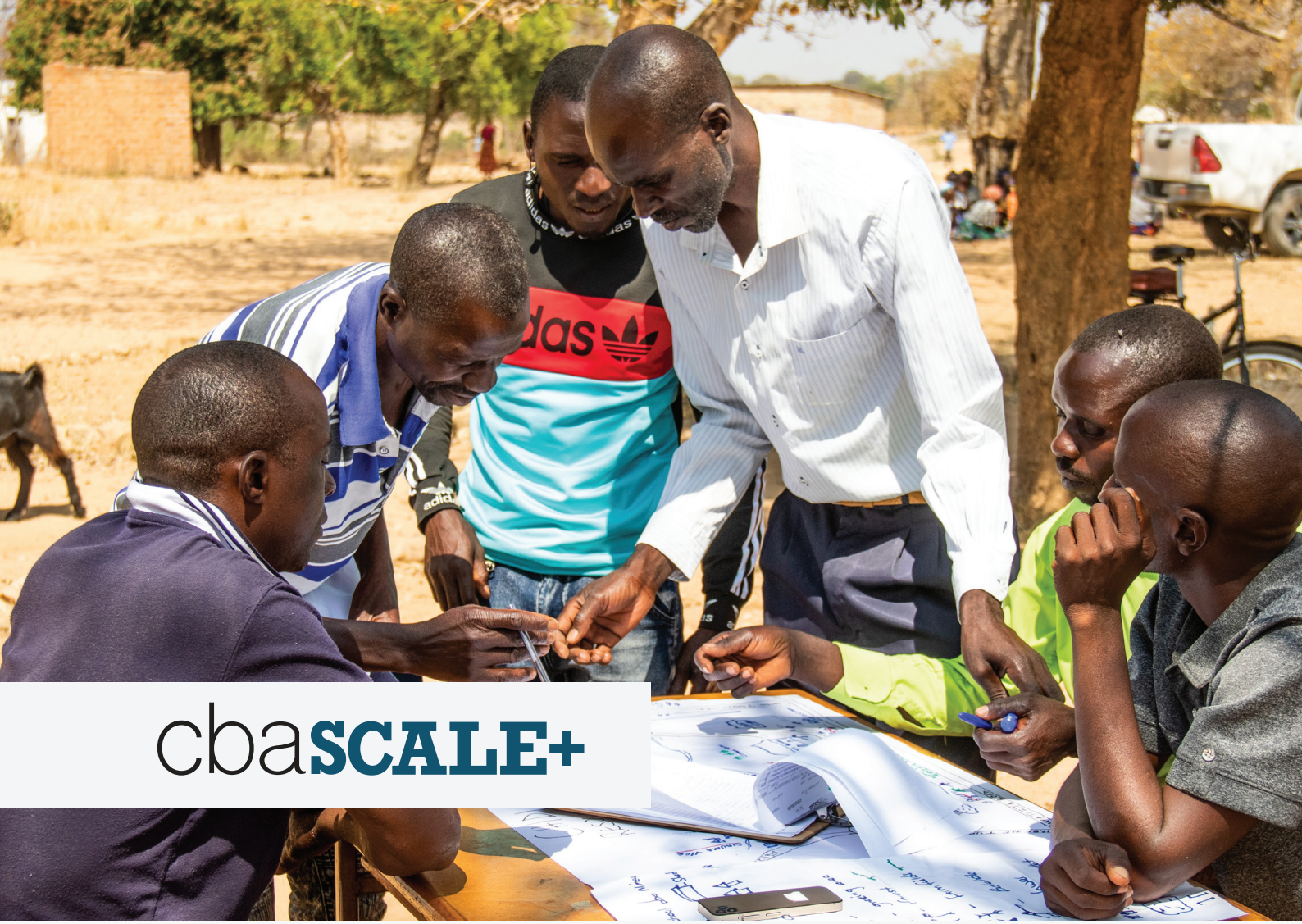

cbaSCALE+

Engaging Communities in Climate Vulnerability Assessment:

Lessons from Southern Africa

By Julie Dekens, Stefan Mielke, and Angie Dazé

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Contents

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Executive Summary

Despite 2 decades of discussions, implementing community-based adaptation (CBA) at scale remains a challenge. Community-level participatory climate vulnerability assessments (PCVAs) provide the foundation for effective locally led adaptation by linking local insights on climate impacts and vulnerabilities with climate projections. They can offer a nuanced understanding of current and future risks to diverse genders, social groups, ecosystems, and livelihoods.

A consortium of four international organizations—CARE; the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network; the International Institute for Sustainable Development; and the International Union for Conservation of Nature—along with local partners, applied PCVA processes in nearly 100 communities in Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe from 2024 to 2025. Drawing from country reports, virtual meetings, and partner interviews to validate findings, this report identifies six lessons from conducting PCVAs:

1. Efficient and respectful community engagement in PCVA begins by building on existing climate and vulnerability data to avoid duplication, yet reliable information is not always available and accessible.

2. Meaningful integration of community knowledge with scientific climate information in PCVA processes requires a strong understanding of climate science, skilled facilitation and communication, attention to cognitive biases, and deliberate efforts to build confidence in scientific evidence.

3. Involving local governments and other key actors at the outset and throughout the PCVA process is essential to institutionalizing CBA, which requires time, trust building, and flexibility.

4. Conducting a PCVA during ongoing crises requires sensitive communication and effective expectation management among project teams, communities, and funders.

5. Communities may disengage quickly if expectations go unmet, so project teams must transparently communicate from the outset what PCVA processes can and cannot achieve—and why—while maintaining proactive engagement throughout.

6. Large consortia collaborations require blending diverse partners' approaches and expertise through deliberate effort over ample timelines. This approach fosters a shared understanding and ownership across the consortium, ultimately bolstering the quality of the PCVA process and results.

While these lessons may seem familiar, practitioners should not take them for granted—much remains to be done for CBA to realize its potential. This report provides detailed recommendations for each lesson, targeting adaptation and development practitioners interested in advancing CBA and community-level PCVAs.

Introduction: Scaling up community-based adaptation

A community-based adaptation (CBA) approach aims to empower people to lead efforts to strengthen their resilience to climate change impacts, based on their own needs, priorities, and capacities. It recognizes that adaptation needs and priorities vary within communities shaped by socio-cultural, environmental, and politico-economic factors.

The approach seeks to shift decision-making power toward those most affected by climate change impacts yet least heard in decision-making processes. CBA therefore aims to strengthen the agency of individuals, communities, and local organizations in designing, prioritizing, and implementing adaptation actions.

In this report, CBA is treated as synonymous with locally led adaptation (LLA). This term emerged in 2020 to emphasize local agency and power shifts in adaptation decision making, moving beyond mere community participation (see more information in Box 1).

The 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) *Sixth Assessment Report* provides strong evidence that CBA can enhance adaptive capacity to climate change impacts. At the same time, and despite being widely discussed for more than 2 decades, there is an ongoing challenge to scaling up CBA in ways that meaningfully and respectfully engage with—and accurately represent—the social diversity within local communities (IPCC, 2022).

This challenge is unfolding amid unprecedented attention on approaches that advance knowledge co-production and justice and equity in climate adaptation. Concurrently, many aspects of these advancements are being actively questioned or contested by different actors, with discussions increasingly shaped by polarization and divergent perspectives worldwide (e.g., Brechenmacher, 2025). Understanding how CBA can be implemented at scale and its impacts therefore remains a challenge.

To address the persistent gap in achieving scale in implementing CBA, in 2023, CARE, the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN), the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) partnered to implement the Community-based Adaptation: Scaling-up Community Action for Livelihoods and Ecosystems (CBA SCALE+) initiative. The goal is to work with communities, local authorities, and policy-makers in three Southern African countries—Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—over a 6-year time frame (September 2023 to August 2029) to implement and scale up CBA actions that are nature-based, gender-responsive, and just.

CBA actions are measures identified and managed by communities to adjust to the impacts of climate change. These actions are considered "nature-based" when they focus on protecting, conserving, restoring, and sustainably managing terrestrial, freshwater, coastal, and marine ecosystems while enhancing community well-being. They are considered "gender responsive and just" when they address the specific adaptation needs and capacities of different genders and social groups, supporting equitable participation and influence in adaptation decision making, as well as equitable access to financial resources and other benefits from adaptation investments. In sum, the project aimed to identify and implement CBA actions that simultaneously address communities' vulnerabilities to climate change, social exclusion, and nature degradation.

