



WORKING PAPER

# Untapped potential: The role of local governments in locally led adaptation

## Experiences from the Local Climate Adaptive Living Facility (LoCAL) in Niger, Lesotho, and Cambodia

Authors: Ayesha Dinshaw and Colleen McGinn | Contributing authors: Moussa Mamoudou Boubacar, Keregero J.B. Keregero, Relebohile A. Mojaki, Abdourahamane Illiassou Salamatou, and Kalyan Sann

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Adaptation is fundamentally a local process. However, local-level actors often have limited influence on how international climate finance is spent.
- Locally led adaptation (LLA) offers an equitable and effective approach to identifying, prioritizing, implementing, and monitoring adaptation actions.
- Local governments represent key stakeholders that have largely untapped potential to lead local adaptation action, mediate between local actors and national authorities, and manage climate finance to address local needs.
- The Local Climate Adaptive Living Facility (LoCAL) is a mechanism designed by the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF). LoCAL equips local governments in developing and least developed countries (LDCs) to access climate finance. It does this through delivering performance-based climate resilience grants (PBCRGs), capacity building, and technical assistance.
- This paper highlights how local governments have advanced LLA through the LoCAL mechanism in three countries: Niger, Lesotho, and Cambodia.
- LoCAL is a powerful vehicle that serves as a model for engaging local governments in LLA efforts. However, local governments often mirror the power dynamics of higher levels of government and have exclusionary politics, which the LoCAL mechanism alone cannot shift.
- LoCAL is designed to foster nongovernmental participation as well, but more intensive efforts would better enable participation by communities in planning and budgeting processes.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Context

**Locally led adaptation is increasingly recognized as important in redressing the predominantly top-down approaches to channeling climate finance.** LLA is a framework that facilitates devolution of finance and decision-making power into the hands of local actors, including local governments, traditional authorities,<sup>1</sup> and community members. In doing so, it can enable more effective and equitable adaptation solutions and processes. Existing efforts at LLA are mostly focused on the roles that nongovernmental stakeholders, such as local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs), can play; meanwhile, the role that local governments can play in facilitating LLA is relatively less advanced.

**The Local Climate Adaptive Living Facility is a local government-focused mechanism that advances LLA.** LoCAL does this by combining PBCRGs to local governments with technical and capacity-building support to enable local-level adaptation action. It works in LDCs and developing countries across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. It specializes in contexts characterized by extreme fiscal constraints (especially at the subnational level) and high levels of poverty and climate vulnerability.

PBCRGs are grants that complement a local government's regular allocations of investments that are important from a local adaptation perspective. The extra money enables adaptation investments, in particular by "climate proofing" the local government's infrastructure priorities, thus ensuring that they are more likely to withstand climate shocks. These grants are paired with capacity building (often in the form of awareness building, training, and mentoring that provides on-the-job learning) as well as incentives in the form of a "performance bonus" for local governments that perform relatively better than their peers based on annual performance assessments. The LoCAL mechanism uses existing intergovernmental fiscal transfer systems to deliver adaptation finance and decision-making power directly to local governments. Through LoCAL, local governments identify, prioritize, implement, and manage and monitor local adaptation actions.

**Although local governments are the centerpiece of the LoCAL mechanism, LoCAL is also designed to engage nonlocal government stakeholders at each stage of the LoCAL process.** LoCAL technical guidelines, tools, and annual performance assessment frameworks emphasize gender equal-

ity and social inclusion (GESI) and give directions on how to mainstream GESI at multiple specific points across the LoCAL cycle (see "About the LoCAL mechanism" on page 5).

### About this paper

**This paper provides insight into how LoCAL equips local governments with the tools they need to play a key role in LLA and touches on what constrains LoCAL's contribution to LLA.** LLA can take many forms, and there are numerous approaches to institutionalizing it (Coger et al. 2022). While slowly being recognized by donors and practitioners, the unique role of local governments in enabling LLA represents untapped potential (DanChurchAid 2022; Arnold and Soikan 2021; UNCDF 2022b). The examples of applying the LoCAL mechanism in-country show how working with local governments can be a powerful way to devolve adaptation finance and decision-making power to the local level, and therefore improve the efficiency and reach of climate funding, as well as the effectiveness of adaptation investments.

This paper begins with an overview of what LLA is, the LoCAL mechanism, and the research methodology undertaken. UNCDF works in 34 countries worldwide, but this paper draws primarily from case studies of three of them: Niger, Lesotho, and Cambodia. The authors analyze how the LoCAL mechanism has facilitated LLA in these three countries. The paper ends with conclusions and overarching recommendations for supporting LLA.

**While local government is an important local actor, it is not the only one.** This paper also reflects on how LoCAL engages a broader spectrum of local actors in its pursuit toward LLA. National consultants led interviews and focus group discussions with a range of local actors in two sites in each country and analyzed the resulting data using a predetermined analytical framework.

**This paper is not an evaluation of the LoCAL mechanism** and is not intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of whether LoCAL is effectively enabling LLA in all the countries where LoCAL operates. This paper was informed by research conducted in only 3 of the 34 countries where LoCAL has operated: Niger, Lesotho, and Cambodia. In addition, the paper does not provide an overview of adaptation efforts in the three focus countries. Rather, it specifically assesses how the LoCAL mechanism supports local governments to be key actors in the

LLA process in a small sample of countries, and identifies the lessons from this subset of LoCAL experiences that can inform the broader adaptation community interested in LLA.

## Key findings

### **LoCAL meaningfully advances LLA by providing performance-based climate resilience grants to local governments.**

These grants, along with the capacity building and awareness raising supported by LoCAL, enable local governments to make meaningful decisions on adaptation. Doing so also sets the stage for them to mainstream climate change into local government planning. LoCAL highlights how local governments can be a powerful set of actors to advance LLA in a way that is institutionalized within existing country systems and structures.

### **The LoCAL mechanism demonstrates that local governments can and should be recognized as key actors to advance LLA.**

Local governments are in a unique position to connect climate finance, national climate policies, and community-level adaptation action—and have untapped potential that can benefit from additional focus within the LLA discourse.

### **However, local governments often mirror the power dynamics of higher levels of government and have their own exclusionary politics.**

Local governments are not always representative of all community members, highlighting the need for broader engagement across a range of local actors. Local governments can be inclusive of other local actors' adaptation needs and priorities, but the LoCAL mechanism alone cannot shift entrenched power dynamics that are inherent in government systems, even while it contributes to advancing LLA through local governments.

