Building and sharing knowledge for adaptation: Lessons from the Regional Climate Change Adaptation Knowledge Platform for Asia

Key Findings

- **The Regional Climate Change Adaptation Knowledge Platform for Asia (AKP) made a substantial contribution to adaptation research and capacity-building across the region, supporting studies and pilot projects in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam, plus some analysis of Myanmar.**
- **AKP was an intensely collaborative project, with a share of the budget allocated to local partners to analyse their countries' policies, gather knowledge on the ground, test new approaches, and build local capacity. This was AKP's greatest strength: it built a rich, diverse network with the potential to effect real change, not through outsiders' interventions, but by empowering local experts and stakeholders.**
- **The logistical challenges of such an approach, however, are enormous. Strong and consistent leadership and coordination are essential, with expert support and monitoring for each sub-project to ensure quality, consistency, timeliness, and good communication among partners. A strong presence would have helped also deepen the engagement of AKP with national partners and evolving adaptation activities on the ground. AKP fell short in this regard.**
- **AKP projects have culminated in a series of publications, but in order to maximize their impact on policy and practice, this knowledge should be broadly disseminated across the participating countries – preferably, in local languages. The process should also lead to a new round of dialogue with stakeholders**
- **Linear project planning frameworks do not sufficiently capture the complexities of the change process that adaptation seeks to achieve. Social learning and increased adaptive capacities, for instance, are key goals of AKP, but they cannot be measured in such a short time frame. Fully capturing the lessons from AKP and gauging its impacts will require continued monitoring and evaluation over several years.**

The Regional Climate Change Adaptation Knowledge Platform for Asia (AKP) grew out of a recognition that countries across the region faced potentially dramatic climate change impacts, but lacked the knowledge and capacity to effectively reduce vulnerability and plan for a more climate-resilient future.

AKP set out to fill this gap by building a strong network of local researchers to gather new knowledge on the ground, bring international adaptation expertise to the stakeholders who need it, test new approaches, and share the results with their peers, decision-makers and civil society across the region.

Outcomes of the first phase, from 2009 to 2012, have been substantial. AKP supported an array of innovative research in 13 countries, including pilot projects in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Nepal, Thailand and Vietnam; scoping assessments in Bhutan, China, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Laos, and the Philippines, and more limited work in Myanmar.

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Women in Dong Yang village, Savannakhet, Laos, attend a focus group discussion on floods and migration as part of an AKP project.

Implementing partners in those countries were allocated a share of the budget to support work done directly by them. This local engagement – involving speakers of at least a dozen languages, coming from different backgrounds and working in very different countries and organizations – made AKP a challenge in terms of coordination, technical support and capacity-building. Yet that was also AKP's greatest strength: it has built a rich, diverse network with potential to effect change in the countries it serves, not through outsiders' interventions, but through the empowerment of local experts and stakeholders.

AKP in context

Climate change poses great challenges to Asia, with water scarcity, droughts and floods becoming more common and more severe in many places, and development patterns often exacerbating disaster risks. Country- and local-level data are limited, and so is knowledge about which populations are most vulnerable and how to strengthen their adaptive capacity. Add the inherent uncertainty of climate change, and it is easy to see why adaptation is progressing so slowly: policy-makers do not know where to begin.

When AKP was launched, adaptation was just starting to gain international attention. Developing countries had been encouraged to develop National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs), but finance was sparse; the Adaptation Fund, for example, issued its first funding call only in 2010. The concept of "mainstreaming" adaptation into development plans, sectoral policies, etc., was also relatively new – certainly to local decision-makers, who were used to addressing climate change in isolation.

AKP set out to build adaptation knowledge and capacity in Asia at all levels: from individual communities, to national governments, to regional networks. To achieve this, it took a three-tiered approach: sharing knowledge through seminars, workshops, regional forums, a newsletter and an interactive web portal; generating new knowledge through research projects; and applying knowledge through pilot projects.

Mainstreaming adaptation

One of AKP's goals was to integrate adaptation into development plans and sectoral policies across Asia. Our research found that uncertainty is a major barrier to adaptation action, but if framed differently, it can create a strong incentive for mainstreaming adaptation. Policy-makers tend to see adaptation as a response to a specific climate risk – for example, a sea-wall to protect from storm surges – but uncertainty and the relatively low probability of disasters may make it difficult to justify such investments.