The approach to strengthening the institutionalization of nature-based, gender responsive, and just CBA in these countries is built around five key elements implemented consecutively, each building upon the previous one:

1. **Conducting participatory assessments of vulnerability** to climate change in selected communities.

2. **Developing community adaptation action plans** that prioritize short- to medium-term measures based on these participatory assessments.

3. **Facilitating access to resources for implementing the action plans** through project support, partner organizations, integration into local development planning (to ensure allocation of public resources), and/or alternative financing mechanisms.

4. **Creating an enabling policy environment** for implementing CBA actions in the selected countries and beyond.

5. **Collecting lessons learned**—what works, what does not, for whom, where, and why—**and sharing good practices**.

A key theme cutting across these five elements—and essential for supporting the institutionalization of CBA—is the focus on community and local actors' engagement, as well as capacity strengthening.

The core assumption is that, when combined, these elements will support the scaling of CBA implementation in the three countries and beyond; hence the acronym CBA SCALE+. This comprehensive approach to scaling sets the project apart from other CBA initiatives.

This report focuses on the first element, participatory climate vulnerability assessments (PCVAs), conducted in 2024–2025 across the three countries. Its objective is to document lessons learned from the process of conducting PCVAs in target communities. It is primarily designed for climate adaptation and development practitioners globally, especially those interested in advancing CBA and PCVA at the community level. The analysis was developed through a review of country reports developed by project partners, complemented by virtual meetings and interviews with project partners to validate and refine findings.

Box 1. How CBA SCALE+ aligns with locally led adaptation

In this report, CBA is treated as synonymous with LLA. The CBA SCALE+ project was designed in 2020–2021. At that time, the LLA principles[1] had just been developed and were beginning to gain endorsements, but the term "CBA" remained more commonly used among practitioners, including project partners.

Since then, momentum around LLA has grown considerably. By 2025, more than 130 governments, civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international institutions, among others, had endorsed the eight LLA principles (Mitchell, 2025). Recent literature also highlights the shift from CBA to LLA, emphasizing that community participation in climate adaptation does not automatically translate into meaningful leadership or decision-making power.

Nevertheless, from its inception, the CBA SCALE+ project's intent has closely aligned with the ambition of effective adaptation at the local level through strengthening local agency, power redistribution, and genuine local leadership in adaptation decision making. While this report continues to use the term "CBA" for consistency with the original project design, CBA SCALE+ is conceptually grounded in the eight LLA principles and seeks to contribute to their implementation to varying degrees.

[1] See the principles here: https://gca.org/reports/principles-for-locally-led-adaptation-action/

Starting Point: Participatory climate vulnerability assessment

Climate risk and vulnerability assessments are the foundation for risk-informed decision making and help move development beyond "business as usual." As climate change increasingly affects communities, ecosystems, and economies—and with impacts projected to intensify—the effective use of climate risk assessments is more urgent and relevant than ever.

The assessment of climate risks at the global level began over 3 decades ago, notably with the establishment of the IPCC and its First Assessment Report in 1990. Climate risk assessments were first integrated into climate policy following the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992.

Substantial progress has since been made: climate models and projections have evolved, and the focus of assessments has steadily expanded from global physical risks to socio-economic vulnerabilities at the regional, national, and local levels. Importantly, approaches have shifted from top-down to more bottom-up, participatory methods, with growing emphasis on equity and social inclusion.

At the community level, PCVAs play a critical role in linking local insights on climate impacts and vulnerabilities with climate projection analyses. This enables a more nuanced understanding of current and future risks to different genders and social groups, ecosystems, and livelihoods.

Despite these advances, challenges persist. Many existing vulnerability assessments, even when labelled participatory, do not meaningfully include or reflect community perspectives. Engagement is often limited, extractive, or insufficiently inclusive, which can lead to incomplete or distorted understandings of local vulnerabilities. As a result, key information about communities' lived experiences, capacities, and climate-related stresses tends to be overlooked, reducing the accuracy and usefulness of the assessments themselves.

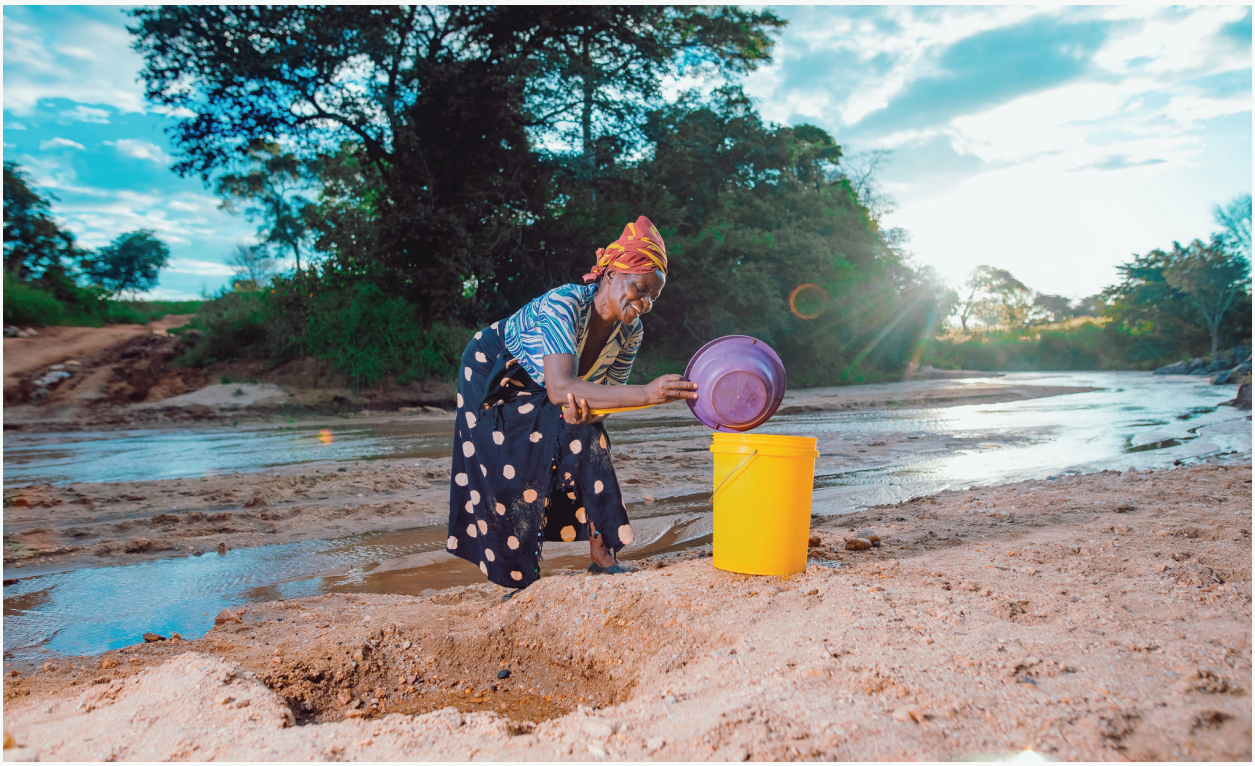
A genuinely participatory PCVA must therefore create the conditions for communities to articulate their own climate-related concerns and priorities, without imposing preconceived assumptions.

Box 2. How CBA SCALE+ strengthens PCVA

CBA SCALE+ was developed to address common shortcomings in community-level climate vulnerability assessments. Its approach deliberately avoids introducing predetermined adaptation strategies, instead helping communities articulate their own priorities and perceptions of climate risks. As one project partner noted:

> "This project allowed the communities to have an input, instead of assuming what they want or what they are going through; the communities are speaking for themselves, instead of going with preconceived ideas of what is needed."

Finally, although most countries have undertaken some form of climate vulnerability assessment at various scales, a detailed, downscaled, and up-to-date understanding of climate risks and vulnerabilities at the community level remains essential. Strengthening participatory PCVAs is therefore foundational for informing subsequent stages of local adaptation planning, while the prioritization of adaptation actions is addressed later through the community adaptation action plans.



