

What counts? The state of evidence of outcomes of locally led adaptation

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Cover photo

Installing a tree guard for the 14 Trees Foundation, a locally led adaptation initiative. The picture is a mosaic of hundreds of photographs of on-ground economic transactions – “every gas cylinder bought, every wage paid, every tree guard installed” – created from a system in which every expense is logged with a photograph attached. As 14 Trees describes it, the image is “quite literally, the spend on the ground rendered visible”. Photo © 14 Trees Foundation, Vetale, Khed taluka, Pune district, Maharashtra, India.

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Key Messages

- Solid evidence from a wide range of geographies, sectors and approaches suggests that locally led adaptation (LLA) is a good investment, generating positive social and economic co-benefits and building communities' capacity to adapt to climate change.
 - The evidence base has limitations and gaps. These include a focus on short-term benefits rather than long-term resilience building, limited comparative analyses, and a critical lack of recognition and documentation of Indigenous and local knowledge on LLA outcomes.
 - This report argues that the limited uptake of existing evidence by funders is largely caused by three divides: in underpinning values, ways of knowing (epistemologies), and prevailing practices in used by knowledge producers and funders.
 - The report recommends actions to help bridge divides. The recommendations build on a central tenet: Generating evidence on locally led adaptation is valuable for all, and it is essential for enabling transparency, fostering accountability, aiding learning, and strengthening sustainability of adaptation action. Key among the recommendations are:
 - **Adaptation funders and host governments** should recognize and use existing evidence to channel funding towards locally led adaptation by building on strengths, including Indigenous and local ways of knowing. At the same time, they should provide additional funding to produce evidence by adopting a dual-track approach that serves both their decision-making needs and those of communities.
 - **Knowledge producers and other actors on the ground** should continue to generate knowledge as an integral part of the adaptation mission and champion such efforts to serve aims beyond funder requirements. They should fill key knowledge gaps and synthesize evidence of LLA outcomes for uptake in national and global assessment processes, focusing particular on ethical co-production and synthesis of Indigenous and local knowledge.
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Executive summary

Locally led adaptation (LLA) is a process of developing and implementing climate action in which local people, communities and institutions have the decision-making power and access to resources needed to define, prioritize, design, implement and evaluate adaptation actions that affect them. Since 2021, more than 130 organizations and governments have endorsed the Eight Principles for LLA of the Global Commission on Adaptation.¹ This signals a growing recognition that empowering local actors enables fairer and more legitimate adaptation action. Yet only a small percentage of overall international climate finance for adaptation (between 10–17%) reaches local levels. When it comes to finance for LLA, rhetoric does not match reality.

Five years after the adoption of the LLA Principles, now is an opportune moment to take stock of the ways in which LLA can build climate resilience and the reasons it has received such limited levels of climate finance support.

Major adaptation funders – including dedicated climate funds, multilateral development banks, bilateral funders, and philanthropies – assert that one reason for the persistent shortfall is a lack of clear evidence that LLA approaches build long-term climate resilience. This independent report responds directly to their call for better and more nuanced evidence on the outcomes of LLA. We draw on evidence syntheses, preparatory dialogues, a two-day symposium (held 3–4 June 2026 in Bangkok, Thailand), written evidence summaries from 30 contributors working in the field, and online pre-and post-events involving dozens of others also working in the field.

We find relatively widespread and robust evidence that LLA approaches build adaptive capacity and generate a wide range of co-benefits, along with indications of their cost efficiency. At the same time, the evidence base suffers from some methodological weaknesses and gaps: a focus on short-term benefits over long-term resilience building, limited comparative analyses, and a critical lack of recognition and documentation of Indigenous and local knowledge on LLA outcomes. It is likely that unpublished evidence – particularly that which draws from Indigenous, local, and experiential ways of evaluating outcomes – is even more widespread.

We argue current evidence is sufficient to support efforts to increase financial support for LLA. At the same time, additional support is needed to further evidence generation and strengthen our collective understanding.

We identify and describe three key divides that inhibit the uptake of existing evidence into investment and decision-making processes of adaptation funders and host governments:

- *A divide in values* between a rights-based and returns-based framing of LLA
- *A divide in ways of knowing (epistemologies)*, as actors differently define and value evidence and outcomes

¹ <https://gca.org/programs/locally-led-adaptation/>

- A *divide in practices*, in which project cycles, limited funding, and language barriers lead to the instrumentalization of evidence generation largely for compliance in reporting rather than the generation of knowledge

To fill key knowledge gaps and help bridge these three divides, we recommend:

- Funders and governments should draw on the existing body of evidence and local knowledge on LLA effectiveness. They should also support further evidence generation in a dual-track approach that meets their decision-making needs and those of communities.
- Researchers and practitioners should fill key knowledge gaps. They should conduct longitudinal and comparative studies, examine conditions for scaling and sustainability, and collate and synthesize unpublished evidence, particularly in collaboration with local and Indigenous communities.
- Front-runner funders and governments, in collaboration with communities and knowledge brokers, should build greater flexibility into their decision-making and evaluation frameworks and processes. For example, they should combine top-down metrics with bottom-up indicators that reflect local priorities, experiences and definitions of success.