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Climate change needs to be integrated into major infrastructure planning to ensure that investments do not increase vulnerability. Above, development in Ha Long, Cambodia.

Yet decision-makers can and should ensure that development does not create new vulnerabilities under plausible climate change scenarios (for example, by building houses on the exposed shoreline, or building a hydropower plant on a river that could soon run dry). In this context, mainstreaming adaptation leads to more sustainable and climate-robust development. AKP research also identified promising entry points for mainstreaming, such as integrated water resource management and community forestry.

In practice, however, mainstreaming adaptation may be more difficult than we envisioned when we launched AKP. Our partners' reviews of countries' policies and governance frameworks found that not only is climate typically addressed in isolation from other issues, but coordination across sectors is also very limited, and in fact, sectoral policies and practices often conflict.

Interaction between national, sub-national and local-level government is also limited. And in several instances, we found countries have adopted strong sectoral policies and plans that include all the elements that would support adaptation – connections across sectors and across governance levels, broad stakeholder engagement – but financial, logistical and political problems have hindered implementation.

Finally, the AKP studies highlighted the need to address power imbalances within these societies, where the most vulnerable groups – such as the poor, marginalized populations, and women – are often excluded from social, economic and political processes. While in some countries, special efforts have been made to ensure that participatory processes are truly inclusive, AKP field research suggests that significant disparities remain. Future efforts to support mainstreaming will need to address all these challenges.

Impacts on the ground

At the national policy level, AKP has contributed to the deepening of adaptation integration in the region, built a constituency for adaptation, provided an institutional and physical framework for knowledge-sharing, and raised the profile of adaptation as a research and policy-making priority.

The huge diversity of the countries covered by AKP makes it difficult to measure the programme's impacts to date, but it is clear that it has brought about enduring changes in both awareness and behaviour of important stakeholders such as policy-makers, research organizations, and people working on adaptation and development at the local level. Government officials can now use the knowledge and products provided by AKP to change and improve their planning and decision-making, and some community-level organizations are tailoring their work programmes on the basis of lessons from AKP.

AKP's activities and online presence have helped us build a community of practice in the Asia and Pacific. AKP products are starting to be cited in new research and shared on social media. To further expand AKP's reach, we are now posting materials on other knowledge portals, such as weADAPT and sharing them at major events such as the World Water Week and UN climate conferences.

Another significant achievement has been the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Climate Change Adaptation Forums in 2010 and 2012, arguably the largest gathering of adaptation

experts, decision-makers, and practitioners in the region. The second forum, held in March 2012, drew roughly 800 participants from 59 nations; it also showed AKP's power to build networks, with 13 organizations signing on as partners. In addition, the event received wide media coverage, with key messages making it onto the front pages of Thai newspapers.

AKP published reports on both forums, which provided rich insights into the state of the art of adaptation mainstreaming in Asia and the Pacific. The reports from the second forum are particularly useful in generating insights from practice, especially in terms of learning about processes for stakeholder engagement, dynamics of autonomous adaptation, and ways of building social-ecological systems.

A wide range of research outputs

AKP's partnerships also yielded valuable research outputs. Its partnerships with RECOFTC-The Centre for People and Forests, Southeast Asia Network of Climate Change Focal Points (SEA-CC Net) and Unit for Social and Environment Research of Chiang Mai University (USER) led to eight knowledge products: five country case studies on climate change adaptation and community forestry with implications for REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation-Plus) led by RECOFTC; one desktop study with SEA-CC Net on the assessment of capacity gaps and needs of South East Asia Countries in addressing impacts, vulnerability and adaptation to climate variability and climate change; and two research activities on the role of knowledge in adaptation to climate change implemented by USER.

In all, AKP produced more than 50 knowledge products (journal articles, policy briefs, books, edited books, synthesis reports, toolkits, project reports and videos) during these three years. These will be disseminated through the web portal, other knowledge-sharing websites, outreach by AKP and its partners, media outreach, and future events.

An online survey conducted by an independent reviewer early in 2012 had 91% respondents agreeing that AKP added value to other climate change initiatives; 96% of the respondents also said AKP facilitated exchange of adaptation knowledge and regional experiences with other countries.

The relevance of AKP's mission is further brought to the fore by two important partnerships that it has forged with the Asia Pacific Adaptation Network (APAN) and the USAID ADAPT Asia Pacific. These projects and the consequent active partnerships that developed demonstrate the relevance of AKP's mission and support the core business of AKP, which is to mainstream adaptation into development planning.