Approach

A first step in developing inclusive, gender responsive, and nature-based CBA actions is to build a detailed understanding of each community context where the project is implemented. The PCVA approach analyzes six interrelated themes:

- **Livelihood context:** understanding community members' primary livelihood strategies, key assets, and opportunities for livelihood diversification to better manage climate risks.
- **Biodiversity context:** understanding the major ecosystems and natural resources in and around the target communities; the ecosystem services they provide and the livelihoods that depend on them; the impacts on, and the changes to, key ecosystems and their services over time; patterns of ecosystem benefit sharing, access, and distribution; decision-making capacity over natural resources between men and women; and any conflict in the communities around natural resource management.
- **Climate context:** identifying the climate hazards affecting the community, assessing observed and projected changes in weather and seasonal patterns, and analyzing their consequences for livelihoods, household and community assets, ecosystems, natural resources, and access to services. This process also includes examining how these impacts differ among genders and social groups.
- **Governance context:** understanding the institutions present in the community, the main policy and decision-making processes that influence them, how communities engage with existing governance structures, and how participation and influence in decision making can become more gender equitable.
- **Gender and social context:** understanding gender and social differences in adaptation needs and capacities to ensure that planned actions are gender responsive.
- **Conflict context:** understanding existing and potential conflict dynamics within and among communities and how investments in CBA could affect these dynamics, either positively or negatively.

By focusing on these six themes, the ambition was to understand communities' vulnerabilities to multiple stressors, recognizing that climate stressors often intensify pre-existing vulnerabilities related to weak governance, social exclusion, ecosystem degradation, and conflict. Developing a detailed understanding of the local context therefore helps to uncover the root causes of vulnerability to climate change.

To guide data and information collection across these themes, a template was developed that linked each theme to a set of specific questions. In each country, information was gathered through a qualitative, phased approach that combined desk-based research with primary data collection, including community consultations and key informant interviews (see Table 1).

Table 1. Data collection and analysis process for the PCVA

Steps	Purpose	Methods
Desk-based research	To compile available secondary data and information	Review of the literature, including climate databases and reports and statistics from governments and NGOs
Community consultations	To fill information gaps with a focus on understanding differences among community members, bringing future climate risks into discussions and identifying adaptation measures	Focus group discussions with community groups (e.g., men, women, youth) using tools such as hazard mapping, historical timelines, and impact chains
Key informant interviews	To fill the remaining gaps in the information gathered in the steps above and validate the information collected	Interviews with knowledge holders who can provide detailed information on the area, such as local leaders, women's and other underrepresented group leaders, and government representatives
Results analysis and validation	To analyze results and validate key findings with participants	Validation workshops at the community level, sense-making workshops among project partners and with government officials, and final reports

Source: Authors.

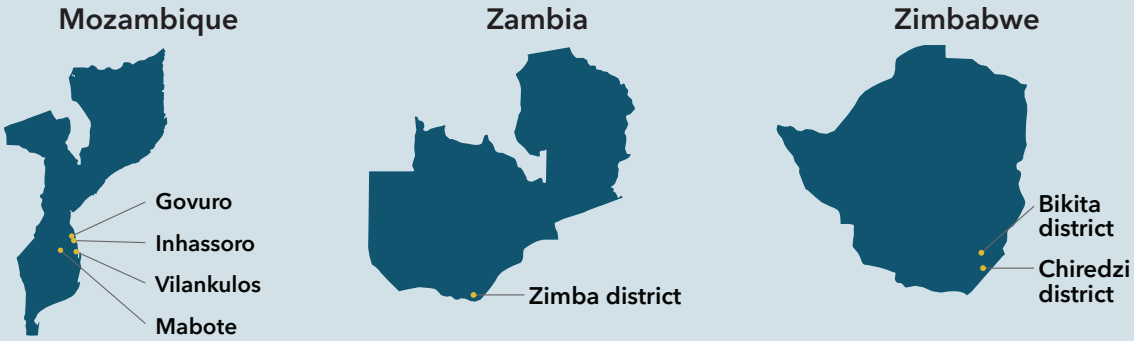
The analysis of climate risks and vulnerabilities was participatory in two main ways. First, data collection and analysis were conducted through consultations with a range of knowledge holders, including community members, government authorities, and civil society organizations. Second, the approach sought to integrate community knowledge with scientific climate information and, in particular, future climate trends. The latter is essential for effective CBA. However, potential future climate vulnerabilities are often overlooked in CBA initiatives, limiting the ability to plan for the future (IPCC, 2022, p. 817).

The questions and methods used in the PCVA were mainly informed by the *Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis Handbook (CVCA)* developed by CARE International (CARE, 2019).

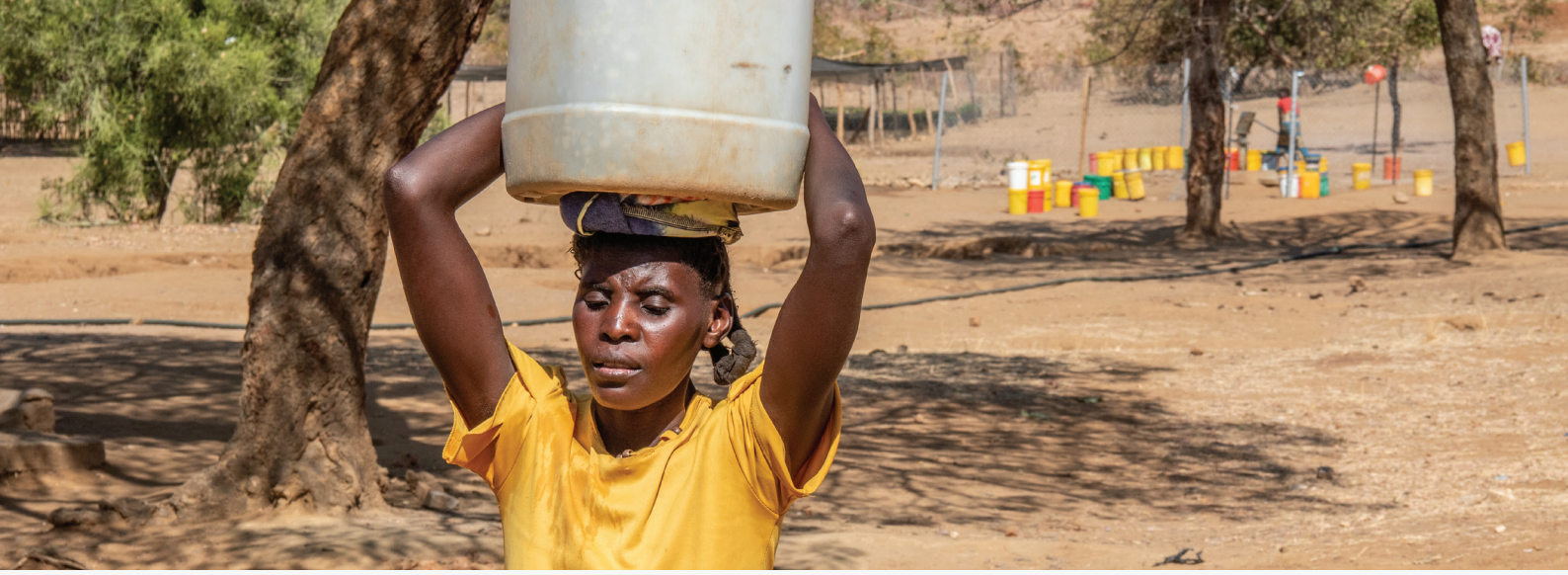
Box 3. Project locations

Partners implemented the project in nearly 100 climate-vulnerable communities, building on existing relationships:

- In Mozambique, the PCVA process covered selected communities across a cluster of three contiguous coastal districts (Govuro, Inhassoro, and Vilankulo) and one geographically separate inland district (Mabote) in Inhambane Province, located in the southern part of the country.
- In Zambia, the PCVA process covered selected communities in Zimba District, in the Southern Province of the country.
- In Zimbabwe, the PCVA process covered selected communities in two adjacent districts (Bikita and Chiredzi) in Masvingo Province, in the southeastern part of the country.



The next sections focus on six themes identified based on a review of country reports and discussion with project teams: (1) building on existing data and information, (2) combining community knowledge with scientific climate information, (3) effective and meaningful engagement of local actors, (4) conducting a vulnerability assessment in a polycrisis context, (5) building and maintaining community trust, and (6) collaborating as a large consortium. The context, challenges, lessons, and recommendations for adaptation and development practitioners are summarized under each theme.



Theme 1: Building on existing data and information

Context

The PCVA process is fundamentally grounded in primary community knowledge to understand people's firsthand lived experiences, local priorities, and the socio-ecological dynamics shaping their vulnerabilities to climate change. Direct community engagement and participation are therefore essential.

