

LOCAL PARTICIPATION AMIDST CLIMATE SHOCKS

How Participatory Planning Supports Climate Security in Kenya

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Climate, Fragility, and Conflict

The Horn of Africa is [in the midst of a deepening and potentially catastrophic drought](#). One of the [predicted impacts of climate change](#), this unfolding crisis has combined with pre-existing conflicts, COVID-19, and increased pressure on food supply due to the war in Ukraine to sharply intensify humanitarian need. In the region, more than [22 million people](#) are currently experiencing extreme hunger. In addition the drought is fueling [cycles of violent conflict and climate vulnerability](#).

Researchers and policymakers have argued that effective, accountable and legitimate governance systems are vital for [breaking the link between climate change and conflict, due to their ability to effectively mediate competition over scarce resources](#). However, there is little evidence regarding how to effectively scale-up local governance interventions alongside broader efforts in supporting conflict-sensitive climate change adaptation.

Case study: Ward Development Planning in Kenya

Our case focuses on the Ward Development Plan model (WDP), a participatory intervention that been implemented in five arid and semi-arid lands counties facing extreme droughts in Northern Kenya, part of a USAID-funded program from 2017-2022.

The WDP model is a participatory planning and development process that seeks to strengthen community capacities to assess their own needs, and to prioritize, plan and implement their

projects. The model is inclusive along geographic and social lines through a locally representative Ward Planning Committee (WPC).

Mercy Corps' program evaluations suggest that the WDP model – as a participatory institution – [has increased the capacity of local communities to participate in resilience-oriented development planning and address conflict](#). The program has been recognized by Kenyan county governments as a model for replication, with multiple counties in advanced stages of considering legislation which would enshrine the WDP process in law.

Local Governance, Legitimacy, and the Ability to Address Climate-Related Conflicts

A key benefit of participatory governance is local legitimacy, which is important in [addressing intergroup conflict](#). The WDP intervention builds legitimacy in two ways.

Democratic selection

During selection, Mercy Corps convened community members in geographically distributed, participatory meetings to identify development priorities for their ward and to select members of Ward Planning Committees. These public and transparent events for selecting local representatives provide a rich institutional interface with the wider community, relative to voting alone. During these inclusive meetings, deliberation allows community members to make values-based arguments for and against WPC candidates, followed by public selection.

Embeddedness & social accountability

Beyond selection, the social connections between WPC members and their communities provide an additional source of [informal accountability](#). These strong connections stem from the hyper-local nature of the WPC, whose members continued to live in their village communities while serving, remaining enmeshed in day-to-day social interactions. This contrasts with community perception of formal ward-level government representatives (Members of the County Assembly), who were perceived as living in the county capital and only responsive during the campaign season.

Mobilizing to prevent ethnic conflict

Both of these factors—deliberative selection and social connections—allowed committees to credibly claim an ongoing mandate for representing the community in development planning and in addressing inter-communal violence.

Across the program area, ward-level committees were mobilized alongside community institutions to resolve conflicts. Inter-ethnic disputes related to grazing rights or cattle rustling were the most common cause of conflicts addressed by the ward-level committees. These types of disputes over scarce natural resources [have intensified due to the pressure on water, pasture, and other natural resources stemming from the current drought](#). WPCs worked with existing community institutions to help stop cycles of violence before they escalated.

Incorporating Local Information into Drought Response

Government agencies and international development funders often lack information about where to target public infrastructure most efficiently. This includes investments designed to manage or mitigate the impacts of climate change. For instance, during the current drought, there is an urgent need for information about where is best to place new boreholes or piping.

While seemingly simple, the question often interacts with complex factors such as migratory patterns and existing assignments of strategic grazing reserves. Weighing different community needs—especially when all needs are severe—is difficult both technically and ethically.

Often, government and NGO investments result in inefficient, redundant, or actively harmful projects. Nearly every ward interviewed had pre-WPC stories of this type of ‘white elephant’ investment by governments, donors, and NGOs, in which actors outside of the community provided redundant or inefficient public goods. WPCs solved this problem by acting as a central information hub and providing a single ward development plan document which both listed and ranked community priorities related to resilience and climate change. This central document, based on detailed local information, was novel within the governance space in each county and provided a unique opportunity to integrate community-identified needs into NGO and government plans.

FUNCTION OVER FORM

Matching design to the institutional context and the quality of implementation are the crucial elements which allow participatory interventions to fulfill this function.

The Quality of Participation is Crucial for Effectiveness

Finally, our research suggests that being participatory in name alone is not sufficient for providing meaningful legitimacy or local information. Matching design to the institutional context and the quality of implementation are the crucial elements which allow participatory interventions to fulfill this function.

Counties in Northern Kenya are no stranger to participatory institutions. Indeed, public consultation in county-level budget planning is

mandated in Kenya's 2010 constitution. However, previous interventions were viewed as relatively superficial and 'thin' by government staff and community members. Often consisting of only a half-day of meetings with limited structure. In contrast, the WDP model was seen as being an intensive, inclusive, and adaptively implemented process. This invested time and effort into building the participatory institution through well-attended and deliberative selection processes, and then supported the selected committee to make evidence-based, risk-sensitive decisions.

Implications for Practitioners

- Local participatory institutions can be powerful partners to governments and NGOs in addressing climate-change precipitated conflict in the short term and directing public investment for increasing climate resilience in the long term.
- Realizing the potential of participatory institutions requires paying more attention to the quality of the participation, rather than quickly 'scaling' participatory institutions which exist in form, but fail in function.
- Manage for motivation, not compliance. INGOs should resist top-down management practices and should institutionalize approaches which lessen the power of central offices over ground-level implementers.
- Invest in the selection of high-quality, local implementers. Ground-level implementers should be high-capacity and able to work strategically and adaptively. Adequate compensation and fair, competitive selection are crucial for attracting these candidates.

Implications for Donors

- Donors should support participatory models for building local legitimacy and gathering information at the local level, especially in the face of climate change and resulting fragility.
- Donors should re-assess their expectations regarding the use of RCT evaluations to assess the effectiveness of participatory

governance programs. Donor demand drives much of the interest in RCT evaluations which seek to determine 'what works'. Instead, they should seek more complex evaluations, which differentiate implementation challenges from failures of program theory.



Photo: Patrick Meinhardt / Mercy Corps

About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

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