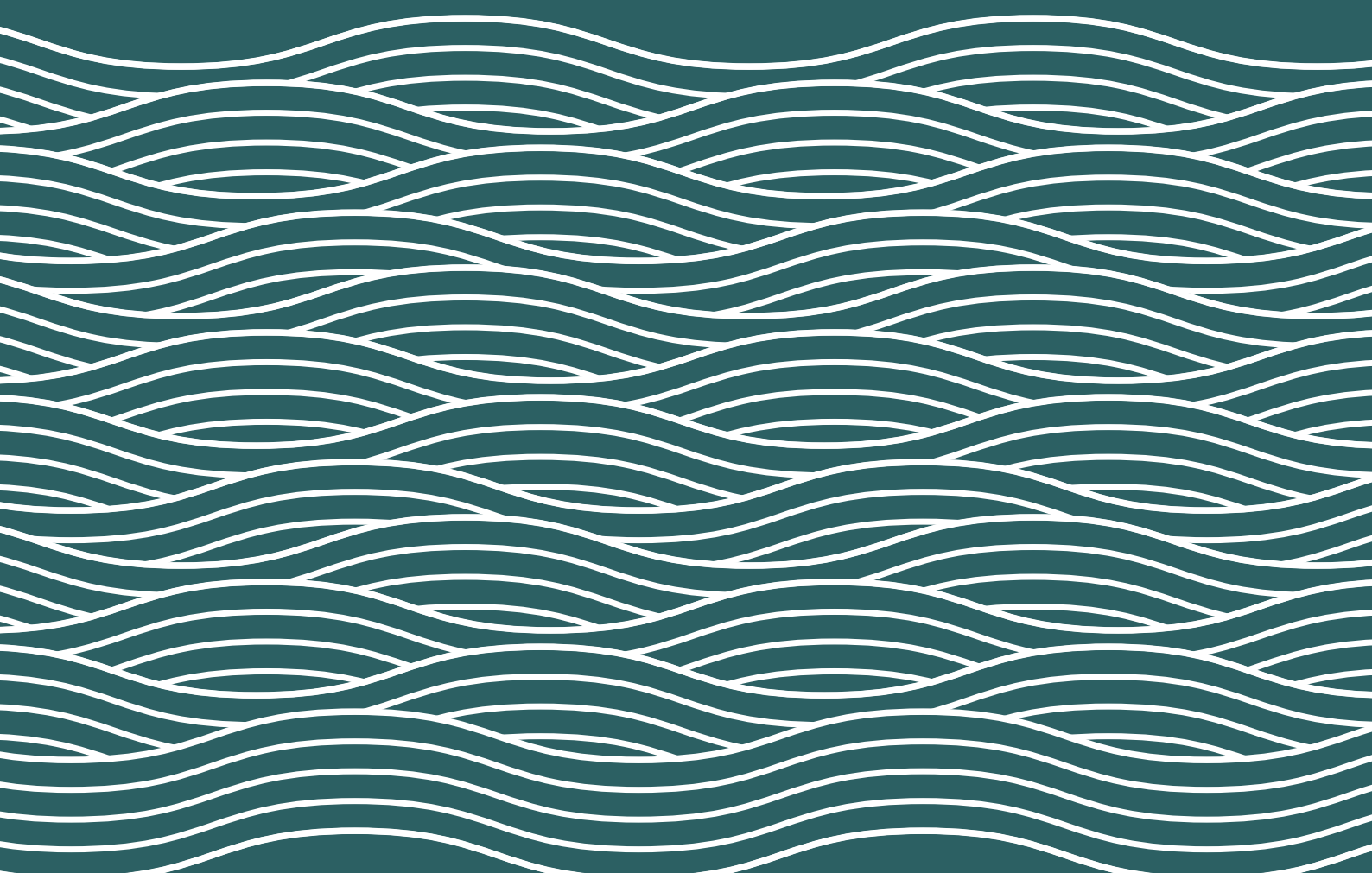


VOCAD

Voluntary Labour for Climate Adaptation and Disasters



Beyond infrastructures and disasters: voluntary labour and climate change in the Indian Sundarbans

Introduction

Voluntary labour has a critical role to play in meeting the challenges of the climate crisis in the global South. But media images of volunteers responding to climate disasters or advertisements calling for international volunteers for climate conservation can obscure the myriad forms of voluntary labour undertaken by communities on the frontline of the climate crisis.