At the same time, integrating existing climate and vulnerability data prevents the duplication of efforts and lays the foundation for efficient, respectful community engagement. A thorough analysis of relevant secondary data equips project teams with contextual understanding, reduces burdens on frequently consulted communities, and supplies climate science—especially on future risks—that communities cannot provide. This step complements—rather than replaces—direct community engagement, making it more focused and effective.

The PCVA process thus requires balancing primary and secondary data and information management. To support this, the project team developed a template early on to map key required data and information. This tool helped teams clarify existing knowledge, identify gaps needing direct community engagement, and ensure consultations focused on meaningful dialogue rather than repeating already documented information.

The template covered six key themes for understanding community context: livelihoods, biodiversity, climate, governance, gender and social inclusion, and conflict. It links each theme to guiding questions, such as "What are the primary and secondary livelihood strategies in the communities?" and "What strategies are used during periods of crisis or scarcity?" For each theme, the template recorded a summary of relevant data and information, along with its source and geographic level. It also included examples of documents for desk-based research, such as specific climate databases and reports from past adaptation projects. The template provided a structured, informed starting point for community engagement rather than substituting for lived experience or participatory analysis.

Challenges

Despite the intention and the development of a dedicated tool, ensuring that assessments made full use of existing data and achieved the right balance between secondary and primary sources proved difficult across the three countries for several reasons:

- **Unavailable data at the necessary scale or level of detail:** Teams encountered a lack of granular data at the community level, which was essential for the assessments. Most available information was at the national or subnational (provincial or district) level. While district-level climate data may suffice, understanding livelihoods and ecosystems requires more granular detail to design adaptation priorities that genuinely reflect local needs. In some countries, administrative restructuring also influenced data availability. For example, in Zambia, the Zimba district (one of the CBA SCALE+ project's geographic focuses) was created in 2012 by separating from the larger Kalomo District. Since most information is available at the district level, that change created a data gap for Zimba, with most secondary information only available at the provincial level.
- **Inaccessible data:** Some teams faced challenges accessing relevant data and information from certain national government departments. This was possibly due to multiple factors, such as a lack of established relationships, risk aversion, required formal authorization processes, or capacity constraints within those departments.
- **Outdated data:** Some strategic documents, such as local development plans, were no longer current. In one location, for instance, forest management plans had not been updated in 20 years, making their information on forest and stream locations unreliable.
- **Data quality concerns:** In some cases, teams questioned the reliability of available data, suspecting that political interests may have influenced certain figures or information. Additionally, some team members exhibited a bias toward quantitative data, viewing it as more objective and valid, which led to the dismissal of secondary qualitative information.
- **Data aggregation and analysis**: Teams encountered difficulties aggregating and analyzing diverse sources of information available at varying scales—such as government statistics, maps, and organizational reports—and combining them with community knowledge to form a coherent understanding of vulnerabilities. Additionally, there is often a tendency to prioritize collecting information over analysis, which can result in excessive focus on primary data collection and insufficient emphasis on making sense of the data.

Teams found ways to address some of these challenges. For example, a project team member noted that:

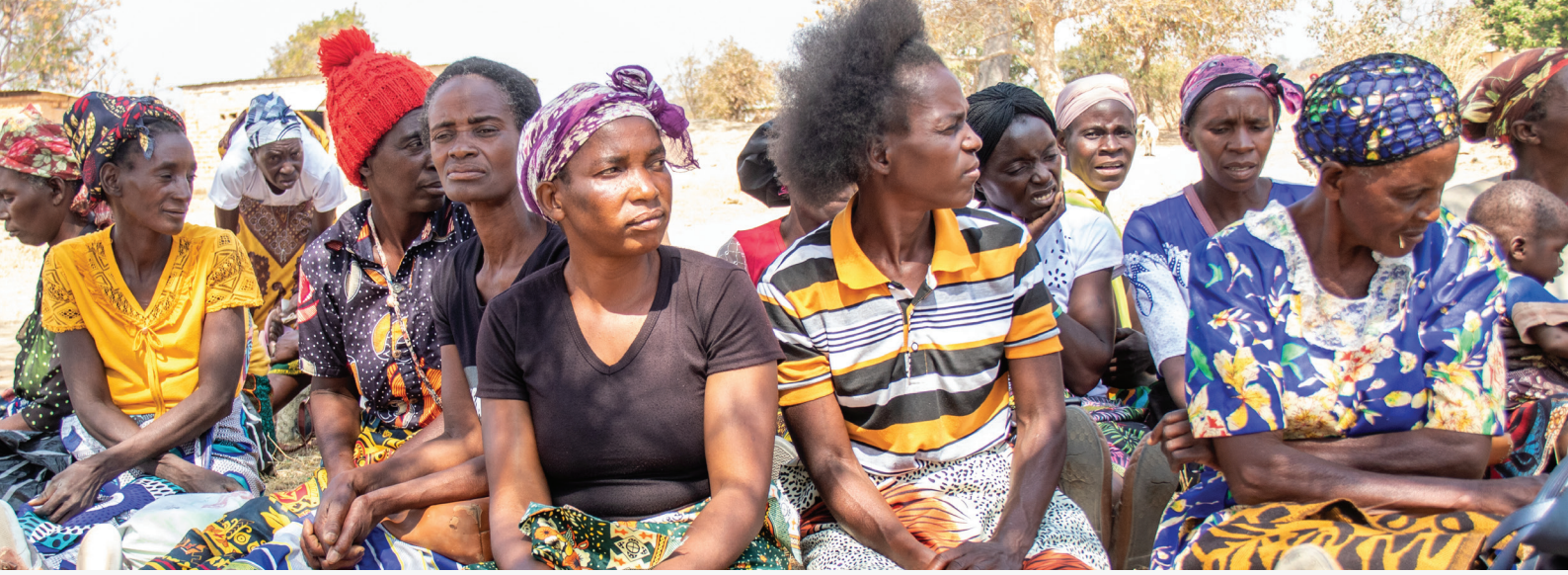
> *"In Zambia, with the absence of adequate secondary data, we tried as much as possible to bring on board the government departments to be part of the analysis process. They participated in the engagement, but also were part of the analysis, and it kind of bridged that gap because they were able to provide in-depth information on particular issues. For example, we learned that there were no gazetted forest areas and that several wetlands are located within the focus area, information that had not been mentioned during the community consultations."*

Lesson

- Efficient and respectful community engagement in PCVA begins by building on existing climate and vulnerability data to avoid duplication; yet, reliable information is not always available and accessible.

Recommendations for Adaptation and Development Practitioners

- Use secondary data to prepare for—not predetermine—the results of the PCVA process. Begin by leveraging accessible quantitative and qualitative data to avoid duplicating past consultations and work, while remaining open to community knowledge that may challenge, refine, or overturn existing information.
- Assess the quality of secondary data and information transparently using a simple criteria checklist to evaluate its credibility, timeliness, and completeness, while recording confidence levels. This approach clarifies where additional investigation is needed.
- Organize sense-making workshops early in the process with local actors, such as local NGOs and government officials, to collaboratively consolidate and analyze secondary data. This approach is likely less costly than duplicating efforts and can promote trust among key actors.
- Engage local governments and organizations working in the area in secondary data analysis and validation processes to help bridge data and information gaps. Recognize them as key expert informants who can provide information that may not be documented or is more current than existing records.
- Understand financial, technical, and behavioural barriers to climate and vulnerability data and information sharing between and among government agencies, NGOs, and research institutions.
- Support open climate risk and vulnerability data-sharing agreements or repositories.
- Support periodic updating of key secondary datasets, such as land-use maps or socio-economic profiles, to ensure that future PCVAs and adaptation planning are based on current, reliable information.
- Transparently document and communicate climate and vulnerability data limitations in reports and discussions with key actors so that decision-makers understand where primary data collection or further analysis is required.
- Integrate clear climate risks and vulnerability data management processes in project design and allocate sufficient resources for data and information sharing, ideally by strengthening existing systems.



Theme 2: Combining community knowledge with scientific climate information

Context

A central objective of the PCVA was to develop a robust understanding of climate vulnerability by integrating community knowledge with scientific climate information, as each offers complementary insights.

Community knowledge offers a nuanced and situated understanding of local climate hazards and impacts, ecosystem changes, gendered experiences, livelihood conditions, and local coping strategies that are often built over generations.