### **LoCAL can improve the participation of communities and vulnerable groups in subnational planning and budgeting processes.**

The LoCAL mechanism includes several opportunities for nonstate actors to engage in the LoCAL process. LoCAL is also linked to existing subnational planning and budgeting processes, particularly those that open doors for devolution of power and centralization of decision-making. By engaging with the LoCAL mechanism, local governments can truly take the lead in adaptation action, and make it possible for nongovernmental local actors to also meaningfully participate.

## INTRODUCTION

Climate change is a global challenge, but its effects—and the solutions for how to manage them—are fundamentally local (Bours et al. 2015). Unfortunately, global commitments to curb climate change impacts are not always translated into effective action on the ground. To date, adaptation responses have often been driven by national and global climate actors and agendas. However, for adaptation to be efficient and equitable, it is critical to embrace bottom-up approaches and diverse local voices. Locally led adaptation (LLA) is increasingly recognized as a promising approach to fill this gap (Steinbech et al. 2022).

Although the term can be used at many governmental levels, “local” refers to the subnational level in this paper. The specifics of what level this is depends on the country in question (see Box 2).

## Locally Led Adaptation

LLA entails more equitable distribution of power and resources by acknowledging that the people and communities most affected by climate change are often those facing marginalization due to racism, colonialism, and systemic inequities in income, education, social capital, and political power (Coger et al. 2022). As a bottom-up approach, LLA shifts away from historical approaches to development by placing local actors front and center in the adaptation arena, and recognizing how they bring traditional and Indigenous knowledge to the table, especially around coping with hazards and disasters. Local actors also exhibit nuanced understanding of their cultural and sociopolitical contexts, and how to navigate them.

As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports, addressing these and other inequities through a bottom-up approach also contributes to more effective adaptation (IPCC 2022). As a working framework, LLA encourages shifts in governance and financing processes toward local actors on the front lines of climate change who are often best placed to identify adaptation solutions appropriate for their local context. By shifting decision-making power about adaptation action directly to the individuals and groups who are affected, LLA advances climate justice aims (Coger et al. 2022).

While external expertise in assessing climate change impacts, identifying future climate risks through projections, disseminating global best practices, and extending technical support are all valuable, it is important to balance these with locally led processes, traditional knowledge, sensitivity to local contexts,

local innovation, and diverse voices. Doing so ensures that adaptation solutions are both more just and more sustainable over the long term.

LLA does not always follow the same processes or involve the same local actors (Coger et al. 2022). It is framed by diverse influences including sources of climate finance; cultural context; patterns of governance, decentralization, and participation; and the constellation of local actors that function uniquely in each space. It is worth noting the distinction between individuals or groups benefiting from local-level adaptation efforts and their active engagement and meaningful participation in local-level adaptation efforts—the former is helpful but may not be as effective, systemic, or long lasting.

LLA is not a methodology or toolkit; instead, it is an approach that can be described using a set of principles (see Box 1). These Principles for Locally Led Adaptation were developed by a consortium of research, grassroots, and civil society organizations

for the Global Commission on Adaptation in 2020 (Soanes et al. 2021). The principles have since been endorsed by over 100 organizations that have committed to alter their practices and adaptation interventions to align with LLA.

The LLA approach is consistent with the Local Climate Adaptive Living Facility (LoCAL) mechanism, which channels climate finance directly to local governments in least developed and developing countries, paired with technical assistance and capacity-building support.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how LoCAL advances LLA, with a particular focus on empowering local governments. The authors draw from country experiences in Lesotho, Niger, and Cambodia to explore how the mechanism contributes to LLA, and, secondarily, to examine how local government stakeholders and nonstate actors at the community level interact to advance LLA through the LoCAL mechanism.

### Box 1 | Principles for locally led adaptation

*Principle 1:* Devolution of decision-making to the lowest appropriate level ensures that those most affected by climate change have agency over decisions about adaptation finance and programming that will affect them.

*Principle 2:* Addressing structural inequalities faced by women, youth, children, people living with disabilities, people who are displaced, Indigenous Peoples, and ethnic groups that are marginalized entails actively recognizing and redressing the power dynamics, imbalances, and development deficits that create vulnerability, poverty, and marginalization.

*Principle 3:* Providing patient and predictable funding that can be accessed more easily requires that funding mechanisms be simplified, and finance provided over longer, more predictable time scales, to enable greater access to funding by local actors, support adaptive management and learning, and adequately strengthen local institutions.

*Principle 4:* Investing in local institutions to leave institutional legacies means creating and strengthening local institutions by building capacity to understand climate risks and uncertainties, generate resilience solutions, and facilitate and manage adaptation initiatives—allowing for local fiduciary responsibility and management so that these institutions can provide grants and loans to other local actors for local adaptation actions.

*Principle 5:* Building a robust understanding of climate risk and uncertainty supports locally led adaptation by ensuring that interventions reflect understanding of local climate risks, current resilience-building practices, and uncertainties about direct and indirect climate impacts on local communities, as well as provide access to appropriate tools to handle uncertainties.

*Principle 6:* Flexible programming and learning recognizes that it is important to maintain budget and programmatic flexibility as well as space for adaptive management and learning.

*Principle 7:* Through transparency and accountability, decision-making and governance structures are made explicit, so it is clear which decisions are made at what level of organization and by whom. Financing flows should also be made transparent and can be publicly tracked, and ultimate accountability should be to local actors themselves.

*Principle 8:* Collaborative action and investment by donors, aid agencies, and governments recognize the need for multiple levels of coordination, horizontally among communities and across sectors, and vertically across levels of government and policy processes.

Source: Soanes et al. 2021.

## About the LoCAL mechanism

LoCAL is a standardized<sup>2</sup> yet flexible mechanism that advances local adaptation action by working with and through local government. The mechanism combines technical and capacity-building support with financial resources in the form of performance-based climate resilience grants (PBCRGs) that finance adaptation action and incentivize strong and sound climate adaptation governance at the local level. The combination of training, capacity building, resources, and incentives equips local governments to set and reach their own adaptation priorities.

PBCRGs typically extend a “top-up” to cover the additional costs of ongoing climate-proofing investments or to finance climate-specific investments. The LoCAL mechanism is tailored to diverse countries, and specifics can and do vary from place to place (for instance, the amount of the bonus funding).