Despite the growing engagement of volunteers by governments, civil society organisations and the private sector in their responses to climate change, we lack evidence and data to inform their strategies and support volunteers.

This exhibit shares findings from research on voluntary labour by communities who live in the Indian Sundarbans in the Ganges–Meghna–Brahmaputra delta, an area facing significant threats and disruption from climate change. By prioritising their voices and experiences, we learn how volunteering in the context of climate change is about more than building and maintaining climate infrastructures or responding to disasters. It is entangled with the ways societies are being changed and challenged by climate change. And volunteering is itself being changed by climate change.

Through this learning, we can ensure existing voluntary labour is recognised and support more effective, inclusive and ethical engagement of volunteers in response to climate change in the global South.

The research shared in this exhibition was conducted as part of the UKRI GCRF Living Deltas Hub. It is also part of the Voluntary Labour for Climate Adaptation and Disasters (VOCAD) initiative, led by Northumbria University, which is researching the roles of voluntary labour in the context of the climate crisis in the global South.

We would like to thank the communities and NGOs who participated in this research for their support and time, and the funders who made the work possible:



Context and approach

> The Indian Sundarbans

The Indian Sundarbans are part of the world's largest contiguous mangrove forest and delta, the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna Delta. Home to 4.4 million people (2011 census), it is a region highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Rising sea levels, cyclones, and salinity intrusion owing to breached embankments threaten agriculture and fisheries, severely disrupting lives and livelihoods and exacerbating inequalities and poverty.



UNESCO World Heritage Site

Rich in flora and fauna

42.37% of India's mangroves

4.4 million people (Census of India, 2011)

94.26% rural population

~1100 persons per sq. km.

43.51% Below Poverty Line (<0.35\$/day)

> Our research approach

The research aimed to:

- *conceptualise the different kinds of voluntary labour mobilised for climate adaptation and disaster response in the Indian Sundarbans.*
- *analyse the different ways voluntary labour is managed and governed in strategies for adaptation and disaster response in the delta.*
- *assess the impacts of voluntary labour on adaptation, climate response and participants' lives.*
- *understand the relationships between voluntary labour and strategies for more sustainable delta futures.*

To prioritise the voices, experiences and ideas of the volunteers themselves, data were collected using participatory and qualitative methods, including photovoice, diaries and interviews. Workshops with volunteers and stakeholders shaped the research design and data analysis. Over 178 people from 7 community development blocks participated in the research, through 49 interviews, 12 photovoice projects, 20 diaries and 15 workshops and focus-groups.

Infrastructures and disasters

In the Sundarbans, embankments are critical to protecting communities and agricultural land from the twice daily tides, storm surges, and cyclones. Maintaining and repairing them, particularly after damage caused by events such as cyclones, requires significant labour.

“During Amphan(cyclone) the water levels in the river started rising as a result of which the water overtopped the embankment. Then after a while we realised the situation is turning worse when we informed the Village Chairperson who came and informed that steps must be taken to strengthen the embankment. Then volunteers were sought to fill up sacks with mud and increase the height of the embankment which checked further water from entering. The threat diminished but people were affected quite a lot.”

– Female volunteer

▸ Mud-filled sacks used to strengthen and slow down the impacts of erosion on the embankment.



Photo Credit: Sumana Banerjee



▲ A mud embankment in the Indian Sundarbans with habitation on the left and the river on the right.