Learning from our shortcomings

Like most projects, AKP had weaknesses and limitations. The single greatest problem was a lack of strong, consistent leadership and coordination. This was not by design, but rather, due to high staff turnover, which left projects without the feedback, support and oversight they needed. In several cases, quality and timeliness were compromised as a result, and teams from different countries working on joint projects did not interact as much as planned, leading to uneven and hard-to-compare outputs. A stronger AKP presence in each country would also have helped deepen the programme's engagement with national partners and with evolving adaptation activities on the ground.

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Concentrated growth in high-risk areas, like the Bangkok mega-delta, means increased exposure to disasters. Above, flooding in 2011.

AKP projects were ambitious, guided by top-notch research literature and expertly designed methodologies, but reality often got in the way. The research teams brought different levels of academic knowledge, analytical skills, and mastery of English, and some found it much harder than others to apply the chosen frameworks to their particular studies. Other times, information was simply not available, or logistics got in the way, but it was difficult to adjust the projects accordingly.

Another major concern is that AKP's outputs have not yet reached all their target audiences, not least because almost all are in English, not in the national and local languages. Thus, AKP has just touched the surface of its potential. Significant follow-up is needed to share our findings and continue engaging stakeholders. Adaptation is an iterative process, and adaptation research must be as well.

A key challenge: measuring impacts

How do we know what impact we have made? In late 2012, we prepared a self-assessment, which served as the basis for this policy brief. Yet a key insight from our review is that we can't know yet what our impact has been. For instance, it is not possible to measure social learning and increased adaptive capacities, key components of AKP, within a short time frame. It may take years to see the results.

This is not to say that monitoring and evaluation aren't crucial – they absolutely are. The point is that we need better evaluation frameworks that capture socio-economic complexities. Adaptation involves many scales (temporal and spatial), covering different regimes and involving different ecosystems. It is also very much embedded in uncertainties and complexities. Yet existing frameworks tend to be linear and reductionist. Finding a better approach should be a priority for future work.

Still, we believe AKP has started to make a real difference. It has built a strong research and knowledge-sharing network, actively engaged with policy-makers and other stakeholders, raised awareness of adaptation, and helped fill critical knowledge gaps. It has also laid a strong foundation for continued outreach and collaboration. We hope to keep building on that foundation in the coming years.

Policy recommendations

- Knowledge of climate science, vulnerability, and analytical methodologies is very uneven across Asia. A key first step in launching a regional research collaboration is thus to build capacity among participating researchers. Group seminars can help, but any capacity-building plan should recognize the differences in experience and language skills among the participants.
- Major research collaborations need champions – several of them. They need strong and consistent leadership and coordination, and a strong core team that can follow through with each sub-project from beginning to end, build relationships with the participants, and offer plenty of support and guidance. On-going support from a knowledgeable, culturally sensitive editor could also be very valuable to improve the overall quality of publications and to help distil key policy messages.
- Using participatory processes in research is very effective, both as a knowledge-gathering tool, and as a way to ensure that research will have an impact on policy and practice. AKP's pilot projects and case studies are arguably its most important contributions, because they not only advanced knowledge, but also built capacity and established relationships with policy-makers and other stakeholders.
- Regional collaborations need to address the language challenge head-on. It is impossible to avoid having a "master language", and that is likely to remain English, but publication and dissemination plans should include translation into national and, if relevant, local languages. This should not only be done for country-specific material (e.g., translating a report about Thailand into Thai), but also for "lessons learned" syntheses, to promote sharing of ideas across countries.
- From the outset, the programme design must incorporate on a verifiable and realistic results framework that allows for regional and country-based monitoring and evaluation. This process must be supported by a strong and capable programme management unit, and must continue after projects have been completed.
- Future initiatives should look more closely at barriers to adaptation. A key aspect of this work may be to focus on access to adaptation knowledge for civil society organizations, local communities and local governments. More research is also needed to understand why well-designed, promising policies and plans fail at the implementation stage, and how this might be avoided in mainstreaming adaptation.

This policy brief was written by Albert Salamanca and Marion Davis, based on Mainstreaming Adaptation into Development Planning: Results from Three Years of Implementation of the Adaptation Knowledge Platform – the completion report for the Regional Climate Change Adaptation Knowledge Platform for Asia (AKP) – and on their own reflections on AKP. The completion report is available at www.asiapacificadapt.net or weADAPT.org.

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