



VCA | VOICES
FOR JUST
CLIMATE ACTION

BUILDING A CLIMATE RESILIENCE EUROPE

LESSONS FROM FRONTLINE COMMUNITIES

WHY LOCAL LEADERSHIP IS ESSENTIAL

Europe is the fastest-warming continent: 2024 was the first year to exceed 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, with high temperatures showing into 2025 (Eurobarometer survey 2025). Across the entire continent, people and ecosystems are facing escalating climate risks. An increasing number of Europeans, now 38%, report feeling personally exposed to environmental and climate-related risks. Citizens see climate action not only necessary but beneficial, both economically and socially. Aside from personal exposure, the societal costs of damage from climate change-related disasters are estimated at €650 billion since 1980.

Despite the progress made on climate action, Europe remains largely unprepared for the impacts of climate change. Societal preparedness is still low and policy implementation lags behind in responding to the challenges that lie ahead of us.

Alongside policy action, the effectiveness of climate adaptation will heavily rely on the leadership and active participation of local actors, who can bring knowledge, experience and understanding of what solutions work best in which contexts. Too often, decisions about adaptation are made remotely, without serious input from those directly affected. This disconnect can lead to missed opportunities for innovation and, even worse, the implementation of measures that waste time, money and resources. To strengthen Europe's climate adaptation strategy, it is essential to empower local actors to co-design and drive solutions that are both effective and sustainable. This approach is at the heart of Locally Led Adaptation (LLA).

WHAT IS LOCALLY LED ADAPTATION (LLA)

Locally Led Adaptation (LLA) is about shifting power and resources to those closest to climate impacts,

who are best placed to design and lead solutions that last. This means recognizing the knowledge of local communities, building mutual trust and creating space for co-creation between civil society and institutions at all levels. Without such a strong civic engagement and local leadership, adaptation will risk being disconnected from the realities on the ground. Not just across the Global South but in Europe too. This is why WWF-NL endorsed the LLA Principles in 2021, together with over 130 governments, leading global institutions and other local and international NGOs.

PROVEN EXAMPLES OF LOCAL LEADERSHIP: VOICES FOR JUST CLIMATE ACTION

To foster local leadership in climate action, we don't need to start from scratch. Around the world, communities have been dealing with the realities of climate disruption for decades. Many have mobilized to restore degraded lands, protect coastlines, adapt agricultural practices, manage water resources and shape national climate policies.

WWF, through the Voices for Just Climate Action (VCA) programme, has supported over 70 locally led initiatives across Kenya, Zambia, Tunisia, Indonesia, Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay. These solutions have reached over 1.4 million people and helped manage more than 470,000 hectares of land. Through movement building, co-creation and capacity-building, the VCA has helped influence the amendment, blocking, adoption and/or implementation of a total of 99 climate-related laws and policies; in addition, the program has facilitated 45 multistakeholder fora that elevated local climate voices and stories to higher levels and co-built awareness campaigns that reached 3.5 million people. These initiatives show that when local communities lead, adaptation is effective and sustainable.

CRITICAL LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNER COMMUNITIES

The VCA program has brought us critical lessons regarding the transformational potential of LLA, namely:

a) LLA promotes mutual capacity strengthening between actors to enable true co-leadership:

Creating and fostering equitable partnerships with local actors, especially women, youth, migrants and other vulnerable groups, builds trust and long-term ownership (which are the cornerstone for good governance). In addition, such capacity goes beyond technical training, but it is also about listening to each other, facilitating alliances between communities, building skills on storytelling, advocacy, climate finance literacy, among other areas.

b) LLA advances social equity and human rights:

LLA approaches enable marginalized communities to reclaim their agency. For example, women groups in the Kerkennah islands of Tunisia have claimed decision-making power and leadership by co-organizing the first women-led group in the archipelago for the Development of Fisheries and Agriculture (GDPA) in 2023. In Bolivia and Paraguay, Indigenous journalists were trained to mobilize over 1.5 million people through campaigns that elevated local voices on climate justice.

c) LLA promotes urban-rural connections:

In Zambia, locally led adaptation has strengthened urban-rural linkages by facilitating learning exchanges, such as the Lusaka-Mazabuka on composting and community gardens, the Chongwe-Lusaka on water data collection, and the Luangwa-Lusaka on women-led land rights and health initiatives. This brings together rural and urban communities to share knowledge and build capacities, engage local leaders in cooperation and implement context-specific adaptation solutions.

d) LLA enhances transformative youth leadership:

Local climate conferences and platforms for organizing and discussing equips our future generation of leaders with the right skills to govern in ways that are grounded in justice and sustainability. In Brazil, the “CUIDA” initiative brought together 38 young people and women from all nine states

of the Legal Amazon for a comprehensive training in climate advocacy. Participants engaged in lectures, workshops and dialogues with legislative and executive branches in Brasília on topics such as climate justice, environmental racism and the impacts of climate change in the Amazon.

e) LLA can be scalable and influential:

Innovations that come from local actors can attract external validation and investment. For example, our project in the northern drylands of Kenya received recognition by the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration as it promoted the Ramat Model, a locally led and cocreated model for rangeland management and governance by the Indigenous Samburu people.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO EUROPE

The EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change already acknowledges the need to learn from international partners and prioritise local action. It is now urgent to put this commitment into practice. Not only EU local and regional governments play a crucial role in implementing adaptation, but also European local communities must be empowered to influence decisions.

Shrinking civic space is a growing phenomenon globally, including in Europe. And yet, when civic voices are respected and resources, we see stronger policies, better adaptation outcomes and more resilient communities. The lessons from WWF-VCA show that even under challenging political conditions, civil society leadership can unlock transformative change. Therefore, we call on EU institutions and stakeholders to:

- Invest in locally led adaptation.
- Strengthen partnerships with local actors and recognize their critical role in shaping the future of a climate-resilient Europe.
- Support civic space and enable community participation in climate decision-making.
- Learn from global experiences, particularly from climate vulnerable countries where civil society is leading on adaptation.