Ultimately, evidence of LLA effectiveness is only one piece of a larger puzzle. Decision-making for adaptation and investments are rarely technical processes alone. Instead, decisions are shaped by funders' need to balance political interests and governments' willingness to devolve decision-making. Increasing financial support for vulnerable communities to take adaptation actions of their own initiative is as much about justice and empowerment as it is about outcomes. Effective LLA thus demands a meaningful devolution of decision-making power to local actors, including the power to define and evaluate their own measures of adaptation "success".

Background

Why focus on locally led adaptation?

For the purposes of this report, locally led adaptation (LLA) is defined as a process that enables local actors, including communities and local governments, to have decision-making power to prioritize, plan, design, implement and evaluate adaptation actions that affect them (Soanes et al., 2021). The concept of LLA is rooted in decades of research demonstrating the effectiveness of decentralized governance models, which shift decision-making power and control over resources downward from centralized authorities to local actors and organizations (Ostrom, 1990), as well as a recognition of the importance of local, traditional, and Indigenous knowledge systems (Berkes, 2017). Its core tenet is that, given the highly localized nature of climate impacts, local actors are best positioned to understand and respond effectively to the risks they face (Rahman et al., 2023). As such, it is understood to go beyond concepts such as “community-based adaptation”, by emphasizing the importance of local agency rather than participatory approaches and consultation alone (Vincent, 2023).

LLA has also been strongly influenced by long-standing decolonial critiques of international development (for example, Escobar, 2011). It should thus be understood as part of a broader advocacy movement to challenge structural inequalities in the international financial architecture, including those that shape the design and distribution of development and climate finance (Roberts & Parks, 2006). Despite efforts at reform, most decisions about which countries and communities and what types of climate action should receive international funding continue to be made by actors in wealthy countries, who provide most of the funding, and by multilateral institutions that disburse it (Ciplet et al., 2015, 2022). Many lower-income countries also remain heavily in debt, constraining their financial capacity to invest in their own adaptation (UN Environment Programme, 2025).

Within this context, support for LLA signals an important power shift. Since 2021, more than 130 organizations and governments have endorsed the Eight Principles for Locally Led Adaptation of the Global Center on Adaptation,² indicating a growing commitment to empowering local actors to take adaptation action aligned with their own priorities and knowledge. Yet, this has not been accompanied by a matching shift in financial flows. Only between 10–17% of international climate finance supports adaptation at local levels – and even less of this funding is allocated directly to the control of local actors (Treichel et al., 2025; United Nations Environment Programme, 2023). In an increasingly unstable geopolitical environment, LLA is also competing with other urgent priorities, such as energy and national security, for international investment.

Why evidence on the outcomes of locally led adaptation?

Five years after the adoption of the LLA Principles, now is an opportune moment to enhance collective understanding of the different ways LLA can build climate resilience and deliver broader benefits to a wide range of communities – and to improve

² <https://gca.org/programs/locally-led-adaptation/>

understanding about why it has yet to receive higher levels of climate finance support. Momentum is also growing among researchers, practitioners and policymakers to better understand and assess adaptation effectiveness at local, as well as national and global levels. Global assessments of progress on adaptation – such as the Global Goal on Adaptation and Global Stocktake under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the regular assessment reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – also demand a clearer understanding of the role LLA plays in broader adaptation efforts.

Furthermore, improved evidence can enable increased financing for LLA. In June 2025, the Stockholm Environment Institute convened a group of adaptation funders to discuss collaboration to scale up financial support for LLA.³ During the dialogue, funders highlighted the need for stronger, more nuanced evidence on the effectiveness of LLA approaches. They argued they need better evidence of outcomes to demonstrate that LLA works not only as a process – improving local participation, equity and legitimacy of adaptation – but also as a vehicle to deliver outcomes, providing sustainable socioeconomic benefits and strengthening communities' climate resilience in the long term (Browne et al., 2025). Such evidence would also help them advocate internally and externally (to national governments, for example) to support LLA and inform more equitable investment and design decisions (Lehtman & Tyldesley, 2026).

However, many in the LLA community challenged the assertion that such evidence is lacking (Wilton Park, 2025). They contend that evidence of outcomes is already widespread but it has not enabled financial and technical support to flow – either because it has not reached key decision-makers, or because the decision-makers who have received it have not acted on it (Coger et al., 2022; Global Center on Adaptation, 2025).

The evidence that the LLA research and practitioner community generates often relies on participatory processes, lived experience, qualitative data, storytelling and locally grounded ways of knowing. These are evidence types that decision-makers either do not view to be as reliable as other types of evidence – such as cost-benefit analysis, investment appraisals and multi-criteria decision analysis – that they routinely use to assess the credit worthiness or likely financial success of proposals. It therefore lacks the degree of credibility and comparability that funders and policymakers expect. It is evidence of a different nature, outside of their conventional decision-making metrics, or in a language or format that does not fit neatly into application forms or set evaluation procedures (Falzon, 2021).

Most controversially, some contend that the evidence is not recognized or valued simply because of who produces the knowledge: marginalized groups and the poor, who face ongoing discrimination and inequalities (Olazabal et al., 2021). Still others assert that vulnerable people – bearing the brunt of climate impacts that they did not cause – should be given carte blanche to use what limited resources they receive to invest in adapting and not be expected to siphon off funds to measure outcomes. They further argue that it is not the job of traditional or marginalized communities to

³ In collaboration with the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and Agence Française de Développement.