Scientific climate information provides evidence on past trends, future climate projections, and uncertainties that communities cannot observe directly.

Effective CBA must draw on both to identify adaptation actions that respond not only to current realities but also to future climate risks and uncertainties. Without this integration, actions may be maladaptive, meaning they are short-sighted or misaligned with the magnitude of projected changes.

To support this dual approach, the project incorporated scientific climate information into the PCVA design in several ways. The data template included a dedicated climate section with guiding questions on both observed and projected climate impacts in each country. Participatory tools, such as hazard mapping, historical timelines, and impact chains, enabled communities to document their lived experiences of climate hazards and their consequences. In parallel, the project team prepared short, accessible climate briefs summarizing key trends and projections to facilitate discussions with communities about future climate risks.

Challenges

In practice, effectively bringing community knowledge and future climate information together was not a straightforward process. Teams across the three countries encountered four key challenges:

- **Project framing:** The PCVA was framed as a participatory exercise to understand climate impacts and vulnerabilities at the community level from the diverse perspectives in each community. Consequently, some teams interpreted it primarily as an exercise focused on gathering lived experiences. This framing may have unintentionally downplayed the expectation that scientific information, especially future climate projections, was integral to the analysis.
- **Communicating future climate risks:** Translating technical climate projections and uncertainties into accessible messages proved challenging. Some project teams lacked strong experience with climate science communication, and several communities had low literacy levels, further limiting the effectiveness of conventional communication formats.
- **Present bias:** Communities naturally prioritized immediate concerns over long-term risks. This tendency was heightened in the project communities, where acute challenges such as drought-driven water scarcity and food insecurity demanded urgent attention. It made it difficult to shift conversations toward future climate projections and potential long-term vulnerabilities.
- **Messenger effect:** People tend to value information based on the credibility or likability of the person delivering it. In some countries, teams reported that many community members distrusted scientific information, particularly when it was communicated by the government.

To address some of these challenges, the project team used participatory scenario planning processes based on seasonal weather forecasts as a starting point to build communities' trust in scientific information. As noted by a project team member:

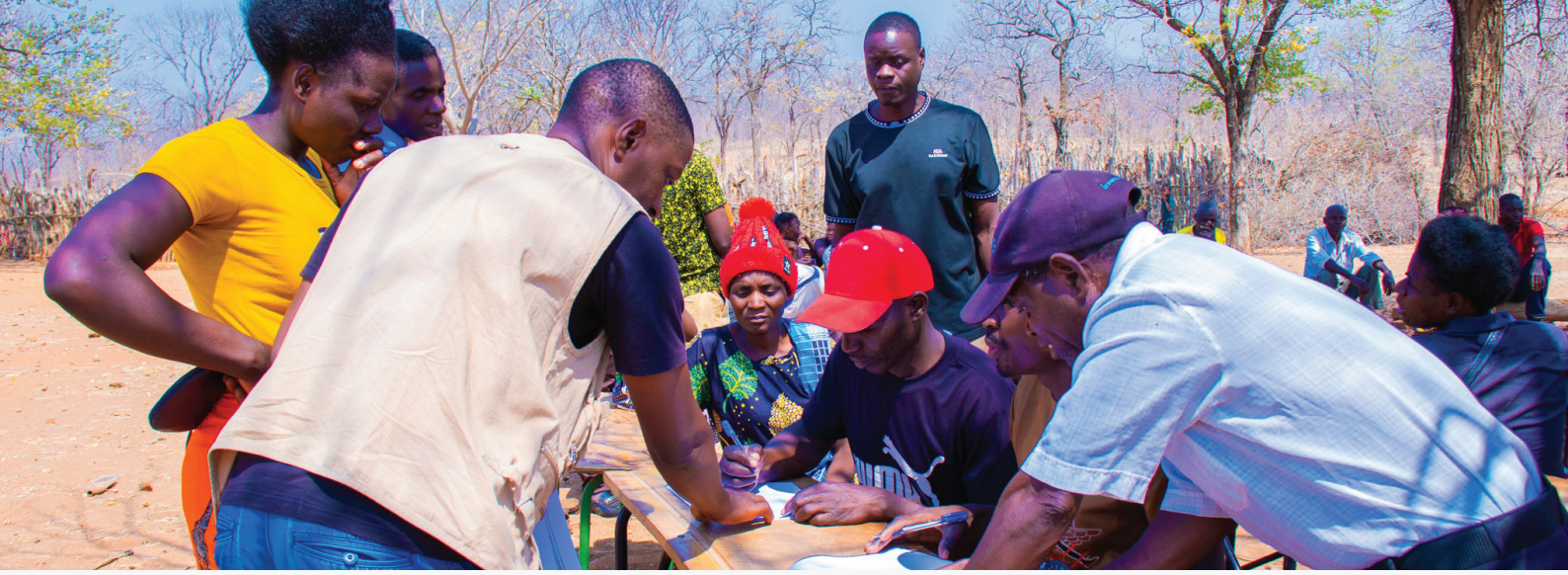
> *"Building trust is slow. Last year, the traditional community predictions and the scientific predictions matched, so the communities were more willing to listen to the scientific knowledge. There is a need to educate and train community members to rely more on scientific knowledge."*

Lesson

- Meaningful integration of community knowledge with scientific climate information in PCVA processes requires a strong understanding of climate science, skilled facilitation and communication, attention to cognitive biases, and deliberate efforts to build confidence in scientific evidence.

Recommendations for Adaptation and Development Practitioners

- Frame the PCVA as an assessment that integrates multiple information sources and methods, including literature review, climate analysis, and direct community engagement. This approach helps balance the roles of community participation and scientific climate information, ensuring neither is downplayed or overlooked.
- Use participatory tools to connect past experiences to future risks. Tools such as hazard mapping and historical timelines can help communities reflect on observed changes before moving into scenario-based discussions of projected impacts using the best available scientific information.
- Involve communities in regular discussions about future climate risks, rather than one-off conversations, to progressively build their understanding and capacities.
- Build community trust in climate information gradually—for example, by starting with accessible seasonal weather forecasts and identifying trusted messengers within the community. Recognize that integrating scientific and local knowledge takes time, requires intentional effort and relationship building, and benefits from ongoing capacity strengthening.
- Develop and disseminate short, tailored climate briefs in accessible language or visual form to strengthen dialogue and comprehension of future climate risks at the community level.
- Allow communities to articulate the full range of challenges they face in securing their livelihoods and discuss how future climate projections intersect with or amplify these issues.
- Clearly communicate the project scope and limitations while providing them the space to discuss their challenges. This helps manage expectations and clarifies that while not all issues can be addressed by the project, the PCVA aims to identify where climate projections exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, informing later stages of planning.



Theme 3: Effective and meaningful engagement of local actors

Context

Another objective of the assessments was to avoid extractive approaches and ensure effective, meaningful engagement with communities and other local actors in all phases of data management—from collection to analysis and validation. Local actors include individuals and institutions operating at the subnational level, such as community groups, civil society organizations, and local government authorities. Engaging a broad range of local actors was essential to accurately capture the adaptation needs and priorities of diverse groups within the focus communities, particularly women and men, and to secure their ownership of the results.

To support this goal, project teams in each country involved local government representatives and civil society partner organizations as community facilitators for data collection and analysis. For example, in Zimbabwe, the facilitation team included representatives from three ministries: the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development; the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small-Medium Enterprises Development; and the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Development and Vocational Training.

To build a common understanding among facilitators, teams provided training at the outset on participatory climate vulnerability analysis and the use of tools such as hazard mapping, historical timelines, and impact chains.

At the community level, separate focus group discussions with different gender and age groups helped to identify diverse needs and priorities. To minimize disruption, meeting durations with communities were limited to a maximum of one day or three hours per community, depending on the size of the community and country context.

Challenges

In each country, several factors affected how communities and local governments engaged in data and information management:

- **Competing priorities during drought emergencies:** Across all three countries, severe drought conditions understandably shifted community focus toward urgent needs. This made it more difficult for community members to engage in more long-term resilience-building activities.
- **Varied trust levels in civil society–government collaboration:** In some contexts, existing dynamics between civil society organizations and government actors affected the ease of collaboration. These dynamics occasionally influenced the extent to which government representatives were able or willing to participate in project activities.
- **Gaps in local governments' climate adaptation capacity:** Although decentralization has created opportunities for more localized decision making, many local government officials are still developing the technical knowledge and skills needed to address climate change adaptation. This sometimes limited their ability to engage fully with the PCVA process.
- **Role of local leadership:** In some locations, established community protocols required project teams to coordinate closely with local political leaders. While this helped ensure formal approval and legitimacy, it also sometimes resulted in leaders' perspectives being more prominently reflected in discussions and occasionally influenced which topics received emphasis. These protocols also meant that community meetings needed to be scheduled around leaders' availability, which at times reduced flexibility in planning and limited the time available for wider engagement.

