A new report, Lessons from Local Adaptation Practice 2023 released Thursday by the Global Center on Adaptation (GCA) and Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN) finds that global and national systems are not changing fast enough in response to the needs of local communities racing to adapt to climate change to secure their survival.

The report said that local adaptation leaders are working hard to transform lives and livelihoods in the face of the changing climate, but find their gains are precarious where they lack the enabling environment (legislative, financial, institutional, technical, and capacity-related) to lock in such transformations.

The findings are based on over 200 stories submitted by champions of locally led adaptation which tell of progress and gaps in adaptation at the local level. Many local adaptation leaders reported they are struggling to find the necessary support and resources to enable them to scale and extend their work to other communities.

The stories also show that in comparison to sectoral top-down adaptation efforts, local champions are implementing holistic approaches that account for the linkages between climate change as a driver of exclusion and marginalization and its impact on the mental health of communities.

Prof. Patrick Verkooijen, CEO of the Global Center on Adaptation, commenting on the study's findings said: "At COP28, it is important for global leaders to recognize that no global stocktake or measures of progress towards a Global Goal on Adaptation can be effective without including local-level assessments of the progress individuals and communities make in managing the impacts of climate change."

Locally led adaptation

Right now only a tiny fraction of climate funding reaches the people battling the worst effects of climate change, it said.

"Every day that passes without giving them the necessary resources to protect themselves and their livelihoods leaves them more vulnerable. But this is not just about money, it is also about recognizing how local communities have a more holistic view of what is needed to build climate resilience and adaptive capacity on the ground," Prof. Verkooijen said.

Reacting to the new findings Anju Sharma, Locally Led Adaptation Program Lead at GCA said: “COP28 will only be a success if it achieves real benefits for the communities most affected by the climate crisis.”

“This year’s climate summit must ensure that finance flows to the poor communities most affected by climate change, and into locally led, appropriate and effective adaptation. If we achieve this, the world will have taken a big step toward redressing the gross injustices of climate change.”

According to Dr Shehnaaz Moosa, CEO of the Climate and Development Knowledge Network, a clarion call at the heart of these stories is the championing of people’s rights. COP28 needs to put the recognition and enforcement of rights at the center of climate change adaptation. “The stories show that local communities regard progress on rights – particularly of marginalized groups such as women and Indigenous Peoples – and locally led adaptation as two sides of the same coin. Where these fundamental rights are eroded, people’s adaptive capacities are also weakened,” she said.

The study recommends that funders and governments must change how adaptation finance works by embracing a wider definition of adaptation, instead of expecting local communities to reframe how they experience the negative impacts of climate change.

It said that they must be smarter about recognizing the cascading impacts of climate change on marginalized groups in society and supporting communities to explore multiple pathways to climate-resilient development such as tackling gender-based violence and convening mutual support activities for psychosocial resilience. In addition, they must be willing to provide patient, predictable resources for LLA that directly address the social norms and structural power relations which currently perpetuate disproportionate burdens, and which widen the gender development gap.

While meaningful partnerships between communities and local governments to create an enabling environment that allows locally led adaptation to flourish remains critical, the new study points out that adaptation responses may also be discriminatory.

Confronting discrimination is essential for many people to be able to thrive, and doing so widens the leadership pool for local adaptation, it said..

Currently less than 17 percent of global climate finance and perhaps as little as 2 percent, reaches climate-resilience projects led by local communities.