“perform adaptation success”, provide a proof of concept or carry reporting burdens imposed by funders (Eriksen et al., 2021).

Finally, many perceive the barriers to LLA as fundamentally about power (Global Center on Adaptation, 2025). They argue that funders and governments are unwilling to devolve real decision-making and financial authority to local actors. They contend that better information will not increase the share of financing to LLA as long as those in power distrust communities to use resources responsibly and effectively.

Why this report?

This report, and the collective assessment process underpinning it, responds directly to adaptation funders’ demand for improved evidence on the outcomes of LLA and the broader debate within the LLA community about the validity of this demand and how to respond to it. It also seeks to inform decision-making within host governments – those currently receiving or seeking international funding – who play a critical role in shaping the policy and regulatory environments in which LLA occurs. We aim to answer three key questions:

- What is the state of evidence on the outcomes of LLA?
- If evidence exists, why is it not taken up widely in the investment and decision-making processes of funders and governments?
- How can different actors (funders, governments, researchers, practitioners, and communities) strengthen evidence and improve uptake?

Following a description of methods, the report is organized into three primary sections responding to each of these questions. The next section (Section 2) presents a novel and rapid assessment of the state of evidence on outcomes of LLA. It demonstrates that there is already a strong rationale for investing in LLA, though some significant gaps in knowledge remain. Section 3 describes the key divides in values, epistemologies and practical procedures that inhibit the uptake of existing evidence into national and international investment and decision-making processes. Section 4 suggests steps all actors should take to fill key gaps in knowledge and bridge the substantial divides between LLA knowledge holders and producers and national and international decision-makers.

Methods and limitations

This report draws on two systematic evidence syntheses, targeted preparatory dialogues, a two-day symposium, written evidence summaries from 30 contributors working in the field, and online pre-and post-symposium events. Although it responds to a request from adaptation funders, it is an independent assessment.

Systematic evidence syntheses. Two global syntheses of evidence on the outcomes of LLA were prepared in advance of the symposium, where their key findings were presented. Though both are independent analyses intended to serve broader audiences, they were also timely to inform the discussions. They are:

- “Beyond the principles: Evidence of whether locally led adaptation works in practice” (Hassan et al., Forthcoming), a research report by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). The report applies an evidence and impact framework to systematically map the strength of evidence on LLA process and impact, reviewing a corpus of 106 academic and grey literature documents.
- “Locally Led Adaptation builds adaptive capacity, delivers multi-sectoral benefits, and is cost effective: Results of a systematic evidence review” (Browne et al., Forthcoming), a World Bank Policy Research Paper. The paper identifies empirical evidence of outcomes of LLA approaches from 50 academic and grey literature publications, and documents them along 6 dimensions (effectiveness, social and economic co-benefits, cost efficiency, scaling, and sustainability).

Targeted preparatory dialogues. In advance of the symposium, SEI partnered with key organizations to conduct separate dialogues with adaptation funders, national governments, and community groups. The goal of these dialogues was to capture differing perspectives on the state of and need for evidence on the outcomes of LLA.

The first dialogue was held in partnership with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, with the Locally Led Adaptation Funders group on 24 March 2026. Representatives from nine multilateral and bilateral funders shared their views on the types of evidence needed to support LLA investment and program design. The second input was drawn from five sessions convened by a range of organizations during the 20th International Conference on Community-Based Adaptation to Climate Change in Manila, the Philippines, held 11–14 May 2026. These dialogues and activities focused on power dynamics and the role of diverse knowledge in LLA assessment and accountability. The final dialogue was held on 29 May 2026 in collaboration with the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre. This roundtable included four representatives of South Asian and Southeast Asian governments and assessed their evidence needs from the perspective of policy and planning to support LLA in the Philippines, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Findings from all three dialogues were captured in short summaries and shared with symposium participants in advance.

Call for submissions of evidence on LLA outcomes. In response to an open call to gather state-of-the-art approaches and evidence beyond the published literature, 211 proposals were received. Symposium participants were selected by the organizing committee following a robust screening procedure that focused on the merit of each applicant’s evidence contribution and the overall representativeness of participants.

Merit was evaluated based on relevance, interdisciplinarity and contribution to knowledge. Representation was evaluated both in terms of actor type (such as geography, gender, career age, organization) and evidence type (such as methods used, outcomes examined, scale of analysis). Thirty participants from sixteen countries contributed, representing a wide range of LLA knowledge holders and producers.

Prior to the symposium, all participants submitted short summaries of their evidence contribution following a common template. Submissions were grouped into five themes: 1) Governance models and institutions; 2) Knowledge syntheses; 3) Co-benefits; 4) Scale up, replicability and sustainability, and 5) Indigenous and local knowledge. All summaries were shared with participants in advance, and they were encouraged to review the other submissions within their theme. These summaries, largely unpublished elsewhere, are integrated throughout this report to represent the diversity of evidence available, and they can be read in full in the accompanying appendix.