In 2021, 91 percent of PBCRG-financed interventions were directed toward infrastructure investments. The remaining 9 percent was spent on equipment and awareness-raising activities. By sector, 78 percent of these PBCRG-funded interventions focused on agriculture, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and disaster prevention and preparedness, and 11 percent were investments in transport and storage (UNCDF 2022b). Examples from the LoCAL 2021 annual report (UNCDF 2022b) of the infrastructure that PBCRGs have funded include the following:

- In Bangladesh, more than half of the 72 local governments deploying PBCRGs were in coastal areas. Investments focused on
  - providing access to drinkable water through water infrastructure able to withstand salinity intrusion; and
  - improved irrigation schemes through re-excavation of canals for better water catchment and/or solar-powered pumps.
- In Gambia, investments focused on
  - establishing integrated farming systems, and combining market gardens with small ruminant production and tree nurseries to diversify livelihood options for communities; and
  - climate-proofing water distribution facilities and rural roads to protect against flooding events.

Examples of the capacity-building efforts that support the implementation-oriented PBCRGs include the following (UNCDF 2022b):

- In Mozambique, a series of district-level workshops on participatory and gender-sensitive planning for climate change adaptation were held in the four provinces of Gaza, Inhambane, Nampule, and Niassa.
- In Mali, 200 community representatives were informed about issues related to climate change and natural resource-induced intercommunal conflicts and on locally led measures that could be put in place to prevent them. These sensitization workshops were held in collaboration with YAGTU, a local nongovernmental organization. More than 70 percent of the participants in these workshops were women and youth.

Figure 1 presents the main technical elements of the LoCAL mechanism. The mechanism seeks to strike the right balance between standardization and flexibility for operating in diverse contexts. Readers seeking a more comprehensive description of the mechanism itself are encouraged to consult De Coninck (2018).

Before LoCAL is operational, the country typically begins with a scoping assessment, and if conditions are right the country enters a design phase that includes tailoring the mechanism’s several components to the local context, such as by crafting an “investment menu” of adaptation actions for local governments to choose from. Only local governments that meet a set of minimum conditions can participate in LoCAL; these conditions focus on local governments’ public financial management and governance capacities.

After implementation, performance is assessed against predetermined performance measures. Local governments that perform well in mainstreaming climate change, investment management, and broader good governance (such as participation and transparency)—as determined by an annual review—earn a bonus for the following year. PBCRGs are accompanied by technical support and capacity building for local government authorities and other local actors on an as-needed basis. Through PBCRGs, LoCAL helps local governments in developing and least developed countries access the climate-finance, capacity-building, and technical support they need to respond and adapt to climate change (UNCDF 2021).

The LoCAL mechanism is implemented in phases: Phase 1 pilots the mechanism in 2 to 4 local governments. Phase 2 scales it out to 5 to 10 local governments, collecting evidence and demonstrating the mechanism's effectiveness at scale. Phase 3 is a national roll-out of LoCAL based on the lessons learned in the previous phases. LoCAL currently has 16 countries in the design phase, 10 countries in Phase 1, 6 countries in Phase 2, and 2 countries in Phase 3 (UNCDF 2022a). A more detailed discussion of the LoCAL mechanism and its tools can be found in De Coninck (2018).

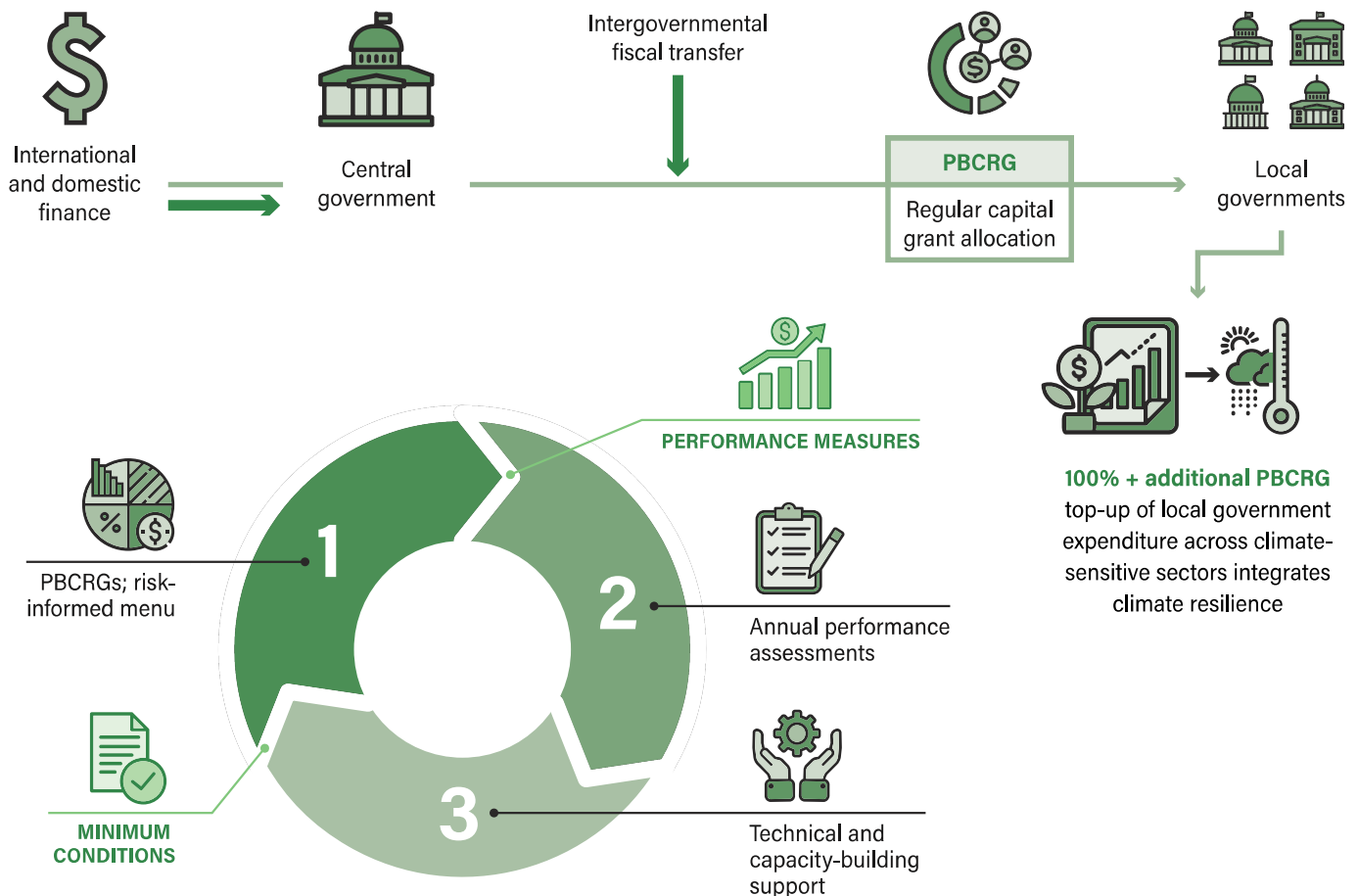
Participation is a cross-cutting priority embedded across the mechanism. Although LoCAL works primarily with and through local government, it actively seeks to elicit broader community participation in the various stages of the process, although the degree and process of doing so varies from one