Photo Credit: Sumana Banerjee

Although they are critical infrastructures, it is often voluntary labour that is relied upon by governments and others to maintain and repair embankments during times of crisis. This work is not always fairly or consistently rewarded or recognised. During crises, communities need to mobilise themselves, despite the challenges they are already facing.

“Aila was a cyclone with a speed of 120 KMph. It was one of the worst natural disasters that washed away the river embankments. In those areas, if the embankments are reconstructed post-flooding then it could have been of some help. However, we didn’t get any government aid with regard to this. In such times some enthusiastic men and even women constructed and rebuilt the river embankment with mud.”

– Male volunteer

“The regular work on the embankment outside of a crisis is paid under the 100-days’ work scheme’ run by the government and local people who work get paid for it. But the emergency work we do before the cyclone is not paid for, although it is work done on the embankment. We are living here and we need to take care of that. We put soil on the embankment during Amphan but they did not pay under the 100 days’ work scheme”

– Female volunteer

‘100-days’ work scheme under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) aims for the enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas in India by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.



Knowledge, learning and decision-making



Photo Credit: Saikat Sardar

▼ To respond to daily needs, volunteers get together informally with friends and neighbours and sit together as a group to discuss issues and divide & delegate the work amongst themselves.

Focusing on the role of voluntary labour in supporting infrastructures or delivering services can obscure how voluntary labour reflects and shapes local knowledge, learning and action in relation to the changing Sundarbans environment.

“As a part of the NGO, we organised an awareness meeting about water conservation in my village to raise awareness of the risks of extracting groundwater and wasting water (like keeping taps running, excess water consumption for irrigation). I did this in my own village and other teams of volunteers did the same work in other villages. We may not have received appreciation at present but shall receive in the future because in the event of water scarcity people will understand the importance of our work.”

– Male volunteer

“In order to find the solution, we set up an Action Research Group. People here who are affected by the floods ... there are women here, adolescents too. Men, women, adolescents, everybody together meets in the Action Research Group. They themselves are suggesting that if we start a mangrove plantation here, then we can see that the embankment isn't going to break”.

– Male volunteer



The voluntary labour people do is shaped by their expert knowledge of their environment. It is part of the long term as well as the immediate decision making that communities make as they seek to adapt to change. In these ways, it plays a role in shaping communities' agency to shape more sustainable delta futures.

“Initially, we must determine the cause of the river erosion. Once identified, we can pursue either a long-term or short-term solution. Opting for a permanent resolution entails mitigating the impact of the river flow on the embankment. To create this resilience, we need to plant trees in the mudflats in front of the embankment area. Or slow down the river flow by making use of weirs.”

– Male volunteer

“When we get too many applications for house-building programme, we visit the villages to decide who needs it the earliest. Then we sit down at the local NGO to make the final decision about who would get it first. Then we go talk to them about the programme’s conditions and rules, if they agree then we tag them along in the group.”

– Male volunteer



▼ Voluntary labour of women and men tying straw in bundles to make roofs resistant to strong winds. This technique is new and women came forward to learn it despite the initial opportunity only being offered to men.

Photo Credit: Participant 1

Trust, bridging and brokering

Volunteers often broker relations between their communities and a range of governmental and civil society organisations. This is not necessarily part of the tangible activities conducted through their voluntary labour. Rather, it comes from their identity as a volunteer, and the social relations, knowledge and connections that come with this.

“Villagers know that we are volunteers and they call us over telephone to inform us when snakes get trapped in their house or if any other wild animal strayed into the village from the forest. We go there upon receiving this news, rescue the snake, and inform the forest department about it. Later, the forest department takes the snake from us and releases it back into the wild. In case of tiger straying, we have to inform the Police Station to control the crowd, and ensure no harm is done.”

– Female volunteer

“Due to heavy rainfall, canals and drains were all full; as a result of which small plants and grass beside our homes were rotting and there was a stench. So after informing the head of the Panchayat, they sent a few men with bleaching powder. I went around with them in the village and helped in sprinkling bleaching powder in many places of the village, which I believe was of help to the people.”