To address these challenges, teams used multiple channels to maintain consistent communication and build relationships with local actors. For example, one team member noted:

> *"We established committees to involve people in project activities, ensuring information flows directly to those familiar with the project. We also created a WhatsApp platform for information sharing and project updates."*

In Mozambique, the project partners collaborated with district-level councils, community-based organizations, and civil society partners, who played an instrumental role in facilitating and mobilizing the community.

Most countries organized sense-making workshops that involved national and local government authorities as well as community representatives to analyze and validate data and information. These workshops facilitated dialogues between technical experts and local knowledge holders on topics such as the causal links between ecosystem degradation and socio-economic vulnerabilities. These workshops also served to collect additional information. In Mozambique, they enabled the results of the PCVA to directly inform the local adaptation plans of two districts.

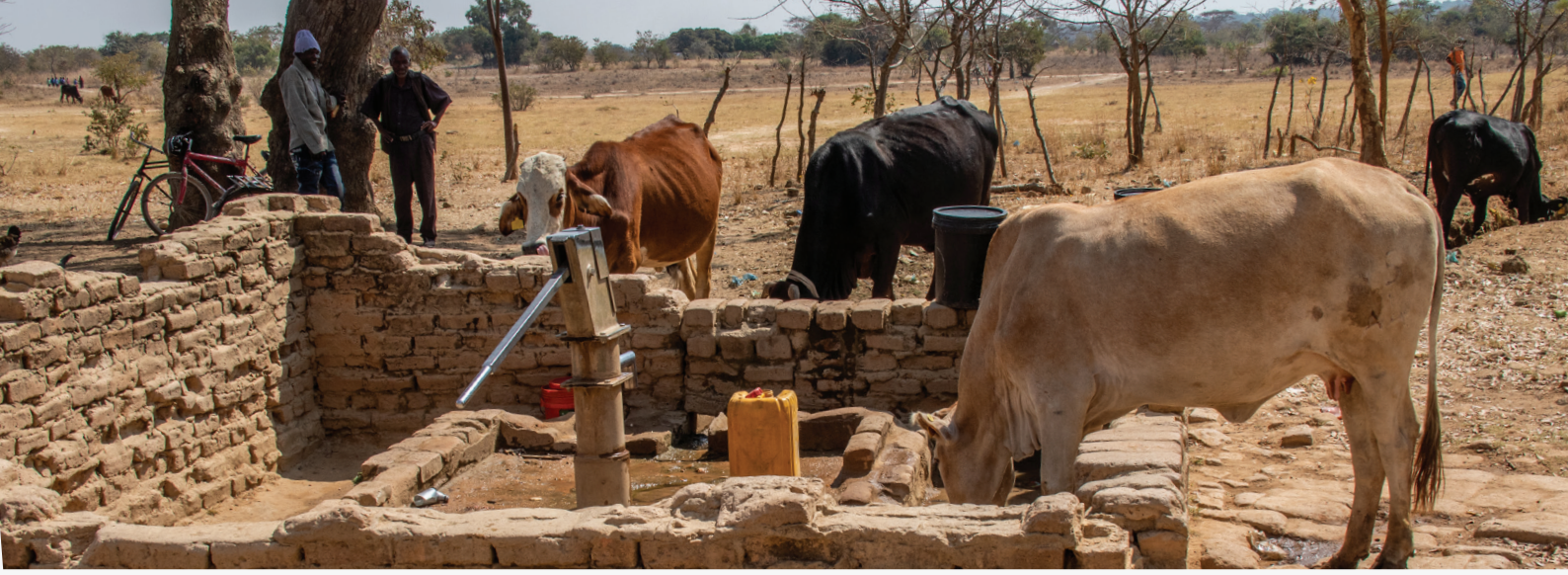
In Zimbabwe, the project team shared regular updates and results from the process with local government extension workers from relevant ministries (environment, agriculture, and district authorities) using existing communication channels.

Lesson

- Involving local governments and other key actors at the outset and throughout the PCVA process is essential to institutionalizing CBA, which requires time, trust building, and flexibility.

Recommendations for Adaptation and Development Practitioners

- Collaborate closely with local governments and other key actors throughout the PCVA process to strengthen capacities and foster local ownership.
- Communicate transparently with community representatives and political leaders about project goals, timelines, and limitations, helping them to understand how a CBA project differs from a typical development project.
- Create regular feedback loops by organizing sessions at key milestones throughout the PCVA process—for example, before data collection to inform the approach and after data analysis to share and validate key findings. These sessions should demonstrate how community inputs are shaping project priorities. Maintaining this ongoing exchange helps sustain trust, strengthen ownership, and ensure that both the process and outcomes reflect the diverse realities and needs within communities. When closing a loop, it is essential to show clearly how community feedback has been acted upon.



Theme 4: Conducting a vulnerability assessment in a polycrisis context

Context

The vulnerability assessments occurred amid overlapping climate, biodiversity, political, and economic crises—a context that is becoming increasingly common.

The governments of Zambia and Zimbabwe declared states of national disaster in February and April 2024, respectively, due to a prolonged drought that began in mid-2023, driven by El Niño (Murwira, 2024; Rédaction Africanews, 2024). In November 2024, the Southern African Development Community (2024) declared a regional emergency based on the drought.

According to the World Meteorological Organization (2025), the drought caused widespread crop failures, with cereal yields in Zambia and Zimbabwe falling 43% and 50% below the 5-year average, respectively. The drought compounded food insecurity driven by ecosystem degradation and triggered severe electricity shortages, leading to significant economic disruptions. Mozambique was less severely affected, with crop production declining by 12%.

Additionally, Mozambique and Zimbabwe experienced notable political instability. In Mozambique, the assessments were conducted prior to the 2024 presidential elections, during which political insecurity heightened and continued to increase throughout and after the elections. During the period of political unrest, physical access to the communities was limited for safety reasons, which delayed the implementation of the PCVA process.

The three countries face economic challenges, including high public debt. In Zambia and Zimbabwe, the drought did not hinder economic growth, which is largely driven by the mining sector. For example, in Zambia, dry weather allowed more open-pit mining, leading to a 12% increase in copper output in 2024 (World Bank, 2025b). However, across the three countries, inequality and high poverty remain widespread. For example, the poverty rate in Mozambique was estimated to be 81% in 2025 (World Bank, 2025a).

Challenges

In each country, conducting the PCVA process in a polycrisis context created several barriers:

- **Addressing immediate needs:** During the drought emergency, communities and local governments understandably prioritized food relief and did not fully recognize the value or relevance of the project's assessment process at that time. Some partner organizations were seen mainly as providers of humanitarian or food aid, which created expectations that the project could not meet.
- **Delayed crisis modifier funding:** The project was unable to rapidly deploy flexible surge funding through a crisis modifier to address communities' urgent food and water needs. This limitation was due to two factors: the consortium did not include a crisis modifier in the project proposal, and the funder lacked a procedure for it. The resulting delay in deploying surge funding led to unmet expectations, causing local actors to lose trust in the project and disengage. Project teams had to invest in renewed dialogue and collaboration to rebuild constructive relationships.
- **Articulating the project's added value:** Teams needed to gradually build understanding among officials and communities about what distinguishes the CBA project from other development projects and how it would benefit them. However, focusing on communities' medium-term needs and priorities was challenging when their immediate needs remained unmet.