country to another. There are five main entry points for participation by nonstate local actors: climate risk assessments (which inform adaptation priorities), investment planning, implementation of the selected investments, investment management, and annual performance assessments. Although led by independent agencies, the annual performance assessment process does include public consultation to explore how the funded intervention has reflected the community's needs and priorities.

## METHODOLOGY

UNCDF commissioned this research to explore how LoCAL contributes to LLA and its principles, and to identify what lessons and best practices may be leveraged and replicated from LoCAL experiences. UNCDF was also interested in findings

Figure 1 | **The LoCAL mechanism**



Note: PBCRG = performance-based climate resilience grant.

Source: UNCDF 2022a.

that could inform how to strengthen LoCAL's role in enabling locally led adaptation, particularly with regards to community participation.

This paper draws from three country case studies—Niger, Lesotho, and Cambodia—of participation in LoCAL. We determined the sites in each country based on how long the LoCAL mechanism had been implemented, the distance from the consultants' home bases to facilitate reasonable travel, guidance from the LoCAL focal point within the country, and, for some countries, other considerations such as security concerns. There is an inevitable trade-off of depth and breadth in research; findings here are derived from a deep dive into only 3 of the 34 countries LoCAL has a presence in.

Senior-level national consultants were recruited in each of the countries. The consultants, along with the in-country LoCAL focal point, selected two sites in each country. The independent consultants visited the locations unaccompanied to elicit frank responses in a series of interviews and focus group discussions in each field site, and with national-level key informants.

The qualitative researchers in Niger, Lesotho, and Cambodia followed the following steps to arrive at the findings that underpin this paper:

- Mapping of the context (including political context), level/degree of decentralization, validity of participation in elections/other processes (through desk reviews, interviews with key informants)
- Stakeholder mapping (through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions)
- Assessment of who is engaged in the LoCAL mechanism process and how (through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions)

The participants were initially identified by key informants at each site, including UNCDF/LoCAL country personnel, local government officials responsible for implementing LoCAL, and leaders or elders in the community. However, the consultants also conducted “snowball sampling” wherein interviewed individuals were asked who else the consultants should speak to since the first set of respondents may not have been representative of the entire community.

Each consultant used a standardized analytical framework as a basis to gather and analyze data. Conversations with local governments focused on their role in the LoCAL process, the opportunities LoCAL affords them in engaging in adaptation efforts, what within the LoCAL mechanism could be improved, and what broader issues in local government processes may need

to shift to better enable LLA. For nonlocal government actors who were engaged in the LoCAL process, the questions in this framework included when, how, and how often they engaged in the LoCAL mechanism process; what incentivized or enabled this engagement; and their interest in additional engagement or even leadership in the process. For those who did not engage directly, questions centered around awareness of, interest in, and accessibility to the process, as well as barriers to engagement.

The consultants' findings inform this paper, which synthesizes and contextualizes their work within the broader LLA narrative.

## COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

The LoCAL mechanism is implemented to align with, and complement, the existing subnational and local governance structure of a country—including domestic finance streams that do not always trickle down to the subnational government, other local adaptation efforts, and national climate policy and public administration systems. To best fit within a country's given political and administrative structure, the unit and system of subnational government that LoCAL engages with differs for each country, including the three case study countries (see Box 2).

### Niger case study

#### Country context

The Republic of Niger is a landlocked country in western Africa, two-thirds of which lies within the Sahara Desert. The primary source of livelihoods is traditional agriculture and livestock; both are vulnerable to drought and intensifying desertification. Temperatures in Niger are rising 1.5 times faster than the global

#### Box 2 | Subnational government structures in Niger, Lesotho, and Cambodia

**Niger:** The subnational government is organized by region, department, and commune (urban and rural).

**Lesotho:** The subnational government is organized by district, constituency, and community council.

**Cambodia:** The subnational government is organized by province, district, commune, and village.

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average and are estimated to become three to six degrees higher by 2100, which will only worsen food and water scarcity and exacerbate conflicts (World Bank 2021a).

The government structure is complex: There is a nationally elected president leading the executive branch, whereas the legislative branch includes a parliament led by a separate prime minister and cabinet. Three major parties compete for power alongside many minor ones; political transitions are not always smooth and there was a coup d'état in 2010. Niger also struggles with ongoing security concerns, including cross-border incursions by armed militants from neighboring countries, refugee influxes, weak civil and political rights, and political tension. Political instability affects local government institutions; disputes may be mirrored at the local level and policy priorities can shift abruptly.

In 2014, the LoCAL mechanism was piloted in two Nigerien communes in the Dosso region: Sokorbé and Dogon Kirya. Dosso lies in southeast Niger, and borders Benin and Nigeria. These communes are largely rural, and among the country's driest and poorest areas; the economy is based on subsistence agriculture and livestock. LoCAL's pilot stage lasted five years. Since 2019, LoCAL has expanded to nine communes in three regions—Dosso, Tahoua, and Zinder—in partnership with the Nigerien Local Authorities Investment Finance Agency (ANFICT) and the Ministry of the Environment and the Fight against Desertification (ME/LCD). At the subnational level, the mechanism is implemented through the communes.

The two sites for this research (Sokorbé and Kantché) were selected based on a combination of security, accessibility, and length of LoCAL presence; that is, one long-standing partner (Sokorbé) alongside a newcomer to LoCAL (Kantché). Kantché is located in the eastern part of Niger and Sokorbé in the western part.

## Local leadership in LoCAL: Experiences from Niger

LoCAL has been fully tailored to the Nigerien context. It has an especially strong mandate to capacitate and equip the communes with awareness and knowledge about climate change and adaptation. The local government is strongly associated with both the LoCAL mechanism and the five-year communal development plans and interim annual investment plans, making it possible for it to link the progress made through the LoCAL mechanism to these longer-term planning efforts. According to field-level interview data and stakeholder mapping exercises, **there was consistently strong involvement from the various local government authorities in identifying adaptation priorities and**

**interventions, overseeing intervention implementation, and monitoring across the LoCAL cycle.** Traditional authorities expressed less awareness of LoCAL than local authorities, but are eager to learn and participate more.

**There is some participation of local nonstate actors in processes that the LoCAL mechanism supports**—for instance, the public has helped develop the community development plans that are used as a basis for deciding LoCAL grant allocations. There is also a strong preference for local contractors to be hired whenever possible. There are moments across the investment cycle when community members are expected to engage, especially during the implementation period. For example, community members were invited to contribute to a land restoration intervention, and there was a 50 percent quota for women. While the invitation to engage is not accompanied by payment in all cases, in some instances land restoration activities are paired with cash-for-work schemes.

Some of the selected investments primarily or exclusively benefit disadvantaged communities and populations. An example of an adaptation intervention that is part of LoCAL in Niger is a livestock (goat) distribution scheme geared toward women. This scheme targets the most vulnerable women within women's cooperatives to receive goats that provide milk (which reduces malnutrition within the family and increases income) as well as fertilizer that can be either used or sold. The scheme follows the *habanayé* system: The goats born from the first group of goats are passed on to a second set of families, and so on.

Although the PBCRGs here focused on improving the livelihoods of the most vulnerable in the community, **there were missed opportunities to more actively engage these traditionally disadvantaged communities in identifying climate risks, choosing adaptation interventions, or monitoring the interventions.** These communities remain “beneficiaries” as opposed to drivers of this local-level initiative. Opportunities for capacity building, empowerment, and leadership have largely targeted the local government officials themselves.

There are both missed opportunities and significant barriers in regard to widening the scope of engagement by local people, ranging from resource constraints to cultural norms. LoCAL aims toward both distributive justice (i.e., benefits reaching those who are poor or otherwise disadvantaged) as well as procedural justice (i.e., processes that are participatory and empowering). This case study suggests that fully realizing the latter requires intensive investment of resources.



## Lesotho case study

### Country context

Lesotho is a small, mountainous, and landlocked country, surrounded entirely by South Africa. The climate is generally temperate with alpine characteristics; both temperature and rainfall fluctuate dramatically over a year (World Bank 2021b). Due to exceptionally high out-migration of men, as of 2014 about 35.5 percent of households were female-headed (World Bank n.d.a). Lesotho's progress toward sustainable development is compromised by climate change, particularly insofar as it exacerbates long-standing water insecurity. Increasingly unpredictable rainfall is intersecting with poor land management and other socioenvironmental stresses. The resultant land degradation, water scarcity, and collapse of ecosystem services is making traditional livelihoods increasingly untenable.

Politically, Lesotho has moved in and out of military rule, intense activism, short-term coalition governments, and other manifestations of unrest since securing independence from the United Kingdom in 1966. Currently, there is a seven-party coalition government in place, and high turnover in political leadership is paired with abrupt changes in both policy and public administration. This political instability echoes at the local level as civil servants also cycle through posts frequently. Together, these factors systematically constrain the sustainability of investing in local government capacities.

LoCAL entered Lesotho in 2018 and began implementation in 2020. Currently, it is operational in four community councils in Mphahle's Hoek district, and investments consistently focus on water security to support household use alongside small-scale agriculture and herding. In this study, national consultants visited Khoelenya and Qhoasing Community Councils, exploring how councillors and community members participated across the planning and investment cycle.

### Local leadership in LoCAL: Experiences from Lesotho

**Overall, local officials enormously welcome the LoCAL approach, and not only for the additional resources they have access to through the mechanism.** Local government representatives report that they have engaged to appropriately varying degrees in identifying elements of the LoCAL design for Lesotho, contributing to climate risk analyses, participating during the annual performance assessments, crafting adaptation plans, and selecting projects. They noted that the way the LoCAL mechanism is set up confers leadership opportunities and decision-making power over adaptation interventions.

**PBCRG implementation is most fully in the hands of local government,** while other stages of the LoCAL process (for example, tailoring the mechanism to the country context) involve a wider range of stakeholders. Unsurprisingly for an exceptionally small country, in Lesotho national and subnational governments work closely together. For example, national ministries have a direct presence in districts. As such, there have been more national-level actors involved than in the other case studies. Local government respondents do, however, confirm that some degree of consultation with them has been continuously present across the entire LoCAL initiative, and as it rolls out it is increasingly in the hands of the subnational government. They also point to ample opportunities for education, training, and leadership through LoCAL, and welcome more.

**One challenge has been maintaining fidelity to the processes that support LLA, especially when challenges arise.** For example, local governments felt pressured to be extremely efficient and rapidly spend the LoCAL finance available to them, as the donor funding reached the program midway through the fiscal year and the money could not be rolled over into the next one. Meanwhile, COVID-19 restrictions prohibited gatherings. In these situations, certain aspects of the expected functioning of the LoCAL mechanism were compromised, particularly participatory processes.

Additionally, while water insecurity had been identified as a major climate risk during the LoCAL design phase, some stakeholders did not grasp the climate change context and there was not enough opportunity to sensitize them. As a result, after the first cycle of project implementation, some see LoCAL specifically as a water security program rather than a broader adaptation effort. Considerably more engagement with the local government will be needed to frame thinking within a climate adaptation lens and to articulate a climate rationale, ultimately leading to mainstreaming climate change into local government planning broadly.

**Participation among nongovernmental local actors is inconsistent.** The LoCAL mechanism has provided opportunities for meaningful involvement by the community at large in Lesotho, notably as part of the annual performance assessment. Moreover, there is consensus that projects especially benefit women, for example, because they are the primary users and managers of household water in Lesotho. In this sense, the program is seen as embracing the interests and needs of the most poor and vulnerable populations. However, opportunities for leadership, decision-making, and empowerment have not so far meaning-

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fully extended beyond the local government. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic stymied opportunities to raise public awareness about climate change and adaptation action, as the first cycle of PBCRGs was deployed in the midst of it.

## Cambodia case study

### Country context

Located in mainland Southeast Asia, Cambodia shares borders with Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. It is widely recognized as being exceptionally vulnerable to climate change, for both environmental and socioeconomic reasons. The climate is tropical and hot year-round; rainfall is intense during the monsoonal months and scanty at other times. Climate change is expected to exaggerate the extremes in precipitation, placing the nation at risk for both floods and droughts, even within a single year. Shifts from one season to the next are also becoming less predictable, making it difficult to know when to plant the next season's crops. LoCAL has focused its work on the nation's "rice bowl," the lowlands surrounding the Tonlé Sap Lake. This agricultural heartland is especially vulnerable to floods and droughts, both of which are being exacerbated by climate change.

Cambodia is a generation on from genocide and civil war and its economy is growing rapidly, reaching lower middle-income status in 2015 (World Bank n.d.b). Nevertheless, poverty and inequality are pervasive, and it is still among Asia's poorest nations. The government is widely recognized as a "hybrid democracy" (Cohen 2019), which blends elements of both liberal and authoritarian rule, and the Cambodian People's Party with Prime Minister Hun Sen at the helm has been in power continuously since 1998. Decentralization and climate change both represent major policy commitments.

In 2011, Cambodia became one of the first countries to pilot the LoCAL mechanism, and it continues to be recognized as one of LoCAL's most mature country initiatives. The Ministry of Interior's National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development Secretariat (NCDD) leads the implementation of LoCAL; this unit is also responsible for implementing Cambodia's far-ranging decentralization agenda. As the program has evolved in Cambodia, UNCDF stepped back from financing PBCRGs there; the last grant was disbursed in 2018. Presently, LoCAL is working alongside the government and development partners to scale out the mechanism nationwide, and hopes are high that the Green Climate Fund will finance part of this. Meanwhile, other agencies have sought to echo the mechanism, although modifications have been made and the LoCAL facility was not in charge of supervising, reviewing, or financing these efforts.

Several years after UNCDF's exit from directly financing PBCRGs and increased ownership by the government as the mechanism entered Phase 3, key stakeholders remember the initial program. However, over time some details have blurred and recollections have become conflated with those from other initiatives. Nevertheless, the ex post facto review of LoCAL can help inform how to design and implement the mechanism with an eye toward long-term sustainability. This case study lends unique insight into the sustainability and uptake of the mechanism.

### Local leadership in LoCAL: Experiences from Cambodia

**Key aspects of the LoCAL mechanism have proved sustainable insofar as elements have been adopted by the national and subnational governments, and mainstreamed into other adaptation efforts.** For example, PBCRGs have been included in the national government's five-year development plan and decentralization processes, although anticipated funding for these processes has not yet been secured. Meanwhile, the consultant learned that operational and monitoring and evaluation guidelines developed under LoCAL are still in use by other agencies that have embraced PBCRGs in one form or another. As several agencies have taken over elements of the mechanism, PBCRGs have proved to be replicable as a model.

**The LoCAL mechanism truly engaged with local government actors;** official stakeholders remember active involvement in the LoCAL mechanism and said that they learned a great deal from participating in it. In terms of individual PBCRGs, they especially point to the project selection and planning stage as an opportunity for local leadership. Traditionally, the Cambodian bureaucracy has been top down, with little local-level authority. While this is slowly changing, LoCAL is remembered as a vehicle that shifted decision-making to the local level. Once an intervention was selected for funding via a PBCRG, the investments were implemented by the commune council and village chiefs; upon completion, projects were handed over from the commune to village authorities for ongoing maintenance. Arrangements are recalled as being satisfactory.

One important lesson learned, however, is that the **level of government participating matters; LoCAL directed much of its formal capacity building and informal mentoring to the district level, but ultimately individual investments were in the hands of the commune councils.** In other words, training did not always target those who were responsible for carrying out specific activities. The subnational government often has many layers, and it is important to involve the right people at each step of the cycle, though doing so can be difficult. Proto-

cols within an administrative hierarchy may determine who is considered to be the “appropriate” official to participate, but it may not be those with the most hands-on roles.

**Although community participation was intended, the LoCAL mechanism’s participatory intentions were insufficient to impact broader and deeply entrenched habits of public administration.** Governance in Cambodia has historically been top down, with expectations of obedience to a strict hierarchy. Changes to long-term assumptions and norms evolve over time, and the Cambodia experience demonstrates that LoCAL cannot be expected to transcend or overcome deeper barriers to participation in the short term. Participation is mandated, but in the end the quality may be superficial. As in Niger and Lesotho, local governments in Cambodia reflect broader patterns of public administration that are not particularly bottom up. A single program may contribute toward a different governance pathway, but is insufficient to catalyze it single-handedly.

## ANALYSIS OF LLA AS FACILITATED BY LoCAL

LoCAL pairs climate finance with technical support and training for local governments in LDCs and developing countries. The particular bundle of resources, incentives, and capacity building that it delivers advances LLA and fills critical gaps (see Box 3). This section highlights findings, organized by relevant principles, about how LoCAL advances LLA based on the three case studies above.

Using the Principles for LLA as guidance for how to enable local leadership, this section demonstrates how LoCAL advances LLA based on the three case studies above. It is critical to note that these findings cannot be generalized across all countries where LoCAL is operational, and are based on a small sample size of selected case studies. Nevertheless, there was a strong consistency in patterns across the three.

We focus on principles 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7 because they demonstrate specifically how local governments—the cornerstone of the LoCAL mechanism—can advance LLA. Other LLA principles are also important but are not within the reach of LoCAL. Principles 2 (addressing structural inequalities), 3 (patient and predictable funding), and 8 (collaborative action and investment) are beyond the control of this single initiative and thus omitted from the discussion below. LoCAL can strive to advance these principles within the context that it operates in, but cannot be expected to achieve them on its own. The remaining principles better align with LoCAL’s aims and sphere of influence.

### Box 3 | LoCAL’s contributions to LLA

LoCAL can help advance LLA in important and specific ways, including by doing the following:

- Promoting an enabling governance environment at the local level
- Capacitating local governments with the skills, tools, perspectives, and resources to pursue adaptation actions
- Enhancing sustainability and scalability by working with and through existent public administration systems and decentralization processes
- Channeling global climate finance effectively, flexibly, and efficiently to the local level

### PRINCIPLE 1: DEVOLVING DECISION-MAKING TO THE LOWEST APPROPRIATE LEVEL

**LoCAL excels in propelling the devolution of power.** Too often, local governments are responsible for implementation but lack decision-making authority, even over local-level priorities (e.g., budgets, investment selection, monitoring). LoCAL is designed to enable local decision-making; local officials in this study consistently commented that they had never held the same level of trust or power in any local project. LoCAL is exceptionally welcomed among subnational governments for precisely these reasons.

For instance, in Niger, local government authorities are firmly in the driver’s seat in implementing LoCAL. Authorities in the prefecture and rural district lead the selection and monitoring of investments. They are assisted by technical services delivered via the district and departmental level; this support helps keep the agenda on track from a climate perspective and raises local-level knowledge about environment and climate. The mayor of Kantché, Niger, declared that “LoCAL is an inclusive flagship process, the grant is lodged at the level of the communities. . . . Moreover, LoCAL improves the district’s governance through capacity building and performance evaluation” (Pers. Comm. Salamatou 2022).

### PRINCIPLE 4: INVESTING IN LOCAL CAPABILITIES TO LEAVE AN INSTITUTIONAL LEGACY

One of the most striking findings from the three case studies is how well **LoCAL has equipped local governments with the right mix of opportunities and support to engage in the full suite of investment management, including design, planning, implementation, and monitoring.** The case studies

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showed there is consistent feedback from local governments that learning-by-doing in budgeting, procurement, and project management is enhancing public administration skills that can be applied in many settings.

The Cambodia experience demonstrates the systemic changes the LoCAL mechanism has supported. Although the LoCAL mechanism itself, as delivered by UNCDF, stepped back from directly delivering PBCRGs several years ago, other domestic processes and agencies have adopted many elements of the mechanism. It has also been endorsed by the government, and efforts are underway to pursue financing to scale it out nationwide.

Still, challenges remain. More intensive investment is needed to catalyze greater participation by nonstate actors and traditional authorities, and doing so will also enhance sustainability. For example, high turnover of civil service personnel has enormous implications for continuity. Having members of the community engaged in the adaptation processes led by the local government can ensure continuity despite these changes.

#### **PRINCIPLE 5: BUILDING A ROBUST UNDERSTANDING OF CLIMATE RISK AND UNCERTAINTY**

Climate change adaptation is LoCAL's *raison d'être*; channeling international climate finance and related support to the local level is an elegant means of encouraging greater synergy and effectiveness in adaptation action. However, the evidence suggests that **brief trainings and climate-focused participatory exercises are not enough to equip stakeholders with sufficient knowledge or to fully apply learnings beyond the LoCAL support**. Through interviews undertaken by the consultants, many local stakeholders involved in LoCAL efforts exhibited a limited grasp of details of climate change and adaptation action.

One of the challenges seems to be a weak comprehension of the underlying science and terminology, which leads to poor retention of material and misunderstandings on basic points (for example, in Cambodia, local government representatives had difficulty communicating the difference between a drought, a dry season, and water insecurity). To be clear, these nuances are complex and challenging to understand. **It is therefore important that the tools themselves be robust and strong to reinforce the effort from an adaptation perspective**. LoCAL is engaging in an ongoing process of building knowledge, capacity, and planning processes, including through its Assessing Climate Change Adaptation Framework (Dinshaw and McGinn 2019), which is a monitoring, evaluation, and learning system.

Other challenges previously mentioned include the frequent turnover of local government staff, as well as trainings that are directed only to certain branches of subnational government but not everyone who participates in LoCAL. If an initiative like LoCAL is to catalyze broader adaptation action and mainstream climate change into local development planning, it might be useful to more intensively focus on education and outreach, and to consider how to sensitize different audiences appropriately. A related opportunity for LoCAL may be to make sure that local knowledge is being incorporated and reflected in training, and that trainings are as simple and contextual as possible. Addressing these broader gaps in awareness and capacity may also be an opportunity for others involved in LLA, such as NGOs, CSOs, and grassroots organizations, to collaborate and complement the work done through the LoCAL mechanism.

#### **PRINCIPLE 6: FACILITATING FLEXIBLE PROGRAMMING AND LEARNING**

LoCAL's stakeholders consistently praise it for its flexibility. Although the methodology is standardized and structured, **local governments see it as flexible insofar as they have much more decision-making power than is the norm**. The mechanism is structured to ensure fidelity to adaptation aims through design-phase exercises (e.g., climate risk assessments), which ultimately feed into the investment menu of adaptation actions that are tailored to the local context and aligned with national adaptation plans. The scope of most menus is broad enough to give local government officials considerable leeway to select a project that fits into their own priorities.

Learning opportunities are also embedded across the LoCAL initiative, encompassing both investment management and adaptation planning. The case studies suggest that LoCAL has done particularly well in successfully building the capacities of local governments in terms of good governance. Good governance is at the heart of performance-based grants, which seek to achieve it through incentivization. In all three countries, local government representatives praised LoCAL for giving them decision-making power across planning and budgeting processes, and it was clear that the prospect of receiving a bonus for sound performance was motivating. LoCAL can and does pair flexible programming with a flexible funding mechanism, which is increasingly being recognized as a good practice in development finance (see Li et al. 2022).

## PRINCIPLE 7: ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The LoCAL mechanism is **especially strong as a vehicle for transparency and accountability. Effective performance is rewarded with increased grant allocation, incentivizing good performance and adaptation relevance and enhancing good governance habits.** For instance, in Niger, the annual performance of every district enrolled in the LoCAL mechanism is assessed by a government team alongside an international consultant and UNCDF. It is carried out at the national level to be independent from the local-level implementers. There are restitution workshops to mediate disagreements.

The three case studies also show opportunities for improvement, particularly with regard to downward accountability, which is accountability to community members as opposed to the traditional upward accountability to donors. The case studies show opportunities for increased engagement with nongovernmental stakeholders in determining the selection and implementation of investments.