– Female volunteer

Volunteers ensure communication and coordination between NGOs and community members during the distribution of chicks. Chick rearing can be a source of nutrition for the family as well as an income.



Photo Credit: Shiba Mondal

Being a volunteer can build trust with diverse actors. This enables them to help communities to access services and feedback to organisations about community needs and experiences. Beyond and through their voluntary labour, they contribute to accountability and capacities to assert rights.

“We are going to all houses we know. The way we have become acquainted with these households that once we go, they respect us so much now.”

– Female volunteer

“When we started volunteering in this area, we were walking on a dark plateau region, through ups and downs, we faced obstacles from Gram Panchayat and political parties. But we never stopped walking; all of us hand-in-hand. Today, working has become smooth in this area, we discuss with Gram Panchayat ... this was not the situation earlier ... we couldn't talk with them ... that space has been built, people can express their opinion openly in gramsabha (village meeting), to encourage people to do so. So, individually and the staff with whom I work, we are running through the vast open field, towards the light, and we will keep walking. For life time ... maybe the NGO won't be there, but I will be there.”

– Female volunteer

“I wrote applications for some poor people who live in dilapidated homes without proper roofing and submitted to the Panchayat.”

– Female volunteer

▼ A volunteer helped this elderly woman access tarpaulin from the local Panchayat during the monsoon to retrofit the dilapidated roof of her home.

