

Enabling Least Developed Country universities to contribute to and support national adaptation action

Interim findings from an ARA Co-Creation Space | July 2023

Written by: Leigh Stadler, Sheona Shackleton, Nabeel Petersen, Lucy O'Keeffe

Illustrated by: Mohamed Hassan



Introduction

Universities in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) play a critical role in advancing knowledge and providing solutions to the complex challenges facing these under-researched and underrepresented countries. One of the most pressing challenges facing LDCs is the impacts of climate change, which can exacerbate poverty and inequities and undermine sustainable development. To effectively address this, LDCs need an integrated, action-oriented climate change adaptation research and engagement programme that aligns with and contributes to government efforts to advance the SDGs and build resilience to the impacts of climate change.

Through working together, universities, government agencies, civil society and other stakeholders can design action-oriented research that brings community voices to the fore, fills knowledge gaps, and provides locally generated evidence for policy making and practice. Such evidence could support resilient and equitable adaptation to climate change, including in the areas of disaster risk reduction, sustainable land use, natural resource management and governance.


Introduction to the ARA Co-creation space

The Adaptation Research Alliance (ARA) is co-creating a new action-oriented research programme that puts Least Developed Country (LDC) Universities in the driving seat to support their country's adaptation priorities. Interfer is a social enterprise that is facilitating this ARA co-creation process. As we are mid-way through this ARA co-creation process, we present our Interim Findings in this report for those who have participated so far.

The purpose of this Co-creation Space is to co-develop a new adaptation research programme, embedded within an LDC's broader knowledge system, that will provide both the enabling environment and build capacity to support national adaptation efforts. The intended programme will facilitate the preparation, use and enhancement of national scientific and technical capacities in LDCs and embed these going forward into national adaptation actions, processes, and development plans across scales. By taking a whole of society approach, the programme will ensure that the voices of the vulnerable are included and that locally-led and community-based adaptation approaches can be integrated into national systems and at scale.

What has the Co-creation process looked like so far?

The co-creation process has been emergent based on needs identified at each step along the way. The process is guided by an Advisory Committee made up of experts from universities, government, funders and multilateral organisations working in LDCs. The Advisory Committee meets regularly to give feedback and suggestions for the steps in the process.



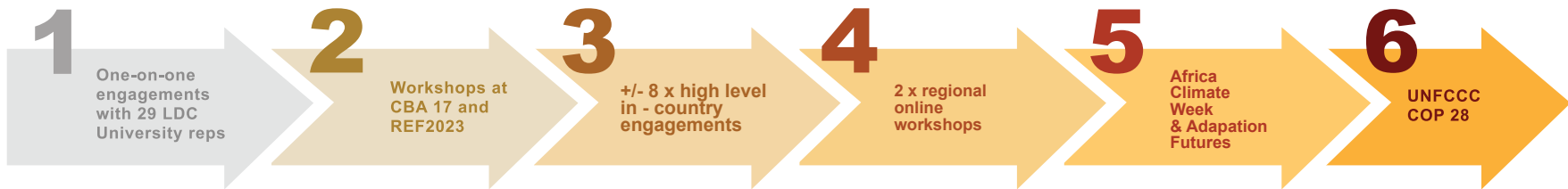
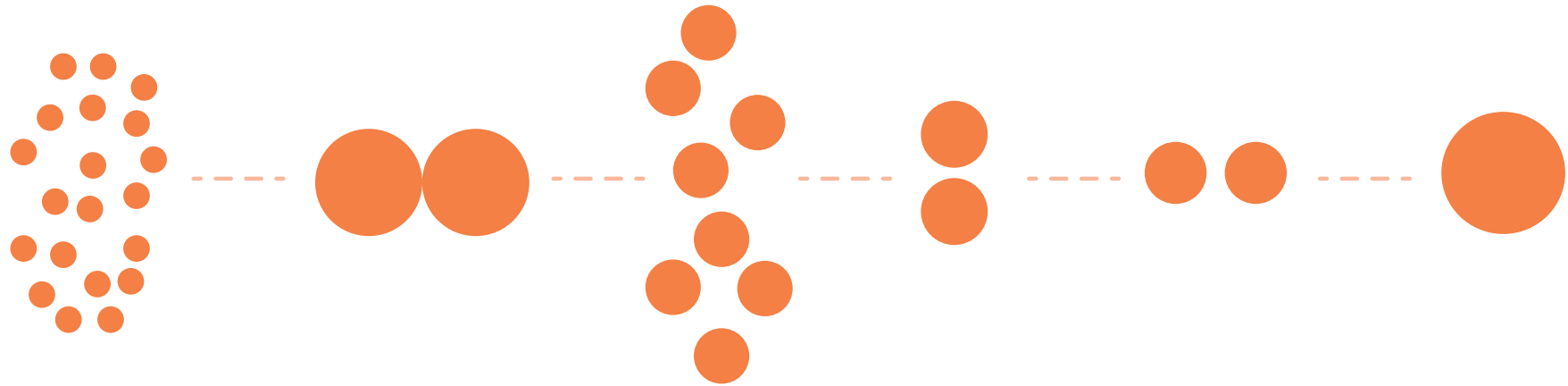
The co-creation process started in April 2023 with 20 conversations with individuals affiliated with universities spanning 12 different LDCs across Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. These conversations focused on barriers and enablers to getting local research recognised by government in policy and practice, and gaps in knowledge and information needed to inform adaptation efforts.