To address these issues, teams followed formal processes for initiating and communicating about the project. For example, in Zimbabwe, the project was launched sequentially—first nationally, then at the provincial, district, and community levels. Teams also established regular communication with communities through community and political leaders, clearly outlining the stages and constraints of the crisis modifier process. As one team member explained:

> *"The local authorities then circulated this message at the community level, and we made sure to have a local representative present when we were in the communities to reiterate and reinforce what we were doing."*

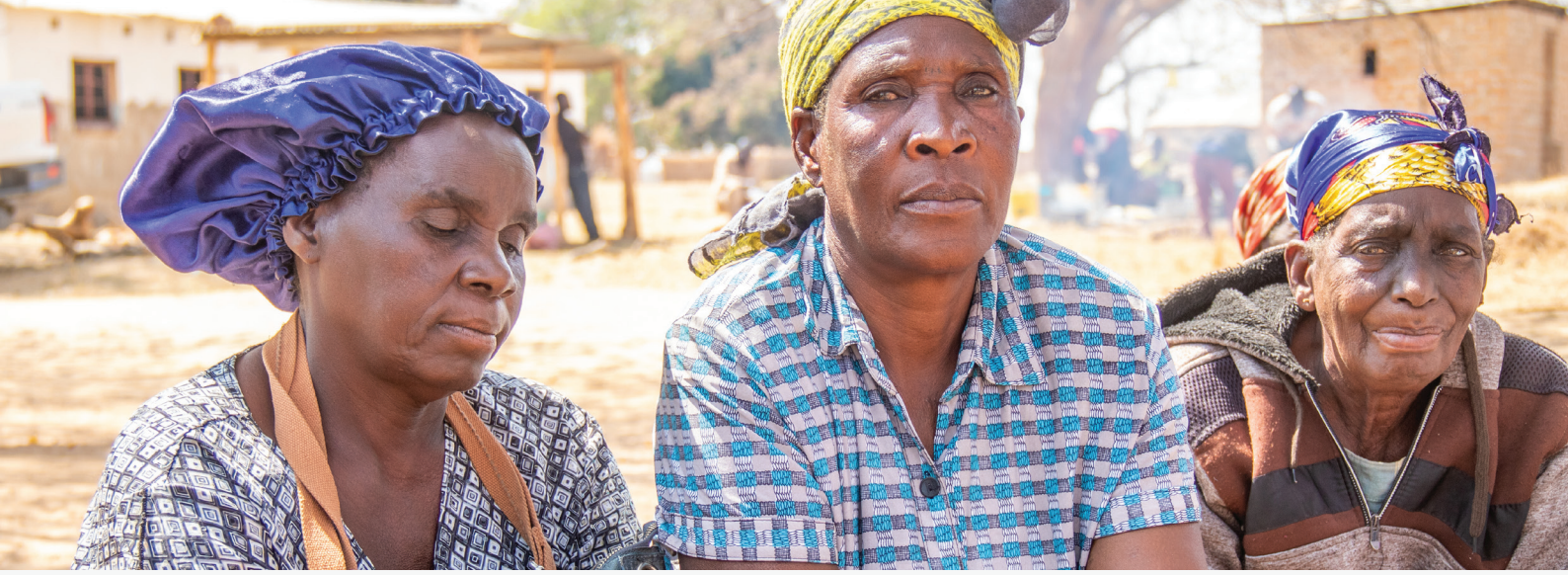
In Mozambique, the project team used delays caused by political unrest as an opportunity to organize a peer-to-peer learning session with Zambia to better understand the PCVA process—what worked well, what did not, and why in the Zambian context. They also devoted additional time to conducting secondary research before engaging with communities, which proved valuable.

Lesson

- Conducting a PCVA during ongoing crises requires sensitive communication and effective expectation management among project teams, communities, and funders.

Recommendations for Adaptation and Development Practitioners

- Assume from the outset that shocks will occur and design PCVA processes to be inherently adaptive and responsive to crises.
- Adapt engagement formats to reduce burdens on communities during crises. The PCVA can be more crisis-sensitive and flexible through shorter, well-targeted sessions; mobile or cluster-based meetings closer to households; and additional outreach to ensure the inclusion of vulnerable groups. These adjustments can lower participation barriers, minimize travel demands, and ensure that critical voices are not lost during periods of heightened stress.
- Systematically include provisions for a crisis modifier in project proposals so that the needed flexible resources can be rapidly deployed.
- Engage funders early—ideally during proposal development—to build awareness that flexible funding mechanisms may be required in times of crisis. This is especially important for funders without experience in humanitarian or emergency contexts and when such mechanisms are not specified in existing guidelines or anticipated in the original project design.
- Set aside funds from the start for "quick win" and no-regret activities that address the community's most immediate needs while also building resilience for the future. This approach allows the PCVA and longer-term planning processes to unfold alongside these immediate actions.



Theme 5: Building and maintaining community trust

Context

Trust is a fundamental element that underpins all the previously mentioned themes. It is both essential for the success of the PCVA process and a key outcome of an effective PCVA. While trust is widely recognized as crucial, it is also complex—it takes time to build and can be quickly lost if not carefully nurtured.

In most focus communities, project partners engaged with groups fatigued by repeated consultations from numerous projects—often perceived as information-extraction exercises with little follow-up or tangible outcomes, which created frustration. Recognizing the critical role of trust in understanding and addressing local climate vulnerabilities, the project sought to build on existing relationships by collaborating with local implementing partners already embedded in the communities.

The PCVA process was framed as an initial step in a broader effort to facilitate the implementation of adaptation actions relevant to these communities. Efforts were made to rigorously follow community protocols, including the involvement of traditional leaders and local committees, to ensure a participatory process that was both representative and inclusive. This approach helped establish a process perceived as legitimate—and therefore trustworthy.

As noted by project team members:

> *"Trust was gained by separating groups (men, women, youth, elderly), which helped each group speak more openly. When results were presented to the entire community, they were recognized as collective inputs, not attributable to any single person."*

> *"Creating a safe space for women and youth to express their views communicated respect and equality, valuing diverse voices."*

This approach fostered trust and enabled more effective engagement and collaboration throughout the PCVA process.

Challenge

Sustaining trust even when delays occurred due to unforeseen factors was an overarching challenge. Across the countries, communities began to doubt that the consultations would lead to concrete outcomes due to delays between the PCVA process and the subsequent steps of prioritizing and implementing specific measures. This gap generated anxiety within these communities.

To address the issue, project teams aimed to provide regular feedback and maintain consistent interactions with communities, while offering transparent information about the reasons for the delays.

Lesson

- Communities may disengage quickly if expectations go unmet, so project teams must transparently communicate from the outset what PCVA processes can and cannot achieve—and why—while maintaining proactive engagement throughout.

Recommendations for Adaptation and Development Practitioners

- Collaborate with local organizations that have already established trust within communities, enabling them to lead engagement efforts. Support them with communication tools and strategies to strengthen their capacity to convey the project's intentions and approach.
- Spend time with community leaders, local government representatives, and other local actors at the start of the engagement process to help them understand the broader objectives beyond the PCVA. Emphasize that this initiative differs from a typical project and represents a longer-term commitment to the communities. Use visuals and inclusive communication methods to build shared understanding.
- Allocate flexible funding to implement activities that address urgent needs and priorities while supporting the longer-term CBA planning process. Such funds can be particularly useful if a shock occurs early in engagement and serve as good practice to generate early benefits, build trust, and sustain participation throughout the PCVA process and beyond.

Theme 6: Collaborating as a large consortium

Context

While previous themes focused outward on community- and local-level processes, the PCVA's effectiveness hinged equally on internal collaboration among consortium partners. This final theme examines how the consortium collaborated to implement the PCVA process and jointly interpret the results.

The project united four international organizations—CARE, FANRPAN, IISD, and IUCN—building on 2 decades of inter-organizational ties to advance community-level climate adaptation.

The partnership includes diverse representation at the international, regional, national, and subnational levels. In each country, CARE and IUCN country offices led efforts, partnering with local implementers to conduct the PCVA process. The large consortium thus provided access to diverse and complementary expertise and resources.

Though the core PCVA approach and tools were mostly set at project design, partners closely collaborated to apply, adapt, and interpret them during implementation. Through ongoing communication and collaboration during the assessment process, they aligned on cross-country execution, pinpointed data gaps, and collectively analyzed findings. This shared sense-making ensured consistency across varied contexts.