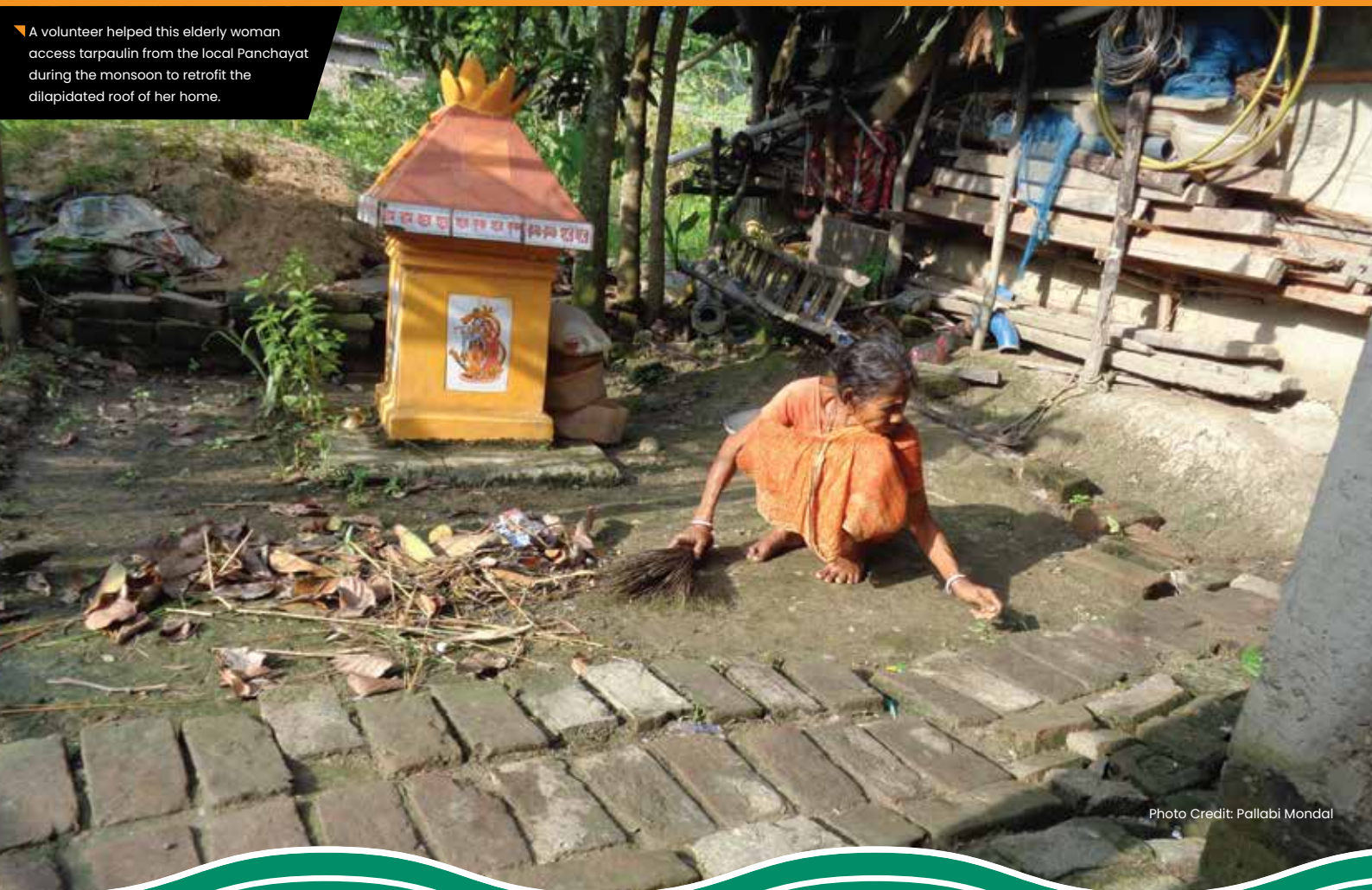


Photo Credit: Pallabi Mondal

Belonging and attachment

Voluntary labour is part of the repertoire of activities that enable communities to remain in the place they call home.

"in the aftermath of Cyclone Aila ... we had to do something as the main intent for us was survival there; we needed to save ourselves; then, we didn't have the headspace to wait for someone from some association or government to come and help us ... we needed to do what needed to be done by ourselves."

– Male volunteer

Through their voluntary labour, communities can negotiate new identities, attachments and communities of solidarity which support them to tackle the complex challenges of living in an environment threatened by a changing climate.

"I was a housewife, and after joining this voluntary role I got to know myself a lot, and I am enjoying working with everyone."

– Female volunteer

"If we move forward together hand in hand to do this work we might be able to save the world. Even if not its entirety, we can save at least some, if we save Sundarbans then to some extent we can save the environment."

– Female volunteer

"They used to treat me well, a contact with people that was close, a relationship that was formed with them that they loved ... chatting with people, sharing the joy with people, this is the best thing"

– Male volunteer

▼ Preparation of mangrove saplings by female volunteers. These mangroves are planted by the NGO on the mudflats along the embankments to prevent soil erosion.



Photo Credit: Participant 1



Local volunteers help in dragon fruit sapling planting, which will help the ecosystem and also the people who can eat the fruits themselves or sell them.

Photo Credit: Participant 1

Voluntary labour provides a means to express the feelings of care and responsibility people have towards the place they call home, despite the challenges it faces.

"I love Sundarbans, and I also love the locality surrounding Sundarbans and its people. The most important reason is, I joined this role as a volunteer with a pledge of protecting its wildlife"

– Female volunteer

"I felt that people were in big trouble, not getting food, after all they are the people of Sundarbans where I was born. I run my business here and God has blessed me, so I should stand beside these people at this time of crisis, that's all."

– Male volunteer



Disrupting social norms

Voluntary labour is not only about protecting the Sundarbans. It is also about changing it. By building trust, solidarity and collective identity, voluntary labour can also challenge social norms that perpetuate inequalities.

"During menstruation women are not allowed in the temple, and they feel menstruation is impure. I asked women "Why wouldn't you go to the temple during the menstruation?" I questioned how can menstruation be impure since it was given to us women by God himself. I could convince a girl to change her mind to enter the temple, this made me really proud. Even if I am paid in thousands, I would not have felt this happy. Working together with everyone, sitting down and eating together with everyone is what bring happiness to me. I did this work for all those women who are engulfed by superstitions."