## CONCLUSIONS

While climate change is global, adaptive actions are fundamentally local and contextual. To date, the global climate arena has struggled with how to approach climate resilience in a way that responds to the scale of the global climate threat while being tailored to diverse ecosystems and socioeconomic contexts. On the one hand, there is pressure to identify effective solutions that can be scaled up and out. On the other, there is growing recognition that given solutions may not be useful across diverse contexts. If adaptation solutions are identified and owned by local actors, ensuring they are appropriate for the context and community, they are more likely to be successful. **LLA is a particularly compelling framework insofar as it frames bottom-up approaches within global themes and funding streams.**

The LoCAL mechanism focuses on local government actors as key participants in LLA, building local governments' capacities, incentivizing them, and empowering them to make and finance adaptation decisions. Local governments are critical local stakeholders because they can channel funding to local priorities and needs, and are also interlocutors between the local level and national authorities. The LoCAL mechanism's specific way of working with national and local governments enables rapid and standardized scaling, compared with a project-based approach that works with local governments. LoCAL showcases how local governments can be a powerful set of actors that can scale out LLA. **LLA proponents are encouraged to better recognize**

**the roles and responsibilities of local governments in promoting LLA** in addition to the wide range of nonstate local actors engaged in adaptation.

Local governments are key for all the steps in the LoCAL mechanism—from identifying projects and facilitating implementation to monitoring and participating in the assessment of their performance. Too often, public administration systems across the world are top down, and local-level officials have little decision-making power. LoCAL strengthens decentralization, and gives local governments a budget, methodology, and structure that works well in diverse contexts for addressing local adaptation needs. At the same time, central agencies provide support and mechanisms to scale LoCAL across the country. **Performance-based climate resilience grant systems represent an opportunity for true local government leadership in adaptation.** The three case studies demonstrate that these grant systems, along with the capacity building and awareness raising provided by LoCAL, enable local governments to make meaningful decisions on adaptation.

**While local authorities can confidently be expected to understand the local context and act accordingly, they may also replicate top-down patterns of governance at the local level or govern based on exclusionary politics.** Addressing this is a complex matter that is well beyond the reach of a single program, however. The LoCAL mechanism alone cannot shift entrenched power dynamics that are inherent in government systems, even while it advances LLA through local governments. LLA practitioners keen to engage more with local governments are thus encouraged to be aware of this potential pitfall and support communities in working successfully with the local government for adaptation.

While the LoCAL mechanism is designed to elicit community-level participation, the case studies demonstrate that in some instances, community members are identified as beneficiaries but are not actively engaged as much as they could be. LoCAL's local government focus should not be conflated with broad-based participation. **The LoCAL mechanism could strengthen its achievement of LLA with additional support (both financial and capacity building) to help local governments increasingly and meaningfully engage community members and other local actors in customized ways specific to each country context.**

**Directing resources to local governments is not enough; to ensure sustainability and enable local governments to mainstream adaptation into local planning, broad-based education and outreach about climate change and practical adaptation action is necessary.** Intensive effort is needed to

ensure broad-based participation, and to empower local non-governmental actors alongside local government. In addition to LoCAL ensuring that its mechanism is as open for engagement as possible, there is an important opportunity for other LLA practitioners like CSOs to equip community members with the tools they need to engage in local government processes and adaptation more broadly.

International climate finance is pairing with national governments worldwide to meet the urgency of the global climate threat; however, there are growing concerns about the pitfalls of top-down approaches. **LLA represents a framework to simultaneously scale out climate finance, empower local actors, and deliver local solutions. The LoCAL mechanism shows that climate finance can be effectively and efficiently delivered directly to the local level, and place local governments at the forefront of global climate action.** This model is an important complement to other LLA approaches that emphasize civil society and demonstrates that working with and through local governments represents powerful untapped potential to advance LLA.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

By exploring the LoCAL mechanism critically and openly, we have identified lessons that are applicable not only for the LoCAL mechanism but also for the broader LLA community of practice, which can learn from the LoCAL experience and use these findings to inform their own practices of LLA—especially when working more with local governments as a key stakeholder in locally led adaptation processes. The findings from this paper underscore the following recommendations:

- Agencies that have embraced LLA are encouraged to strengthen the ways that they work with local governments.
- The onus is on the international funding community and national governments to ensure patient and predictable funding, as well as downward accountability. Resource-poor local governments in developing countries and LDCs cannot be expected to compensate for or accommodate disruptions in their plans and budgets.
- Commitments to decentralize public administration and empower local governments must be accompanied by practical opportunities to do so. Performance-based grants combine funding with the right mix of support and incentives. This model can be embraced widely and implemented in diverse contexts.
- LoCAL itself has an exemplary track record of engaging with and empowering local governments. It is encouraged to build upon this strength through more focused outreach to nonstate actors at the local level.
- Participation cannot be prescribed; it takes time, patience, and an enabling environment to be fully realized. LLA policymakers and practitioners should recognize subtle barriers and capitalize on opportunities that may present themselves. Above all, expectations must be aligned with realistic consideration of the operating context.

## ENDNOTES

1. Traditional authorities include chiefs, village elders, and others who are recognized in local contexts but may not be fully integrated into formal government or public administration systems.
2. The LoCAL mechanism has been formally standardized through the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) process. Based on the LoCAL Facility, ISO 14093 offers an internationally recognized country-based mechanism to increase local government access to climate change adaptation finance.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Ayesha Dinshaw** is a manager in WRI's Climate Resilience Practice. Contact: [ayasha.dinshaw@wri.org](mailto:ayasha.dinshaw@wri.org)

**Dr. Colleen McGinn** is an independent consultant. At the time of writing, she was senior resilience specialist at ISET International. Contact: [colleenmcginn@hotmail.com](mailto:colleenmcginn@hotmail.com)

**Moussa Mamoudou Boubacar** is an associate professor in plant and soil ecology at the University of Diffa, Niger. Contact: [boubacar\\_mac@yahoo.fr](mailto:boubacar_mac@yahoo.fr)

**Professor Keregero** is the director of the Centre for Empowerment and Development. Contact: [keregero@gmail.com](mailto:keregero@gmail.com)

**Relebohile A. Mojaki** is a lecturer at the National University of Lesotho. Contact: [mojaki19990@gmail.com](mailto:mojaki19990@gmail.com)

**Abdourahmane Illiassou Salamatou** is an associate professor in applied ecology at the University of Diffa, Niger. Contact: [assalamat2@gmail.com](mailto:assalamat2@gmail.com)

**Kalyan Sann** is an independent research consultant in Cambodia. Contact: [snkalyan@gmail.com](mailto:snkalyan@gmail.com)

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