

Strengthening Gender-Inclusive Climate Action in Intersecting Crises: A Roundtable Discussion

Roundtable report, August 2022
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This note summarises the findings of a roundtable discussion convened in July 2022 by NatCen International at Keble College, the University of Oxford. The discussion titled 'Strengthening Gender-Inclusive Climate Action in Intersecting Crises' was a collaboration of NatCen International with the Weidenfeld-Hoffman Trust and Keble College. The discussion was chaired by Dr Sherine El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, Director of NatCen International and Visiting Fellow at Keble College, and it featured climate experts and entrepreneurs, conflict and gender experts and academics. Speakers included Dr Irina Fedorenko-Aula, Co-CEO of Vlinder Climate; Dr Martin Atela, Programme Manager and Dr Joslyn Muthio Nzau, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research; Dr Salamatou Abdourahamane Illiassou, Senior Lecturer at the University of Diffa; Dr Ersilia Francesca, Professor at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and Dr Lauren Fletcher, Co-Founder at Beta Earth.

The discussion focused on examples from Africa and explored the opportunities and challenges of developing context-specific pathways towards strengthening gender-inclusive climate action within intersecting crises. The conversation was guided by four cross-cutting themes of gender-inclusivity in climate action:

- How can climate action be more intersectional and responsive to gender and other vulnerabilities?
- What is the nature of vulnerability for immobile populations? What is the state of gender-specific adaptation and mitigation strategies?
- How can international engagement strengthen gender-inclusive climate action in intersecting crises?
- How can complementarity between international and local actors be supported and where necessary, redefined?

Key Messages

- African women are key players in the fight against climate change in their communities. However, in contexts where they have shown strong leadership in climate action, they often lack control over economic resources, which has led to underrepresentation and devaluation of women's agency. Economic empowerment of women and supporting them to have stronger decision-making capacity at all levels are necessary.
- Women face overlapping and compounding disadvantages in the climate action sphere. Not all women face the same barriers to inclusion, and many – such as agricultural workers – have much to gain from a critical understanding of the power relationships that underpin climate action.
- Capacity strengthening and engagement with local actors needs to be multidirectional, so that international actors can learn from local actors and vice

versa in shared spaces while avoiding tokenistic inclusivity that does not foster joint thinking on key issues related to climate change.

- In intersecting crises, engaging in climate action must go further to address other forms of vulnerability within communities. Compartmentalized or siloed engagement needs to shift towards a more collaborative and multisectoral approach that addresses vulnerabilities holistically.
- International actors have an important role to play in supporting and strengthening gender-inclusive climate action, but are not doing enough and can unintentionally co-opt negative power dynamics through lack of contextual awareness. Incorporating conflict sensitivity within climate action can help bring a better understanding of local needs and priorities and how complementarity between international and local actors could work drawing on the comparative strengths of each.

Power Dynamics and the Scope for Gender-Responsive Climate Action

The discussion opened with a reflection on a [2019 report by Monash University](#) on women-led climate action in Cambodia, Kenya, and Vanuatu. The report shows how women are often the bearers of local knowledge on the environment which connects crises such as climate, disaster, conflict and food insecurity. The report also pointed out that women's networks and organisations had already effectively linked immediate crisis response and long-term sustainable development. The discussion showed that those findings mirrored the participants' own experiences in working with communities adapting to climate change. Local power dynamics as well as a limited understanding of the local political economy by international actors, however, were mentioned as two key barriers that restrict women's agency and leadership in climate action.

One participant reflected on the leadership roles that women play in development and climate action projects in India, pointing out that in their experience working with rural communities there, women usually play significant leadership roles but do not receive the recognition they deserve. The participant pointed out that 'men come later, when the project is more successful' and reap the rewards.

Box 1. Women-led Climate Action and Gender Norms

Women can and do play a critical role in responding to climate change due to their local knowledge and leadership. However, gender norms can be disempowering of women who might make decisions based on their local knowledge (such as determining which crops to plant), but that they often lack ownership and control over economic resources.

Understanding how gender norms and local power dynamics impact gender inclusive climate action is necessary for women to become agents of change. Gender norms that have contributed to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles have also devalued their contributions to climate action. Much more needs to be done to ensure that women are able to influence and shape climate action.

In Kenya, women's leadership roles are sustained through collective action. Women have proven themselves to hold impressive knowledge about climate adaptation and mitigation strategies especially in rural areas and have developed the potential to tap into funding opportunities for their work. Nevertheless, the political status of women can have an impact on their livelihoods and their agency in climate action. Women are underrepresented in the political and economic spheres and as a result, they have limited decision making capacity. The existence of government-led processes to include gender-inclusivity in climate action was noted by the speakers as a positive step, but deeply embedded social-cultural impediments, such as barriers to land ownership, continued to persist and undermine women's ability to maximise their productivity.