Symposium. This report draws heavily on discussions and activities held during the “Symposium on Strengthening Evidence on the Outcomes of Locally Led Adaptation,” held 3–4 June 2026 in Bangkok, Thailand. The symposium convened a diverse group of LLA knowledge holders and producers to share findings, collectively assess the state of evidence, and chart a forward-looking agenda to strengthen the use of evidence to inform adaptation finance and decision-making. Convened by the Stockholm Environment Institute and the Adaptation Research Alliance, it was planned with the support of an organizing committee comprised of 10 additional research institutes and universities from across the world.⁴

Participants engaged in three knowledge co-production activities designed to inform this report. Activities were based on written summaries and other syntheses, with participants organized around tables following the five identified themes of evidence. The overall goal of the activities was to ensure a level playing field between different actors and the forms of knowledge they brought to the table, to enable a balanced, collective assessment of the state of evidence on LLA outcomes from a wide range of perspectives.

In the first activity, participants critically interrogated what the terms “evidence” and “outcomes” can mean to those involved in LLA decision-making. Drawing on the summaries from preparatory dialogues and their own experiences, they evaluated demands for evidence from the perspectives of funders, national governments, researchers, and communities. Reflecting on different types of evidence and outcomes, they assessed why certain types of knowledge are or are not accepted in decision-making (Figure 1). Participants next conducted a “collaborative evidence inventory”, exchanging their evidence summaries. They then reflected on the perceived value and usability of different forms of evidence (such as academic and policy research, practice-based and participatory evidence, journalism, story-based and visual approaches). Finally, in a collective brainstorming exercise, participants identified barriers and key gaps in knowledge inhibiting uptake of existing evidence into

⁴ The organizing committee was led by SEI with representatives of the following organizations: the Adaptation Research Alliance, BRAC Europe, Caribbean Natural Resources Institute, Climate Analytics, International Institute for Environment and Development, Least Developed Countries Universities Consortium on Climate Change, PlanAdapt, SouthSouthNorth, The University of the West Indies, and World Resources Institute.

decision-making for different groups (Figure 2). They suggested ways different actors can contribute to filling gaps and overcoming divides. For each activity, rapporteurs captured reflections and differing perspectives in structured notes following a standard reporting template.

Figure 1. Symposium participants engage in the co-production exercise “What counts as evidence?”



Figure 2. Symposium participants engage in the “collaborative evidence gallery”



Online events. The symposium was supplemented by pre- and post-online events, which expanded opportunities to reflect on key questions for short-listed applicants. The 1-hour event on 29 May 2026 drew 27 participants, who shared reflections on the symposium objectives. On 17 June 2026, SEI presented preliminary findings and recommendations to 28 participants who then provided structured feedback in breakout groups and a plenary during a 2-hour event. Six online participants then provided additional written feedback via an online form.

Analysis. Based on discussions among the symposium organizing committee, the lead authors analysed and synthesized evidence inputs into the three sections below. The evidence assessment draws primarily on the evidence syntheses and symposium participants' evidence summaries, supplemented by symposium activities assessing existing evidence. The description of divisions draws primarily on preparatory dialogues and symposium activities focused on interrogating what counts as evidence. All inputs informed the development of recommendations, especially the collective brainstorming of symposium participants. Feedback from participants in online events challenged and strengthened all findings.

Limitations. This work represents a rapid, collective assessment of the state of evidence on outcomes of LLA, but it should not be understood as a global synthesis or stocktaking exercise. The evidence summaries included here are intended to illustrate the diversity of evidence available, but they are not comprehensive. The report's overall findings are, however, underpinned by two systematic evidence reviews. The collective assessment exercises conducted during the symposium were designed to draw on a diversity of perspectives, and balanced representation was carefully considered. Nevertheless, we recognize that a small group of actors can never fully represent the wide range of views across the LLA community and beyond.

State of the evidence

Strengths

Evidence on the outcomes of LLA is *relatively widespread and robust*. IIED's systematic review – which examines both process and outcomes in local adaptation literature – finds what it characterizes as robust evidence of impact in 23 sources. Evidence is strongest in some geographies (Latin America, Pacific and Oceania, and sub-Saharan Africa) and sectors (ecosystems and natural resource management and water) (Hassan et al., Forthcoming). The World Bank systematic review finds strong evidence of outcomes in 50 academic and grey literature sources (Browne et al., Forthcoming). Case studies dominate the literature, providing both breadth and depth of information. Furthermore, the published literature likely represents only a small fraction of available evidence. For example, an analysis by the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute identifies 199 LLA actions during a 5-year period (2021–2025) in 15 Caribbean nations alone – pointing to significantly greater depth of information beyond that which is formally documented (see Appendix 1.5 (Granderson et al.)).

LLA *strengthens adaptive capacity across a range of geographies, sectors, and approaches*. The World Bank's systematic review finds strong evidence that LLA does improve knowledge and decision-making, supports development of new and diversification of existing livelihoods, and enhances access to key resources such as water (Browne et al., Forthcoming). This finding is further reinforced in symposium participants' evidence summaries (see, e.g., Appendix 1.6 (Harikishun et al.), 2.4 (Popfalushi & Zozulia), 3.1 (Gautam et al.), 3.6 (Sidiq), 4.5 (Nanda), 4.6 (Nibanpudi), 5.3 (Rahman), and 5.4 (Sharma)). For example, an evaluation from Green Climate Fund programs incorporating LLA principles finds that projects consistently build capacity among local actors in planning, proposal development, financial management, monitoring, and implementation (see Appendix 1.2 (Bentinck et al.)). An analysis of the Least Developed Countries Initiative for Effective Adaptation and Resilience (LIFE-AR) finds similar results (see Appendix 5.2 (Pertaub et al.)).

LLA *generates myriad social and economic co-benefits*. In addition to building adaptive capacity, LLA strengthens social capital and cohesion within communities, improves access to education and healthcare, increases household income and savings, and opens new economic opportunities, especially for women (Browne et al., Forthcoming). Evidence summaries reinforce LLA's role in strengthening social cohesion (see Appendix 2.1 (Akola), 2.2 (Kanjji), 2.4 (Popfalushi & Zozulia), 2.5 (Roy), and 3.2 (Leck et al.)) and additionally point to LLA's role in delivering a range of ecological co-benefits (see Appendix 2.1 (Akola), 2.4 (Popfalushi & Zozulia) and 2.5 (Roy)). Further, there is substantial evidence that LLA improves equity where marginalized groups are meaningfully included in participatory processes, though local power dynamics are not always adequately addressed (Browne et al., Forthcoming; see also Appendix 1.1 (Benelli et al.) and 2.3 (Omil)).

LLA is a *cost-efficient investment*. A smaller number of rigorous studies find relatively high ratios of return (Browne et al., Forthcoming), with the most rigorous estimate of a £4 return in community benefits for every £1 invested (Vardakoulis & Nicholles, 2014). Findings should be interpreted with caution, however, as they were conducted in a narrow set of communities and compared LLA approaches to “business-as-usual” scenarios rather than to non LLA approaches.

Weaknesses

Evidence on the outcomes of LLA is limited by some *methodological constraints*.

Both academic and grey literatures rely heavily on case studies and pilots (Browne et al., Forthcoming; Hassan et al., Forthcoming), which limits generalizability across geographies and sectors. Though qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods are all employed to examine outcomes, much of the evidence published relies on descriptive and perception-based assessments, with limited triangulation (Browne et al., Forthcoming; Hassan et al., Forthcoming). Overall, evidence of LLA is skewed toward evaluating process rather than outcomes (Hassan et al., Forthcoming), with local participation and social inclusion often treated as proxies for effectiveness (see Appendix 1.1 (Benelli et al.)). There is no consensus about how to disentangle process, outputs, and outcomes, or whether doing so is appropriate at all. For many LLA practitioners, the process is as important as the outcomes and the two should be evaluated in tandem (e.g., as in Hassan et al., Forthcoming; see also Appendix 3.3 (Mfitumukiza), 3.4 (Moopelo), 3.7 (Siraj et al.), 3.8 (Venkataramani)).

Existing evidence largely measures the short-term benefits of LLA *rather than its contributions to long-term resilience building*. Outcomes are often measured during or at the end of short project cycles (Browne et al., Forthcoming; see also Appendix 1.2 (Benelli et al.) and 5.2 (Pichon et al.)). Symposium participants observed they rarely had sufficient time or budget for longitudinal impact assessments within project implementation periods. The lack of longitudinal studies and long-term data limits understanding of how different approaches reduce communities' and households' vulnerability and exposure to risk over time (Browne et al., Forthcoming). It remains unclear whether strengthened adaptive capacity necessarily leads to more effective adaptation action (Brown & Westaway, 2011). Limits to measuring long-term impact are not unique to LLA, but rather reflect broader methodological challenges in measuring adaptation effectiveness over longer time scales (Dilling et al., 2019).

Furthermore, no known studies *directly compare the outcomes of LLA approaches to more centrally planned and implemented adaptation efforts* (Browne et al., Forthcoming). Establishing counterfactuals has proven methodologically challenging, as LLA is best understood as a spectrum rather than a single approach (see Appendix 1.7 (Joshi & Nisi)). Comparison between top-down and locally led interventions requires recognition of the contextual nature of LLA and must reflect how benefits of more participatory processes measure against centrally planned interventions. This is a particular weakness of existing cost efficiency studies, which compare LLA to "business as usual" or lack of investment in adaptation rather than alternative approaches (e.g., Vardakoulis & Nicholles, 2014).

The lack of comparison contributes to challenges in articulating LLA's value add or "business case". The potential role of the private sector, including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), remains poorly explored (see Appendix 1.4 (Gakwaya), 5.1 (Panda & Topi)), weakening efforts to build climate resilience into the activities and outputs of SMEs, generate sustainable financial revenue streams, and create local jobs with positive spillover effects (Dupar et al., 2024).

Gaps

There are key geographical, sectoral and language gaps. Evidence is weak in the published literature in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and East and Central Asia (Hassan et al., Forthcoming). There is a strong overall bias toward English-language literature and geographies, as is common in peer-reviewed literature, contributing to key blind spots in the evidence base (Hassan et al., Forthcoming; see also Appendix 1.5 (Granderson et al.)). Key sectoral gaps include health, education, and extreme heat (Hassan et al., Forthcoming; see also Appendix 1.5 (Granderson et al.)). Symposium participants further observed a heavy agricultural focus, with a notable absence of evidence of LLA outcomes in urban contexts.

There is a critical lack of recognition and documentation of Indigenous and local knowledge on LLA outcomes. North America is one key exception where Indigenous approaches are well documented (Hassan et al., Forthcoming). Documented evidence tends to focus on deficits and vulnerabilities rather than capabilities, strengths, and ongoing adaptation action – including autonomous adaptation. This vital gap reflects broader challenges in recognizing and ethically integrating Indigenous and local knowledge into published literature. Symposium evidence summaries illustrate the wealth of knowledge and diverse means of understanding and evaluating outcomes of LLA grounded in local and Indigenous ways of knowing (see Appendix 4.1 (Ferdous), 4.2 (Ginting), 4.3 (Kyaw), 4.4 (Lechón), 4.5 (Nanda), 4.6 (Nibanupudi), 4.7 (Singh et al.), and 4.5 (Sonone)). This knowledge could further inform adaptation interventions and reduce reliance on intermediaries and “experts” in designing programs in the absence of direct inputs from communities.

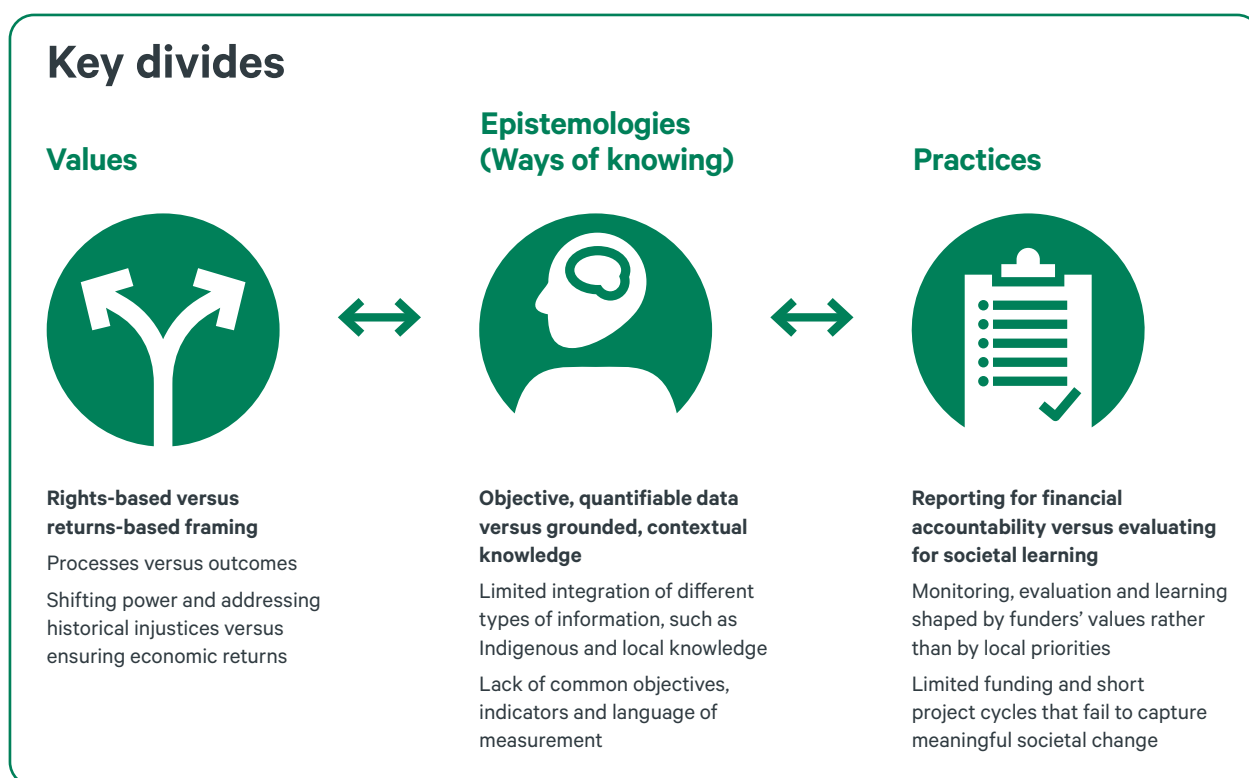
Evidence of the scalability, replicability and sustainability of LLA initiatives is limited and inconclusive (Browne et al., Forthcoming; see also Appendix 1.2 (Benelli et al.)). In terms of scalability and replicability, syntheses have uncovered few documented cases of success (Browne et al., Forthcoming). The context specificity of LLA may present an inherent limit: if LLA interventions are replicated through standardized designs, can they still be considered locally led? Further, though scalability has long been equated with impact, the science behind it shows how difficult it is and that it requires long-term engagement and financial backing (Schut et al., 2020).

Likewise, sustainability poses a challenge, with few examples of LLA sustaining once external funding is exhausted or withdrawn. The few successful cases point to a potentially important role for complementarity. That is, up-scaling and sustaining have been enabled by broader partnerships and/or integration of LLA with initiatives and investments undertaken at higher levels of investment (Browne et al., Forthcoming). However, little is known about the conditions under which LLA scales and sustains, or about the role of sequencing with more centralized adaptation initiatives.

Three key divides preventing evidence uptake

If evidence that LLA works to build climate resilience is relatively robust and widespread, why has it not been taken up in financier and government decision-making? Drawing on preparatory dialogues and symposium co-production activities, we identify three key divisions – based on values, epistemologies (ways of knowing), and practical procedures – between LLA knowledge holders and producers and these decision-makers.

Figure 3. Three divides inhibiting uptake of existing evidence on LLA outcomes



A values divide: rights-based versus returns-based framing

The values divide is between a rights-based and returns-based framing of LLA.

Many LLA proponents and practitioners at grassroots levels argue that investment in LLA is the right of vulnerable countries and communities. This rationale is grounded in the basic premise of climate justice: Those least responsible for climate change bear the greatest burdens of its impacts, and thus they should not have to bear the costs of adapting. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement have established that wealthy countries are obligated to provide support for climate adaptation to the most vulnerable. Adaptation finance, including for LLA, has thus been established as a right. Already burdened with the task of adapting to climate change, vulnerable people should not be further expected to demonstrate the effectiveness of that adaptation to funders. To many of its proponents, LLA is foremost about

addressing historical injustices, overcoming structural inequalities, and empowering local communities. Generating and evaluating impact are secondary matters – or even irrelevant – only adding burdens and siphoning off already inadequate funds.

In contrast, funders – and to a lesser extent national governments – view LLA primarily as an investment. They expect this investment to yield a return in short- and long-term benefits, in many cases not only for the investors and the communities in which they are investing but also for the broader economy and society. Increasingly, they must rationalize investment in LLA in comparison to other potential investments, as narrowing tax bases and burgeoning public debt servicing erode economies, thus increasing the gaps expected to be met by international climate and development finance. Additionally, since most international finance for LLA continues to be drawn from public funds, funders and governments remain under pressure to demonstrate to taxpayers, and in some cases shareholders and governing boards, that limited resources are used prudently and effectively. Private finance, though a small overall contributor to LLA, usually must be motivated by a clear “return on investment”.

These decisions are often not purely technical, as funders and governments balance political considerations, such as those of various contributors and recipients of funding. Governments also play an important role in establishing the institutional arrangements that do or do not enable a meaningful devolution of decision-making power and resources to local actors.

Different actors can thus share a common aim – to increase financial support for LLA – while motivated by profoundly different rationales. This misalignment explains why some LLA proponents argue that communities and knowledge holders should resist the demand for evidence of effectiveness. Accommodating these demands, they assert, risks sacrificing the rights-based foundation on which international support for LLA rests.

A divide in ways of knowing (different epistemologies)

Broadly, funders and governments have fundamentally different ways of knowing (epistemologies) than LLA knowledge holders and producers. As a result, these actors understand, value and define evidence and even outcomes differently – and in ways that influence whether and how knowledge is taken up in decision-making.

Funders and governments tend to value what they perceive to be objective evidence, generated through rigorous and scientific methods. Outcomes should be measured via counterfactuals, cost-benefit analysis, impact evaluations, and other tools of statistical comparison, such as randomized controlled trials, which are widely considered the “gold standard” of evidence. They value standardized, quantitative, and economic metrics and indicators, such as return on investment, that can be easily reported and compared. To provide funding at scale, many funders, particularly multilateral development banks, must provide generalizable evidence to shareholders that demonstrates an intervention is more beneficial than other options. Though they often recognize the value of qualitative methods, they tend to view such methods as insufficient on their own.

In contrast, though LLA knowledge holders and producers vary widely, they tend to value evidence that is co-produced or generated through participatory processes. Often, such evidence is qualitative, grounded in Indigenous and local ways of knowing, and shared through narrative, storytelling and other creative approaches. It is informed by local know-how, experiences that have played out over generations, and a street-smart-like quality about what moves people to get things done in a certain place. The value of evidence lies in its context specificity, as it is directly drawn from and can inform local decision-making.

The absence of common objectives, methods, and even language of measurement, and the dominance of Western and scientific epistemologies among funders and governments, mean that much of the knowledge produced on the outcomes of LLA is not recognized or taken up in decision-making at national and global levels. Indigenous, local, and experiential knowledge sources are often treated as supplementary rather than as legitimate sources of insight in their own right. This can narrow the understanding of outcomes and reinforce a bias towards indicators that are easier to measure, even when they do not fully capture the processes and outcomes that communities value most. Such a divide is not unique to LLA but is particularly challenging given the highly contextual nature of local adaptation.

There are some signs of a growing openness among funders and governments to alternative ways of measuring outcomes. For example, challenges have been made to gross domestic product (GDP) as a universal measure (Costanza et al., 2014). Efforts have also been made to integrate local and Indigenous knowledge into the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Carmona et al., 2026). Yet, a lack of systematic knowledge brokering between actors, made more difficult by the values divide, hampers efforts to integrate different knowledge types and the work of existing knowledge-brokering mechanisms, such as the introduction of knowledge co-production methods.

Divides in practices: project cycles and data collection

These fundamental divides in values and epistemologies in turn underpin more practical challenges in generating evidence for decision-making. The dominant, project-based approach to LLA provides financing for short, one-to-three-year cycles. In general, allocations to support monitoring, learning, and evaluation (MEL) and other institutional systems for knowledge generation are quite limited. In combination, such practices constrain opportunities for systematic and longitudinal evaluation. Generating the type of standardized evidence funders and governments value requires time, resources and expertise. Yet, outside of projects, there is limited funding for independent data collection and learning. Monitoring and evaluation are rarely locally led, and the working languages of funders often do not accord with the vernacular languages spoken in many communities. Channels to bring locally produced evidence into global debates and assessments are weak.