Challenges

Collaborating as a consortium presented several challenges:

- **Coordinating a large and diverse consortium:** Despite a history of inter-organizational relationships, new connections had to be established among individual consortium members. The consortium's institutional and geographical diversity meant partners had varying knowledge and experience of PCVA, requiring time to develop a common understanding. For example, members differed in how they defined "communities" across different contexts.
- **Leveraging the consortium partners' unique skills and knowledge:** Each partner contributed complementary expertise, approaches, and tools. For example, IUCN provided nature-based adaptation expertise, while CARE offered its strengths in adaptation at the community level and the application of tools in the Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis Handbook (CVCA). Still, building a shared understanding of each partner's approaches—and how they interconnected—took more time than expected.
- **Time constraints:** The relatively tight timeline for conducting the PCVAs impacted buy-in to the standardized data collection tools among project partners. Some partners directly involved in data collection felt that the generic template developed to guide data and information collection across key themes—using a set of key questions—did not adequately involve them and was too complex.
- **Trade-offs between scope and depth:** The PCVAs' broad geographic scope limited the depth of the collected information. In each country, the PCVAs covered many communities in different languages across large, sometimes disconnected geographical areas to account for diverse agroecological zones—for example, covering coastal and inland districts in Mozambique or covering an entire district with different wards in Zambia. This broad geographical scope required trade-offs with the depth of information collected. In contexts where communities were widely dispersed, communities were asked to develop a consensus on priority issues, which sometimes led to overlooking specific local nuances.

To address these issues, the consortium organized monthly online meetings among project partners and a face-to-face learning workshop in November 2024. These interactions provided a space for regularly updating each other and discussing challenges and solutions as a group. As noted earlier, since each country conducted the PCVA at a different pace due to contextual differences, Mozambique was able to organize a peer-to-peer learning exchange on the PCVA process with Zambia.

Lesson

- Large consortia collaboration requires blending diverse partners' approaches and expertise through deliberate effort, ample time, and transparent communication. This approach fosters shared understanding and ownership across the consortium, ultimately bolstering the quality of the PCVA process and results.

Recommendations for Adaptation and Development Practitioners

- Recognize that partners may interpret PCVA concepts and tools differently, despite shared experience.
- Allocate time early to map partners' skills, capacities, and approaches—and how they integrate—countering the tendency to default to familiar tools.
- Dedicate time for partners to co-design the approach and tools, explicitly debating trade-offs (e.g., scope vs. depth). This process communicates value for all expertise, which is essential since the PCVA forms the foundation for all subsequent steps.
- Provide consortium training sessions to align on approach and tools.
- Prioritize joint planning and regular communication. Even with fixed methodologies, collaboration during implementation enhances shared understanding and consistency.
- Discuss trade-offs explicitly. Partners should collectively consider the level of standardization required and where contextual adjustments are more appropriate.
- Budget ample time for tool translation and contextualization, especially for sensitive topics such as gender and social inclusion.
- Foster peer learning among consortium partners to identify issues early and enhance the process.

Conclusion

Scaling up CBA begins with robust PCVAs at the community level, providing a strong foundation for effective expansion. These assessments are the basis for identifying locally meaningful adaptation priorities aligned with future climate risks. Yet meaningfully and respectfully engaging with—and accurately representing—the social diversity within communities remains challenging.

We documented lessons learned from applying PCVA processes in nearly 100 communities across Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe between 2024 and 2025. Through this experience, we identified six areas that require particular attention to make PCVA processes more effective, timely, and respectful: (1) building on existing data and information, (2) combining community knowledge with scientific climate information, (3) ensuring effective and meaningful engagement of local actors, (4) conducting vulnerability assessments in a polycrisis context, (5) building and maintaining community trust, and (6) collaborating as a large consortium.

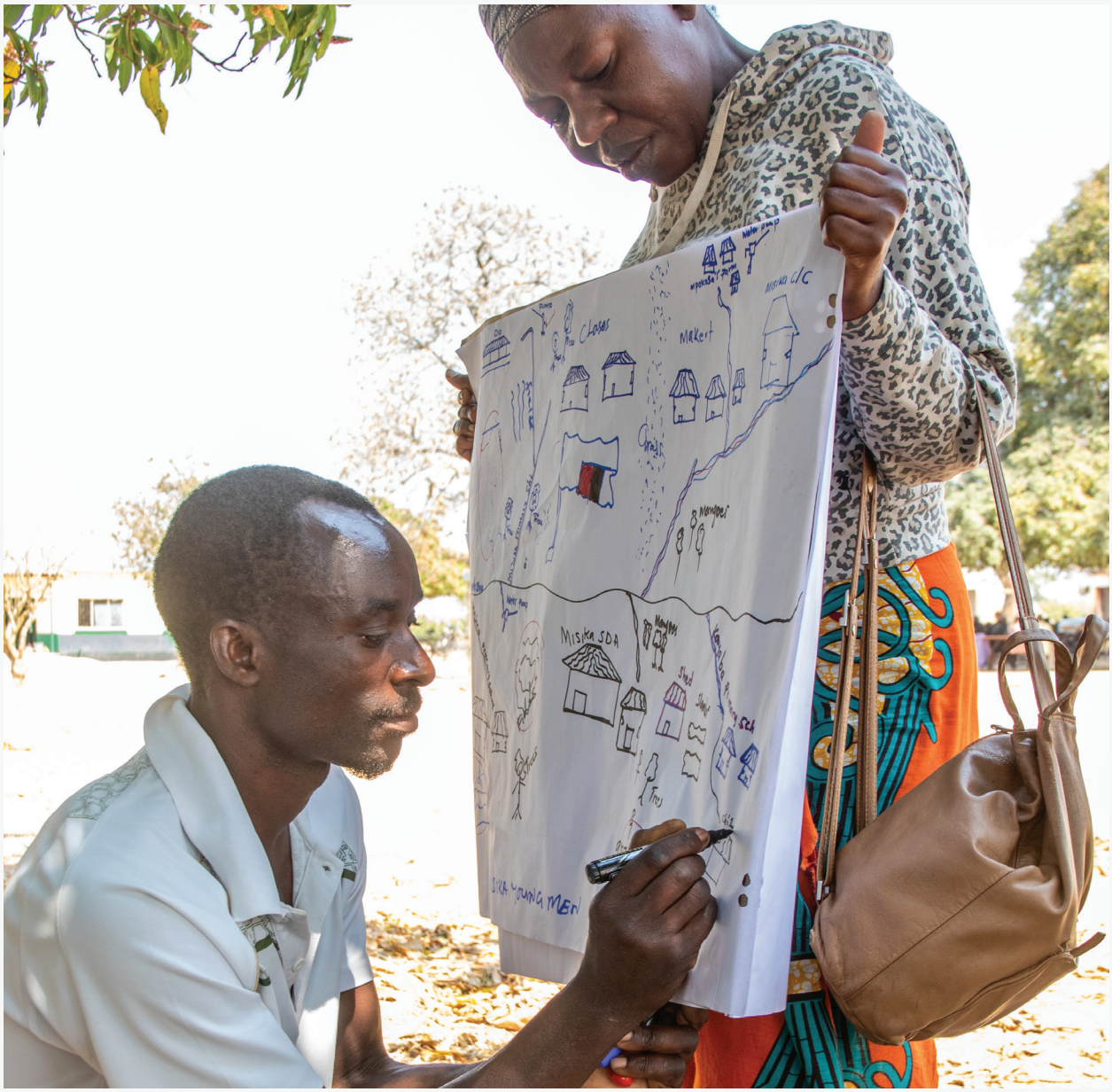
While these themes may seem familiar, adaptation and development practitioners should not take them for granted. Much remains to be done to address these challenges. Striking the right balance in engagement—to ensure effective PCVA processes without overburdening communities and local actors—is complex. It requires NGOs, governments, and funders to design and implement projects differently, leveraging existing information and improving information sharing between and among these actors.

Although it is too early to assess the full impact of the PCVA processes in the three countries, project partners noted that the results uncovered detailed, locally relevant information that might otherwise have been overlooked, such as ecosystem degradation and livelihood patterns specific to certain communities or geographic areas.

For example, in Zambia, four of the 12 focus communities rely more on legal mining than agriculture, which is typically considered the main livelihood activity in the district. The findings also revealed that mining-dependent communities face distinct challenges, such as increased incidents of harassment of women due to the influx of outside workers.

The process also helped teams understand existing community capacities and responses. For example, in Zimbabwe, the project team documented how some communities have already adapted their cropping patterns and types of livestock to adjust to changing climatic conditions. They identified existing responses that need to be supported and possibly scaled up, such as such as community-led multiplication of drought-tolerant seed varieties and specific restrictions for local wetland protection.

These insights demonstrate the value of PCVAs at the community level in generating nuanced, context-specific information. Such findings are critical for identifying targeted, equitable, and forward-looking adaptation measures that build on existing strengths while addressing priority needs. As countries and organizations seek to scale up CBA, investments in rigorous, participatory, and climate-informed climate vulnerability assessments will remain foundational.



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