Because the impacts of climate change in conflict-affected contexts are multidimensional, the speakers emphasized that climate action too needs to be able to address various types of vulnerability. Niger is a case in point. Niger is not only facing a climate crisis in terms of water scarcity; it is also facing a humanitarian crisis which began in 2014 with the arrival of refugees from neighbouring Burkina Faso, Mali and Nigeria, following non-state armed group attacks in the region. At the refugee camps of Sevam, in the region of Diffa, one of the speakers described how women have been at the forefront of innovations in fishing, farming and water use, seeking to respond to multiple vulnerabilities at once. A holistic approach, the speaker argued, was necessary and there is much to be learned from that by international actors that often adopt a compartmentalized approach to climate change.

The discussion stressed the importance of broadening the understanding of power dynamics in climate crises. Speakers highlighted that simplistic and short-term interventions that do not challenge existing power structures will continue to exclude women from their necessary place as leaders in climate action.

Opportunities and Limitations of International Engagement

The discussion then moved onto the practical question of what can be done by international actors and local actors to strengthen gender-inclusive climate actions, and what are the limits to these actions. A speaker pointed out that international actors like the UN, as well as rich economies, have an important role to play in supporting climate action but have been constrained by several systemic and contextual barriers.

Some persistent issues that were pointed out included the domination of climate action spaces by white and male directors and the vulnerability that smaller climate actors face in negotiating with an industry that is attracting billions of dollars from big companies. It was mentioned that one of the problems is that multi-national companies tend to squeeze profit out of the climate problem. The local communities, as such, struggle to meaningfully expand their leadership in climate action. Including women and other marginalised groups in a tokenistic way within the spaces where climate action is discussed and implemented was also a recurring theme throughout the discussion.

Despite the criticisms raised about the domination of white and male social groups at COP21 in Paris in 2015, the participants noted the changes they have witnessed in this regard at subsequent COPs. A marked difference was noted in COP26 in 2021 (Glasgow), where the inclusivity of local communities was a bigger interest than before.

There was a big difference between the COPs 23 and 26 regarding the demographics that were represented. Giving young women a space to discuss and plan ways to mitigate the effects of, and adapt to, climate change was also seen as a progressive step in the right direction. Many felt ambivalent, especially regarding the forthcoming COP27 scheduled to be held in Cairo in late 2022.

There was hope that this would be a useful step towards mobilising action on climate change in the region. COP27 in Egypt was described as an opportunity to gauge how far global communities have come towards community-level inclusivity.

Another participant added that beyond the different COPs, it is important to set an agenda on youth climate education, to ensure sustainable changes in behaviour and success in climate actions all over the world.

Opportunities and Challenges for Complementarity between International and Local Actors

The discussion then addressed the opportunities and challenges for complementarity and collaboration between international and local actors. A speaker questioned the usefulness of the term *complementarity* and stated that underpinning the term is an assumption that “everyone has a strength that complements the weaknesses of others around the table”. This was not always the case in northern-southern partnerships and that sometimes, mutual learning and cultivating a shared understanding of a problem is as important as building on one another’s comparative strengths. As climate change is a global issue, it is important that people come to the table wanting and willing to learn from each other. *Utafiti Sera*, a scheme developed by the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research, builds, supports, and enhances communities of researchers and policy actors working together to ensure evidence-informed decision making. A speaker argued that [Utafiti Sera is bridging local knowledge and approaches with national and international actors](#).

Box 2. “Which Women?” Incentivizing Gender Inclusivity in Climate Action

Speakers explained how their projects include goals to make sure that we build into programmes where women are given full authority as decision makers, and the need to avoid the ‘tick box’ exercise where women are included but are not perceived as equals. This part of the discussion revived the overlapping and compounding disadvantages that women face in the sphere of climate action. Longstanding gender norms affect women’s fair inclusion. It emerged that different women are subjected to these barriers to inclusivity in different ways. A participant posed a thought-provoking question: ‘which women?’. To be inclusive, the participant proposed, we must recognise the power relationships that underpin the actions that are taking place in mitigating and adapting to climate change.

Citing experiences of working with international actors, participants described some of the ways in which international actors come in and ‘push down their thinking so that everyone thinks like them’, so that the local actors are jostled into perceiving their problem in the way the international actors understand it. Participants explained how good it would be if international actors made it clear that they are going to learn about the local adaptations to climate, and then use this knowledge to guide their actions, instead of it being the other way around, which it often is. Furthermore, COP27 in Egypt was highlighted as an arena where actors from the Global North could witness and practice these approaches.

About the Authors

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