These interactions helped shape engagements at the Community Based Adaptation conference (CBA17) in Bangkok, Thailand in May 2023. At CBA17, we held two conference sessions attended by ±20 representatives from universities, funders and international NGOs, and a small post-conference workshop with a group of university staff. These activities focused on presenting findings from one-on-one interviews we had conducted, identifying further barriers and enablers for action-oriented research, and a set of key principles to guide a new action-oriented research and engagement programme. Some initial enablers or solutions were also explored that were taken into the next workshop.

Then, in June 2023, we hosted a workshop following the Resilience Evidence Forum in Cape Town, South Africa, attended by 20+ representatives from LDC universities, government and INGOs. In this workshop we shifted focus to spend more time exploring solutions to barriers, including sharing examples of innovative activities and programmes, and the roles that different organisation have to play in implementing these.

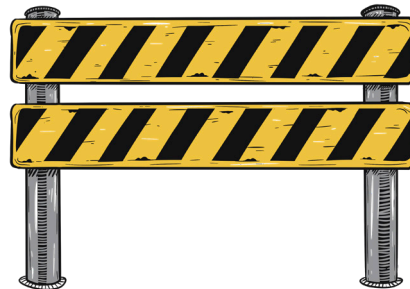
Engagements in the co-creation process

April 2023 May 2023 June 2023 July 2023 August 2023 Sept 2023 Oct 2023 Nov 2023 Dec 2023