– Female volunteer

"My neighbour got bitten by a snake on their leg ... I told them not to go to the Ojha (traditional healer) and took them to the hospital on my motorbike."

– Male volunteer

Participation in voluntary labour can disrupt ideas of who does what work, shifting their own economic and social roles in their households and the community. At times, these actions have encountered resistance from the community and families of the women volunteers.

"Members of my family say "She is acting overbearing, and even though she doesn't know anything, she acts arrogant. I don't think people in my neighbourhood appreciate me much. Even though I work perfectly, people talk behind my back. When we go out, neighbours stare at us with astonishment, wondering "Where is she going? Maybe she is leaving one husband and going to find the next." Even these rumours ... I have had to endure, because even my little girl was told by a neighbour, "Your mother will now bring you a new father."

– Female volunteer



▼ Fetching water is no longer only women's job. Volunteers spread awareness about gender equality and encourage men to do household chores.

Photo Credit: Shiba Mondal

Woman volunteer writes slogans on the wall with a male onlooker. The slogan on the left reads "Father-in-law's house, father's house, where is my house?"



Photo Credit: Nandita Jayraman

The shift in the roles of the women volunteers have inspired a change in attitude for some people in the community.

"Normally boys don't do any household work and girls do it; here a grandfather is teaching his grandson to cook and the grandson is cooking with a lot of concentration. In fact, I have experienced it in my life and I feel good knowing at least a bit of the society has come out of the mindset of the difference between boys and girls."

– Female volunteer

Voluntary labour can create networks and connections that empower people to question and challenge how society is organised.

"As a volunteer, I was able to convince ten women to sit across the table and discuss about being self-reliant through the self-help groups. If women can't love and support each other, then there are high chances that all of them would lose respect in this society. We've seen that men always have oppressed women, in all places. But if women don't support each other, then how are we meant to progress in the society. How can we overcome the misdeeds that the society has perpetrated against us?"

– Female volunteer

Voluntary labour, climate adaptation and disasters in the Sundarbans

Looking beyond infrastructures and disasters reveals the diverse ways voluntary labour contributes to adaptation to climate change in the Indian Sundarbans. Our data show how voluntary labour interweaves with, shapes, and is shaped by the ways social inequalities and power imbalances are being shaped by climate pressures.

Being a volunteer can create networks, connections, solidarities and identities that play a role in protecting the Sundarbans as a place to call home, as well as challenging how that home is organised. Through this, voluntary labour can make an important contribution to Locally Led Adaptation (LLA) to Climate Change, which emphasises local decision-making, addressing inequalities, investing in local capacities, building understanding, and ensuring transparency and accountability.

But this cannot be assumed or taken for granted. Recognising and rewarding some forms of voluntary labour over others, risks exacerbating inequalities. Engaging volunteers only for service delivery or infrastructure maintenance can reduce its capacity to contribute to locally led adaptation.

Voluntary labour has a critical role to play in meeting the challenges of climate change in the Indian Sundarbans and supporting adaptation. However, relying on it, assuming it is always available and failing to recognise its relationship with social inequalities risks placing additional burdens on individuals and communities already under stress.

Locally Led Adaptation (LLA) focusses on bottom-up approaches for adaptation instead of top-down approaches, which are to be led by local communities and institutions. These are the 8 principles of LLA:



1. Devolving decision making to the lowest appropriate level



2. Addressing structural inequalities faced by women, youth, children, people with disabilities and displaced people, Indigenous Peoples and marginalised ethnic groups



3. Providing patient and predictable funding that can be accessed more easily



4. Investing in local capabilities to leave an institutional legacy



5. Building a robust understanding of climate risk and uncertainty



6. Flexible programming and learning



7. Ensuring transparency and accountability



8. Collaborative action and investment

Source: LLA Principles COP26 Poster:



