills in photography and iteratively develop the concept for their story, with ongoing mentoring and input from the training team. At the end of the training program, each trainee has developed an individual story that captures their experiences with climate change and their visions of resilience. Additionally, the group has collaborated to create a collective story to be shared with adaptation decision-makers at the policy dialogue, drawing from the individual stories to create a narrative and visual journey that brings their experiences together.

The policy dialogue brings the trainees together with adaptation decision-makers from government, civil society, development partners, and the private sector. The trainees' photos are displayed in an exhibition that provides the backdrop for the discussions. The collective story is presented by the trainees, followed by round table dialogues where participants can ask questions, discuss, and learn from the women's experiences. The intention of the dialogue is to develop a shared understanding of the effects of climate change on the trainees' lives and the adaptation priorities for their communities. The session closes with reflections from participants on what they have heard and how it has changed their mindset around adaptation to climate change and the role of women and local actors.

Another unique aspect of the approach is the income-generating opportunity presented by the sale of the photos on the Lensational website. Each of the trainees' photo essays is posted to the website, with viewers having the option to purchase the photos for personal or editorial use. The proceeds from the sale of the photos are shared between Lensational and the individual photographers.

An overview of the approach is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Envisioning Resilience approach

Training   Development of   Policy   Income
                  visual stories   dialogue   generation

Source: Training: Jik-Reuben Pringle (2023). Development of visual stories: Brian Siambi (2022). Policy dialogue: Jik-Reuben Pringle (2023). Income generation: Dennis Nipah (2021).

What the Visual Stories Tell Us

The contexts in which we have implemented Envisioning Resilience to date differ significantly in terms of landscapes, types of communities, and socio-economic situations. The trainees' stories take place in arid regions and lush coastal zones, large cities and remote villages and include subjects from Indigenous communities and other specific social groups. Despite this diversity, some common themes emerge across the visual stories that are relevant to thinking about approaches to adaptation more broadly. Importantly, these are aligned with scientific evidence regarding what works for effective adaptation. These themes are presented below, along with a discussion of their importance for NAP processes.

The Differential Impacts of Climate Change on People of Different Genders and Social Groups

Adaptation decision-makers must be aware of the ways in which the impacts of climate change affect different people in different ways. Individual and community stories can bring these variations to the forefront, providing a more nuanced understanding of the factors that make some people more vulnerable than others, as well as the knowledge and resources that local actors are employing in the face of climate change. In prioritizing adaptation actions, these unique lived experiences and differing opportunities and capacities must be taken into account, with targeted actions and measures to ensure equity in access to information, opportunities for participation, and benefits across different groups.

In documenting the impacts of climate change in their communities, the trainees skillfully illustrated the ways that climate change impacts different people based on factors such as gender

Northern Ghana: "Kawasude tills a drought-ravaged land belonging to her mother. The once fertile and thriving land of Mrs. Teni is now barren, and the few surviving crops are … small stumps and twigs sticking out of the ground. Mrs. Teni used to have tomato and pepper plants that bore enough for them to sell in the Tamale market. With the lack of rainfall and no way to irrigate, the crops have perished, and the family now make weekly trips to Navrongo in search of produce to sell."

© Dorcas Abban
Envisioning Resilience Trainee, Ghana

and socio-economic status. Several of the stories in Kenya and Ghana emphasized gender dimensions, highlighting how women's lives and livelihoods are affected by climate hazards such as droughts and floods. In Jamaica, some trainees explored the ways in which social exclusion and marginalization, on the basis of religious and political beliefs or poverty, influence how people experience the effects of climate change. This is supported by the scientific evidence base: the IPCC notes that vulnerability is multi-dimensional and dynamic and that it is "shaped by intersecting historical and contemporary political, economic, and cultural processes of marginalization" (Pörtner et al., 2022, p. 52).

Non-Climatic Factors That Exacerbate Vulnerability to Climate Change

Though primarily focused on climate change, the trainees' stories also draw out other issues that interact with climate risks to increase vulnerability. In Jamaica, for example, one of the stories focused on water issues in a disadvantaged neighbourhood on the outskirts of Kingston, highlighting how infrastructural challenges and crime and violence intersect with decreasing water availability to exacerbate the water crisis for this poor inner-city neighbourhood. In the rural Jamaican community profiled in another story, the absence of plumbing infrastructure heightens the dependence on rainwater harvesting from now more erratic rainfall. In another example, in Ghana, one of the stories showcased how poor planning for urban infrastructure and development further increased flooding.

"Raymond, a resident of Gordon Lane [in Kingston, Jamaica], is seen pushing his own cart, loaded with water-filled pails, by hand. Raymond has been extending his assistance to nearby neighbours for a long time now, sourcing water from neighbouring communities in the same way my son does and bringing it back on his own cart. Over the years, the walk to nearby communities for water has proven an increasingly difficult task. Neighbourhood turf wars on the path to water were getting in the way. Raymond continued to source water for others in Gordon Lane who were reluctant to make the journey."

© Dannelle Fraser
Envisioning Resilience Trainee, Jamaica

What this means is that efforts to manage climate risks must go hand in hand with efforts to address the underlying causes of vulnerability (Hammill & McGray, 2018). According to the IPCC, "integrated, multi-sectoral solutions that address social inequities … and cut across systems, increase the feasibility and effectiveness of adaptation in multiple sectors" (IPCC, 2022, p. 23). For adaptation decision-makers, this requires a holistic approach to adaptation and a solid understanding of the context, both in terms of the climate risks that are affecting the community and the socio-economic factors that influence people's adaptive capacity.

The Contribution of Social Networks to Adaptive Capacity

Many of the visual stories focus on relationships among people: women forming mutual support groups, Rastafarians developing a community space, and traders and other service workers engaging in collective efforts to support their livelihoods. Though not always explicitly mentioned, the idea that these social networks are important for individual and community adaptation to climate change is evident. For example, in the Rastafarian Indigenous community in Montego Bay, Jamaica, the community members are engaged in communal farming using traditional methods that conserve water and reduce heat stress in plants. This aspect of the stories aligns with the literature on adaptive capacity, where early framings emphasized the role of social capital (see, for example, Brooks & Adger, 2004). More recently, the IPCC noted that "common goals and social learning build adaptive capacity for climate-resilient development" (IPCC, 2022, p. 33). They also highlight the role of social movements in catalyzing responses to climate change (Pörtner et al., 2022).

"A group of women convene for a kitty contribution meeting [in Esiteti, Kenya].

Their community is facing a lot of drought related challenges, so these women have joined forces in groups of twenty to twenty-five.

They know the drought is going to last for a while, so each person puts in a small amount of money, from twenty to one hundred Kenyan shillings, into a shared fund. This way, they can buy important things, especially food like sugar.

They really value sugar because they think it gives them and their kids the energy they need, even when they can't have regular meals. By helping each other and being resourceful, these women are trying to support themselves and their families during the ongoing drought."

© Claire Metito
Envisioning Resilience Trainee, Kenya

For adaptation decision-makers, a recognition that social networks are essential for adaptive capacity can motivate investments in local institutions and build support for community-based organizations as essential adaptation actors. Many of the adaptation priorities that are identified through NAP processes will be implemented at the local level, where subnational government authorities will need to work in collaboration with non-governmental actors. A better understanding of existing local organizations and networks, including informal ones, can help to ensure that adaptation efforts build on existing capacities and are institutionalized over time (World Resources Institute, 2023).

Where to Find the Visual Stories

To view all of the photo essays developed by the Envisioning Resilience trainees, please visit the Lensational website: Envisioning Resilience Photo Essays

Individual photos can be purchased directly on the website, with proceeds shared between Lensational and the photographers.

What We're Learning

Reflecting on our experiences in Ghana, Jamaica, and Kenya, we identified the following key lessons that we feel are important for adaptation decision-makers involved in NAP processes, as well as for organizations working to influence adaptation processes in their countries.

Photography and storytelling are powerful tools for enhancing the agency of people affected by climate change so they can engage in adaptation decision making.

The Envisioning Resilience approach involves integrated training that combines a number of different elements, including technical aspects of photography, storytelling techniques, learning about climate change, and building social cohesion among the trainees. We have observed that this helps to enhance agency, which can be understood as "the capacity of an individual to actively and independently choose and to affect change" (Open Education Sociology Dictionary, 2023). Though it is difficult to precisely define (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), in practice, agency has been described as having both formal and informal components (Sterrett, n.d.). The intention of the training was to work in the formal sphere by building knowledge, skills, and capabilities to enable the trainees to develop visual stories and communicate them to adaptation decision-makers. This has been achieved for the most part: the trainees have a better understanding of climate change and have become quite competent photographers and storytellers.

On a less tangible level are the changes in the informal sphere, which comprises confidence, self-esteem, and aspirations. These aspects were addressed not only through the training but also through the opportunity to share their stories with decision makers, having their perspectives

valued, and representing their communities in conversations about climate change and how their country should move forward. The trainees have not only been able to feed their knowledge into the discussions—they have also gained new language to talk about their experiences with climate change, as well as a better understanding of government decision-making processes. We have heard from trainees that they aspire to use the learning in future projects, whether this be pursuing paid work in photography, community engagement projects, or social entrepreneurship initiatives in their countries.

Engaging a small group of advocates in creative storytelling has ripple effects in their communities.

Though the number of trainees engaged in Envisioning Resilience is small, we have learned that the process has touched their communities, as well as the individuals involved. In developing their visual stories, the trainees engaged their family members, neighbours, and local leaders in conversations about climate change and how it is affecting people's lives and livelihoods. This created a process of participatory learning by community members, enabling a better understanding of climate change issues. As well, in explaining why they were undertaking this project, they shared with their community the opportunity they had to interact directly with decision-makers—this helped the subjects of the photos understand that their stories matter and that they should be heard by people with decision-making power. Community members welcomed their issues being presented to policy-makers and other national stakeholders with whom they otherwise would not have had an audience. The policy dialogues have also received media attention, providing further exposure to the approach and the trainees' stories.

Stories are powerful tools in shifting mindsets on the value of community knowledge and meaningful participation in adaptation decision making.

Though the principle of participation has been central to NAP processes from the outset, the value of community knowledge and meaningful participation for more effective adaptation may not be broadly recognized or fully appreciated. The visual stories shared with decision-makers at the policy dialogues had a powerful impact on them—in many cases, they seemed a bit surprised at how much they had learned from the process. The stories provided these experts in adaptation with new ways of thinking about climate risks and how they affect people, triggering an emotional response and grounding their theoretical knowledge in the lived experiences of the trainees and their communities. They saw how people are already taking action to protect their families and livelihoods from the impacts of climate change and gained new perspectives on what is important to build resilience at the community level.

At the same time, when discussing a topic as complex as climate change, it is important to link the stories to the scientific evidence base in order to dispel incorrect beliefs about why the changes are happening. Grounding the stories in science also strengthens their credibility and helps to ensure that they are not disregarded by decision-makers because they do not align with the best available evidence on climate change. The trainees were encouraged to pursue individual research to validate the climate dimensions of their stories with evidence from scientific sources. Undertaking

this research and building their own knowledge on climate change served to change the trainees' mindsets about the value of their own knowledge as a contribution to adaptation decision making. It also helped to clarify and cement more technical aspects of climate science that they previously found challenging to understand.

Creative methods can help in moving from "consultation" to "engagement" of people affected by climate change.

The literature on participation recognizes that approaches fall on a spectrum, with the provision of information (or, in the worst case, coercion) at one end and co-production at the other (Business Lab, 2020; National Co-production Advisory Group, 2021; Stewart, 2009). Consultation generally involves asking people for their opinions on a particular option or issue, often through one-off meetings or surveys where participants are invited to vote on their preferred choice. Engagement, on the other hand, is a more ongoing process that is grounded in dialogue, where people are invited to share their views in different ways and ideally have some influence over the decisions that are made (Business Lab, 2020; National Co-production Advisory Group, 2021).

Using creative methods, such as visual storytelling in policy dialogues, can be a starting point for making this shift from consultation to engagement. In the Envisioning Resilience model, the trainees drive the conversation, sharing their lived experiences and presenting what is important to them and their communities in managing the impacts of climate change. The decision-makers first listen and then engage in discussions around the stories they have heard, which can help to challenge their assumptions about adaptation and what matters to people on the frontlines of climate change. This has facilitated honest, open discussions about adaptation priorities at the local level and for specific groups of people. Though only an initial step, our government partners have communicated that they see the power of this approach in moving toward the meaningful participation of citizens in adaptation decision making. This type of inclusive engagement is an essential enabling factor for the NAP process (NAP Global Network, 2023).

Where Do We Want to Go?

Envisioning Resilience is just getting started. We have secured funds to continue this initiative over the coming 2 years, and we hope that this will lead to further expansion of the work in the future. We are looking forward to working with new partners and in different contexts to expand the collection of visual stories available while continuing to tailor and refine the approach and maintaining the focus on influencing conversations around the NAP process. Deepening the engagement of the government partners in the process leading up to the policy dialogue will also be a key focus as we move forward. At the same time, we are discussing with partners how we can build on the experience and learning developed in Ghana, Jamaica, and Kenya. This may involve support for the existing trainees to engage further in adaptation advocacy or the expansion of the program to bring in new cohorts of trainees. Further, we would like to explore other creative methods to generate dialogue among adaptation decision-makers and people on the frontlines of climate change, building on the Envisioning Resilience visual storytelling approach.

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