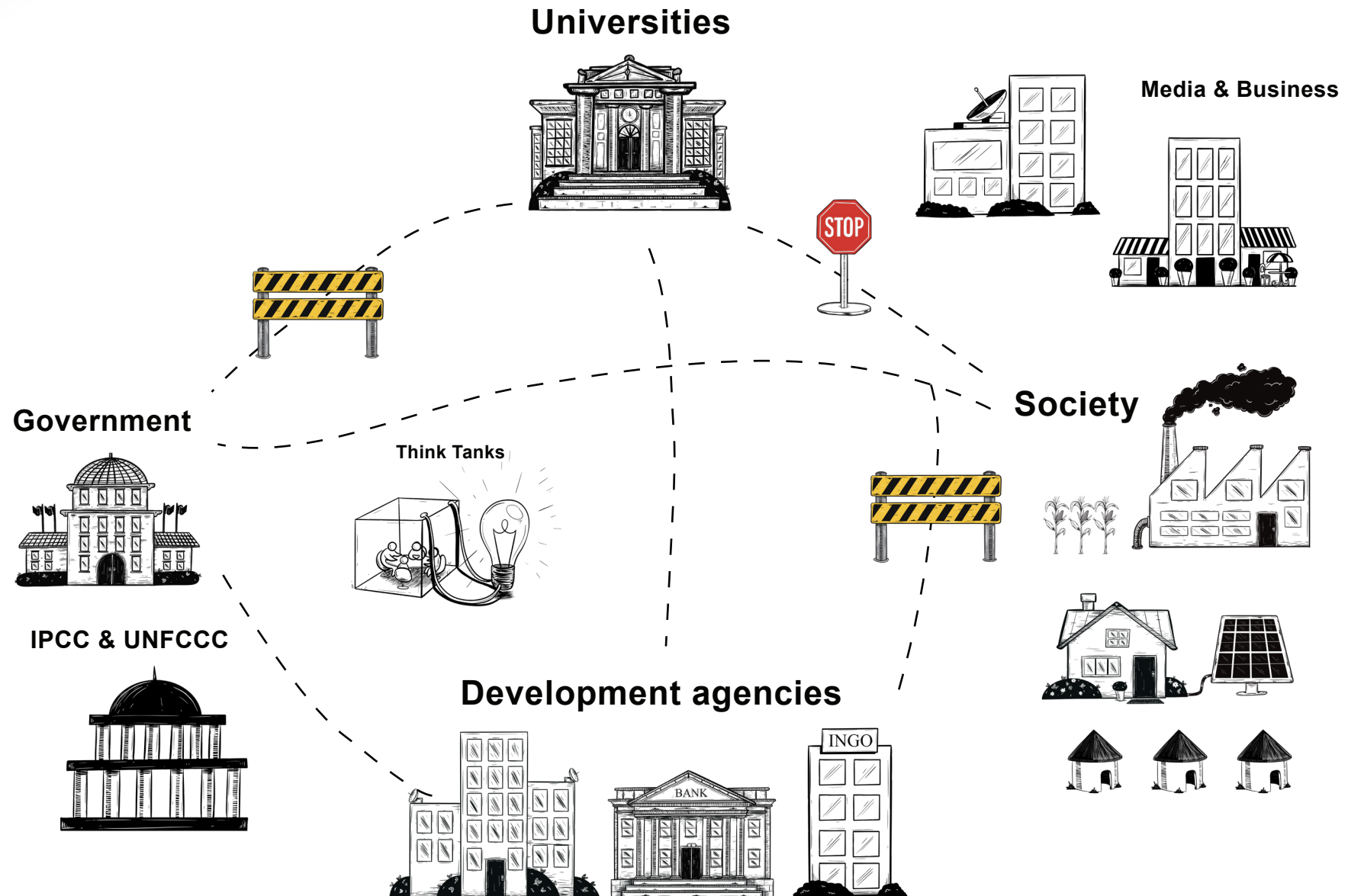


Barriers to action - oriented research

Numerous barriers or obstacles to incorporating local research and knowledge into policy and practice were recognised by participants in our co-creation process. But these were neither universal nor insurmountable and are often intertwined. We grouped and expand on these hindrances below. They provide the basis for consideration of solutions towards a more all-encompassing adaptation knowledge system.



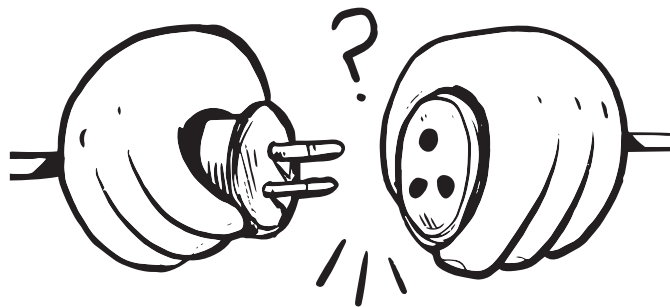
Stakeholders in the Knowledge System



1. Lack of coordination between actors

In many LDC countries, there is a fragmented adaptation knowledge system with limited capacity amongst institutions for collaboration and few platforms to connect. There is a general absence of mechanisms, platforms, or guidelines for identifying synergies and facilitating engagement between different sectors of society. This restricts the representation of university-led research and local experiences and knowledge in national and subnational-level policies and plans. Simultaneously, inadequate engagement amongst different actors in the knowledge system limits the opportunity for universities to design, support and pursue research that can fill knowledge gaps and meet specific data needs for both policy-making and practice.

The incentive structures of all actors are misaligned, and different societal actors appear to have incompatible knowledges and languages. For example, academic staff in universities are incentivised by publishing in peer reviewed journals which are inaccessible to most, and academic language and climate science are also difficult to understand.



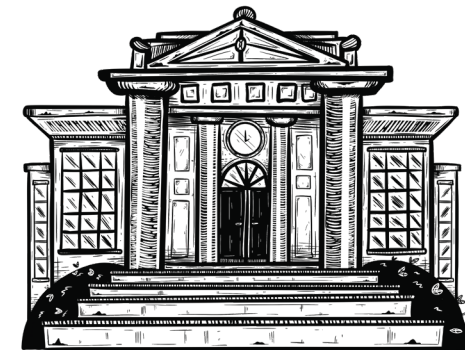
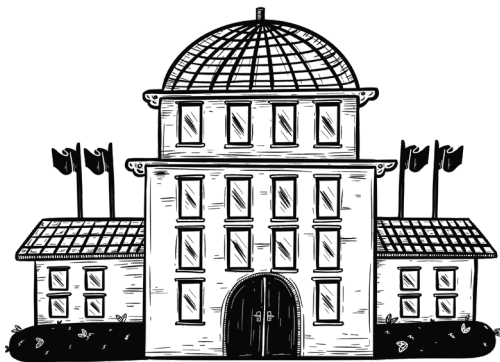
Political leaders often work on election cycles which do not always align to the long-term climate adaptation responses required. Local and indigenous experiences are often not visible in government reporting. Development discourses and language can also be divisive, misleading and misrepresentative (for example, “the Global North and South” implies an equal split which is not the case, and “least developed” can be dehumanizing).

2. Weak relationship between government and universities

Universities and governments in particular do not appear well connected or supportive of each other in some LDCs, though there are exceptions. Political will is seen to greatly determine whether government wants to work with local universities or not, but there is a suite of barriers to this relationship. These sectors have different working cultures and values – for example, government officials don’t read academic journal articles. These two sectors have limited experience of engaging, and few platforms to connect and share. Universities feel that when government officials are invited to their research events, they often do not stay to engage after giving their speech. Government feels that researchers do not understand their priorities or lack time to engage with typical academic products.

Furthermore, government is seen to be biased towards research and researchers from the global North, rather than their own local talent. Plus, international multi-lateral organisations (UN agencies and INGOs) seem to have stepped into the role of being the main sector liaising with government. This could represent an opportunity for research influencing policy and practice, or a barrier to university engagement with government, if university engagement is undermined by multilateral organisations.

Lastly, government is seen to not recognize the value and costs of doing research when they have a need for data or new research – there is often an expectation the universities should provide this service. Often, there is limited funding from national research bodies for local research. These factors, combined, re-enforce and exacerbate trust issues and are further compounded by barriers within each sector described below.



3. University capacity

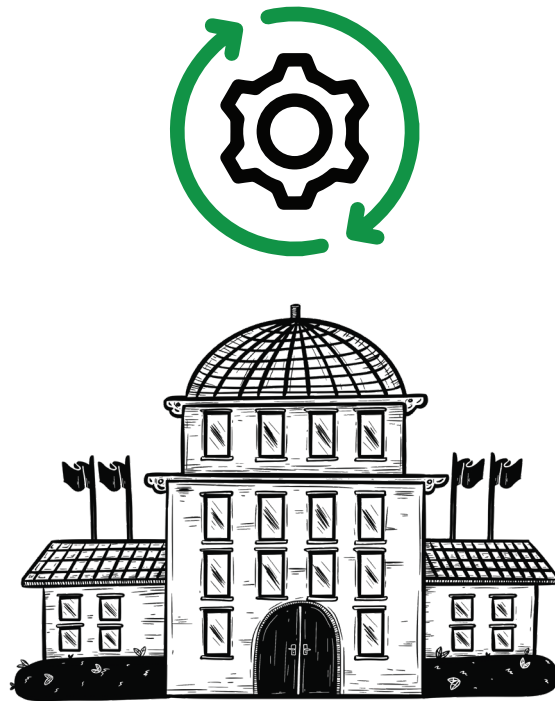
High teaching loads in LDC universities make it difficult to find time to do research, let alone time-consuming action-oriented research. Resource-constrained university researchers are often brought into adaptation research through multi-lateral development agencies who then manage the process of translating the research for government use. Increasingly, these academics are brought into implementation work and capacity development initiatives, as well as baseline research or vulnerability assessments.

In addition, there are financial constraints to sharing research in different ways including in more popular knowledge product formats. Even when there are resources, researchers often don't know how to 'translate' climate science and academic language for policymakers and laypersons. Many LDC university researchers feel isolated, which risks duplicating efforts as they are unaware of others doing similar research. Universities also lack finances and the institutional structures to support engaged, transdisciplinary work.



4. Government processes

There is a lack of accountability in government and policies are often seen to be on paper only, and not implemented in practice. Frequent staff turnover and shifts with elections mean that relationships, knowledge and trust that has been built is lost. Government operates on slow decision making processes and is seen as risk averse, in the sense that they do not want to do things differently, such as action-oriented research.



5. Access to data by who and for what

There is a lack of data – or a lack of access to data. It is often not clear if the data that is needed even exists, as it sometimes exists but is not shared. This includes climate data especially downscaled to decision-making level, ecological and species data, agricultural data, and socio-economic data especially relating to climate impacts on local communities and local community adaptation actions. Sometimes there is competition over the ownership of IP, as this could affect future funding applications. As paradigms between sectors are often conflicting, what constitutes as valid or representative data may differ by sector. For example, numbers in agricultural data may not accurately capture community experiences of hunger, and stories may be more representative. Amongst climate scientists, there is concern that data could be misused and lead to bad decision making and mal-adaptation – especially as terms such as ‘average’ when describing the weather are no longer accurate. Some indigenous communities also fear that their stories, data or information could be misused, raising the ethical concern about data sovereignty.



All of these concerns around access to data and data use further complicates the process of getting local research into policy, as they suggest many underlying power structures at play in the knowledge system. Those working in action-oriented research must remain conscious of these hidden power structures and how they may add bias or blind-spots into adaptation efforts.

6. Hollow gestures

Across multiple sectors there is insincere talk about transformation that isn't matched in practice. Although there is growing recognition of the need for action-oriented research, funders often still set the priorities for research, with limited timeframes or resources for culturally-appropriate engagement, measuring impact or sustained efforts. Global south, black and female researchers have at times felt like their involvement has been tokenistic.





Key enablers or solution spaces

Numerous enablers to surmounting the barriers shared above were mentioned by participants. We summarize these under four main areas that require support if LDCs are to successfully bridge the science-policy-society gap.

Box 1: LARA: A Livelihood Assets & Resilience Academy. African Solutions to Tackle Hunger & Enable Peace

1. Capacity Building

Capacity building is needed across multiple sectors and levels. Examples that emerged during our engagements included: small grants to support researchers especially mid-career researchers to undertake action orientated research; training for knowledge translation and communication; student research on locally-led adaptation; short courses for government and communities led by universities, and training at the tertiary level on transdisciplinary, engaged research and collaboration processes. The new LARA programme for LDCs is an interesting example of a capacity building programme that achieves some of these objectives (Box 1).

This new **World Food Programme (WFP)** project will bring together a network of African universities and other partners to spearhead the localization of expert capacities in integrated evidence based and risk-informed resilience-building programme design and implementation. This network will be involved in capacity development, research, evidence and advocacy.

The Resilience Academy will:

- develop and offer context-specific training-of-trainers programmes, field bootcamps, coursework, and academic curricula on the design, implementation and scaling up of quality integrated resilience programmes;
- invest in generating evidence through practical, topical graduate and post-graduate action-based research; and
- work to disseminate and embed expert capacity within the network's stakeholder partners and institutions to ensure capacity retention and utilization.

Its two objectives are:

To develop strategic, technical and operational capabilities to design and deliver quality and sustainable livelihoods assets and integrated resilience packages, contributing to filling existing institutional capacity gaps that hinder taking resilience efforts to scale; and to strengthen WFP's and national Universities role as key actors and partners in the humanitarian-development-peace nexus agenda.

SOURCE: LARA Info Brief. For more information contact Scott Ronchini, LARA Coordinator, scott.ronchini@wfp.org

2. Platforms for sharing and collaboration between government, universities and other actors in the knowledge system

The need for regular and constructive communication amongst different actors in the adaptation knowledge system was constantly highlighted in our engagements. Many success stories of platforms for sharing university research with government officials and more widely with the implementation community were shared. These included annual open days at universities, annual or biennial multistakeholder conferences or symposiums (several countries have such events); multistakeholder forums and platforms (examples of these were provided - they are often orientated around a specific aspect of adaptation or climate change, see Box 2); embedded or seconded staff (where a government staff member spends time in a university department or vice versa); research advisory committees that include members from different sectors at institutional or project level; and national-level multisectoral advisory committees, such as the Presidential Advisory Committees (see Box 3 for an example from Mozambique).

Box 2: Policy Action for Climate Change Adaptation (PACCA) project (2014-2017)

This project focused on building climate resilient food systems through climate smart agriculture in Uganda and Tanzania by coordinating policies and institutions at all levels of governance through eight Multistakeholder Platforms (MSPs). The platforms were embedded within government structures (for sustainability) and operated as independent platforms although initiated and partially funded by PACCA. Facilitation of meetings was entrusted to the platform-hosting institutions who were recognized for their authority, their central role in local knowledge exchange and their credibility among other stakeholders.

The platforms enabled their participants to share experiences and research findings on climate change. The PACCA project, as a member of the MSPs, contributed to the generation and dissemination of research findings on climate change adaptation contributing to an enhanced science-policy interface. This sharing of research evidence became the basis for discussions and helped define the efforts by the MSPs to influence policy.

Platform meetings, which generally took place quarterly, had two main sessions: the first featured sharing of research knowledge and experience, while in the second decisions were made in plenary through inclusive participatory processes, which normally involved working in groups followed by a plenary discussion. These processes of knowledge sharing contributed towards building trust between stakeholders and facilitated finding common goals and interests, which helped foster unified action.

The MSPs helped to build new networks and influence national and subnational policy and plans, for example by getting gender recognised as key to equitable adaptation. District platforms were able to engage in participatory zonal planning of their territories for the prioritization of adaptation investments. The success of these initiatives is reflected in their increased institutionalisation and the formation of new MSPs without PACCA in both countries.

Box 3: The National Support Office of the African Union Champion of Disaster Risk Management

The National Support Office (NSO) of the African Union Champion of Disaster Risk Management is an advisory body to the President of Mozambique in his capacity as the African Union Champion in this subject. The National Office works in interaction with the Africa Multi-hazard Early Warning and Action System (AMHEWAS) to provide technical and strategic advice to the Champion. The NSO is composed of six members representing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, the Embassy of Mozambique to the African Union, the National Institute for Disaster Risk Management, the National Institute of Meteorology, and the Academia. The Academia is represented by the Oliver Tambo Africa Research Chair in Ecosystem-based Adaptation in Arid and Semi-arid Zones of the Eduardo Mondlane University.

The National Support Office's responsibilities are:

- a) To provide direct assistance to the President of the Republic of Mozambique in the exercise of his functions as African Union Champion for Disaster Risk Management;
- b) Coordinate and organize information needed by the President of the Republic in the exercise of the functions of the African Union Champion for Disaster Risk Management;
- c) Preparing an opinion on Disaster Risk Management matters;
- d) Define and ensure the execution of the Champion's social communication plan;
- e) Preparing studies and implementing the Champion's program of activities;
- f) Drafting the program of activities and the respective plan of action for the Champion;
- g) Coordinate with the African Union Commission and the Embassy of the Republic of Mozambique to the African Union in Addis Ababa;
- h) Promote research to develop local knowledge;
- i) Promote the activities of the Champion.

References of the African Champion reflecting work carried out by members of the National Support Office of the African Union Champion for Disaster Risk Management:

<https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20230301/amhewas-situation-room-disaster-risk-reduction-receives-its-first-visit>

<https://www.undp.org/africa/press-releases/data-driven-disaster-risk-reduction-africa-shaping-resilient-future>

<https://globalplatform.undrr.org/publication/african-union-commission-official-statement-global-platform-disaster-risk-reduction>

<https://guardian.ng/apo-press-releases/african-union-au-champion-for-disaster-risk-management-drm-stresses-adequate-financial-support-to-achieve-africas-capacity-to-build-resilience/>



3. Live repository of available data

Owing to the frequency that issues of access to data was raised, participants in our engagements repeatedly mentioned that value of a data platform where live information, data, previous research findings (including ‘failures’) and project information could be found.

4. Transdisciplinary Centres of Excellence, Programmes and/or Communities of Practice

The concept of a transdisciplinary research Centre that focused on engagement, collaboration and knowledge translation (i.e. using a relevant definition of Excellence beyond academic impact) was frequently referenced in our engagements. One example shared was that of ICCCAD (see Box 4). The LIRA programme is also a good example of transdisciplinary research and capacity building initiative (Box 5) as is the O.R. Tambo Research Chairs (ORTARChI) in Ecosystems for arid and semi-arid zones held by Prof. Almeida Siteo of Eduardo Mondlane University, Mozambique. We also encountered a few examples of large regional networks of universities that aspire to research for impact, and work with shared principles across their members, these include The Himalayan Universities Consortium, and The Horn of Africa Regional Environment Centre and Network.

Box 4: International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD)

The International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) is one of the leading research and capacity building organisations working on climate change and development in Bangladesh. ICCCAD's aim is to develop a world-class institution that is closely related to local experience, knowledge, and research in one of the countries that is most affected by climate change. It is our mission to gain and distribute knowledge on climate change and, specifically, adaptation and thereby helping people to adapt to climate change with a focus on the Global South.

ICCCAD Goals:

- Training future and current leaders on Climate Change and Development
- Conducting research to generate peer reviewed publications on Climate Change and Development, with a focus on Climate Change Adaptation
- Building capacity, specifically for LDCs
- Building and leading a network of partners, mainly consisting of Southern based institutes

Activities to achieve these goals include, amongst others, a formal Masters programme; short courses for multiple actors in the adaptation knowledge system; seminars, workshops, coordination of a community of practice known as Least Developed Countries Universities Consortium for Climate Change (LUCCC) and other networks; various transdisciplinary research programmes and projects; knowledge service provision and consultancy work; production of a range of academic and popular knowledge products; and a visiting lecturer programme. This Centre is seen as an example of what could be developed further in other LDCs.

SOURCE: <https://www.icccad.net/mdeep/#>

Box 5: Leading Integrated Research for Agenda 2030 in Africa (LIRA) programme (2016-2021)

The Leading Integrated Research for Agenda 2030 in Africa (LIRA 2030 Africa) programme was the first research funding programme that sought to build capacity of early career researchers in Africa to undertake transdisciplinary research and to foster scientific contributions to the implementation of Agenda 2030 in African cities, at a continental scale.

The programme was implemented from 2016–2021 by the International Science Council (ISC) together with its Regional Office for Africa in partnership with the Network of African Academies of Sciences (NASAC) and with the financial support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). It was launched to stimulate the new context-specific evidence required for practice and policymaking in sustainable urban development and focused on building the capacity of the next generation of African scientists to work together with local communities, policy and practice to collaboratively rethink urban futures on the continent. Some of the achievements of this programme include:

- New place-based partnerships across different sectors, that have helped anchor SDGs in local contexts, and increased the local ownership of and responsiveness of communities to the global agenda.
- A contribution to shifting the political economy of research on African cities from the Global North to Africa.
- Generation of knowledge on what it takes to undertake transdisciplinary research in diverse African contexts.

LIRA has demonstrated the benefits of synergies between different knowledge types in generating new evidence and has shown that transdisciplinary practices are effective vehicles for bridging science-policy divides, facilitating the co-production of knowledge and forging much-needed alternate pathways to urban progress

- A range of other benefits that the transdisciplinary approach to research on sustainable development across African cities has been facilitated such as understanding community needs and sharpening the research focus on key societal challenges; fostering learning across disciplines, sectors, institutions and cities; reinforcing the agency of stakeholders; forming strategic and long-standing partnerships with local and national authorities, improving the acceptability of research findings and their potential for impact; making research processes more inclusive; deepening social relations and fostering trust, goodwill and commitment among various groups.
- The creation of a community of practice of engaged early career scholars who are well trained and practiced in transdisciplinary approaches, across diverse African contexts.

This first phase of the LIRA programme has provided an innovative programmatic model for supporting transdisciplinary research and pan-African TD collaborations, lessons from which can be useful for future research funding programmes.

SOURCE: International Science Council/Network of African Science Academies (2023). Leading Integrated Research for Agenda 2030 in Africa (LIRA 2030 AFRICA): Key achievements and learnings (2016-2021). International Science Council, Paris, France. DOI: 10.24948/2023.04

Common themes in implementing enablers

In exploring how each of these enablers or solution spaces could be operationalized, some common themes emerged:

- The suggested solutions cannot function effectively in isolation – each needs the others for a healthy knowledge system. For example, a repository of data needs communities of practice and platforms to feed the latest research into it, and manage its terms of use. Any future programme therefore needs to address multiple barriers and provide integrated solutions.
- There are so many exciting projects, structures, centres, platforms already in existence that can be learnt from, replicated, connected with and leveraged in LDCs.
- Where possible, solution spaces need to consider a ‘business model’ for their long-term sustainability. For example, some Centers may work better if they are semi-independent to circumvent inhibitive university bureaucracy and to ensure independent governance. Examples of activities that could support this include value-added services and short courses that can generate income. Similarly, any structure that has voluntary participation needs to think carefully about the incentives for sustained membership.
- Communication and knowledge translation must be beyond data and information, but include creative visuals and stories to reach a wider audience, especially at community levels.
- The governance structures of these solutions needs to be context-sensitive, there is no one-size-fits all; for example, in some countries it may make sense for government to lead an activity, but in other countries civil society is more trusted and reliable.
- No matter the solution, it needs to consider cascading scales in its structure, so that it is always connected to community level and constantly feeds information and lessons up to the national and global level and back down.

Guidelines for a new action-oriented research programme

In deliberating over the barriers and enablers in the current knowledge system in LDCs, a set of key guiding principles emerged for a new action-oriented research programme that enables LDC universities to support national adaptation policy and action.

A new action-oriented research programme:

- ...has networked and engaged with multiple relevant stakeholders in a 'whole of society' approach, and is owned by all stakeholders;
- ...works with locally-led, community-based and LEK-based innovations and solutions;
- ... prioritises relationship bridging and building for long-term partnerships (over new information);
- ... seeks to first understand what knowledge and data exists, who has access to it and who needs it (before conducting new research which may duplicate efforts);
- ... supports multidirectional knowledge sharing and translation of scientific/technical, local and indigenous knowledge;
- ... is flexible and gives applicants the power to negotiate and to adopt locally and culturally relevant actions and success criteria;
- ... prioritises impact and accessible knowledge beyond academic papers, recognising the gaps in academic publications and broadening credibility to other forms of knowledge dissemination;
- ... recognises the politics, power constraints and complexity that all actors in the knowledge system operate in and builds their capacity to respond to these appropriately.

Next Steps:

In the next stage of the co-creation process, we will call on those who have participated so far to host in-country engagements with high-level stakeholders such as national government, local government, funders, multilateral organisations and/or other important stakeholders. The purpose is to explore how such high-level stakeholders in LDCs see their role in action-oriented adaptation research, and in the solutions identified through the co-creation process so far.

From there, we will convene regional online workshops to share what was discussed in each country engagement, and learn from one another.

We will also be interacting with delegates at Africa Climate Week in Nairobi, Kenya, in early September 2023 and in Adaptation Futures in Montreal, Canada, in October 2023.



All of these engagements will be used to design a new action-oriented research programme, embedded within an LDC's broader knowledge system, that will support both the enabling environment and build capacity to support national adaptation efforts. This new programme will be ready to be presented at COP28 by the ARA Secretariat.

Contact:

For additional information about the ARA or the Co-creation processes, please direct any questions to Leigh Stadler, Interfer, at leigh.cobban@uct.ac.za or Julio Araujo, ARA Secretariat, secretariat@adaptationresearchalliance.org.

For more info about the project, go to:

<https://bit.ly/Co-creationLDC>

 www.adaptationresearchalliance.org  [@Adapt_Alliance](https://twitter.com/Adapt_Alliance)