As a result, data collection is often instrumentalized – that is, it tends to focus on compliance with funder requirements rather than on capturing changes that are important to communities. The incentive is often to prioritize what is measurable rather

than what is most meaningful to communities. Evidence is reported in a way that highlights successes, rather than seen as an opportunity to learn and document what did not work and what needs to change. A lack of data also limits transparency and accountability within communities and hampers the depth of understanding needed to scale up measures that show promise.

Recommendations

This report rapidly brings together insights with a clear purpose in mind: bridging gaps that hinder the flow of finance and support to vulnerable populations now bearing the brunt of climate impacts for which they are not responsible. Funds have been set up specifically for this purpose, and all efforts should be made to channel finance effectively, sustainably, and in a manner that can support collective learning for LLA action.

In this unprecedented time of precarity, there is still much to understand about how to best adapt to a changing climate, and knowledge and evidence about what to do and what to avoid will almost certainly evolve. However, the inherent limitations of evidence should not be a reason to doubt investment in LLA. By contrast, limitations re-emphasize the need to continue exploring its strengths, successes and challenges.

We make the following recommendations:

For funders and governments:

Funders and governments should recognize and use existing evidence and design more flexible approaches to LLA data collection. Despite divides over how best to measure outcomes, a solid base of robust evidence from a range of geographies, sectors and approaches already exists on LLA. The evidence includes insights on building vulnerable communities' capacity to adapt, generating positive social and economic co-benefits, and securing cost-efficient investments. Funders should be more flexible and creative in capturing the benefits of LLA, including co-benefits and impacts beyond current sector- and intervention-specific performance metrics. They should consider how to reform or create specific modalities for funding LLA that allow them to bypass other institutionally limiting procedures – such as standardized MEL frameworks – and accommodate bottom-up indicators from grantees (see final recommendation below). Standardized but flexible MEL frameworks can be used to generate the large-N (large sample sizes and cases) and comparative analyses funders seek.

Funders and governments should fund improved research and evaluation to serve both their decision-making needs and those of communities. All actors have a role to play in strengthening LLA evidence systems. However, funders and governments have a particularly important responsibility because they shape the incentives, methodologies and forms of evidence that become recognized and valued. Funders should support a dual-track approach: One track should satisfy their demand for comparable, quantified evidence. A second track should support and integrate participatory, context-specific, and Indigenous and local knowledge-inclusive measurement that does not impose extractive reporting requirements.

Under the first track, funders should facilitate collection and access to data that enable generalizable, quantified and independent evidence generation on LLA outcomes. This should include support for longitudinal and comparative studies of LLA's contributions to long-term resilience building, which are difficult to undertake within the current project-based model. They should also invest in improved understanding of replication and sustainability and their potential trade-offs for LLA interventions. This work should

proceed within already funded, large-scale LLA programs, such as the Least Developed Countries Initiative for Adaptation and Resilience, and the Financing Locally Led Climate Action program in Kenya, supported by the World Bank, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and KfW Development Bank.

At the same time, endorsing LLA principles means endorsing the idea that local actors should define and evaluate their own outcomes. Under the second track, funders should support evidence generation that serves communities and is useful for local level practitioners. This requires investing in long-term organizational capabilities of individuals and communities to conduct MEL, for example, through the co-development of locally led monitoring systems. It also requires recognizing that communities are not monolithic entities. MEL processes thus must respond to the values and priorities of different segments of each community. As adaptation is fundamentally a process of learning and responding to evolving risks, evidence generated by and for communities will strengthen local decision-making and enable learning and adaptive management. It will also improve transparency and accountability within communities.

Governments should play a proactive role in ensuring that evidence on the outcomes of LLA is systematically synthesized, incorporated into national adaptation planning and reporting, and reflected in global adaptation assessments.

This includes integrating evidence from research syntheses, program evaluations and community-generated knowledge into key policy channels: National Adaptation Plans, Adaptation Communications, Biennial Transparency Reports and national MEL systems. Such efforts are needed to inform the Global Goal on Adaptation and the Global Stocktake under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Governments should also support collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and national institutions to ensure that robust evidence is synthesized in forms that are accessible and useful for the assessments reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

For researchers and practitioners:

Researchers and practitioners should leverage partnerships to build on the existing evidence base, fill key knowledge gaps, and package LLA evidence for uptake in national and global assessment processes. As demonstrated by the wealth of evidence unearthed by this report's call for open proposals, communities and local organizations are already taking substantial steps to generate knowledge on LLA outcomes. Much of this is not available in the published, English-language literature. To overcome biases and expand the knowledge base, researchers and practitioners should undertake targeted efforts to address geographical, sectoral and language gaps. For example, researchers and practitioners should coordinate regional and/or global stocktakings of LLA outcomes. Further research is also needed to define characteristics of successful LLA up-scaling, including the institutional arrangements and governance practices that enable approaches to be adapted and sustained across contexts.

Findings should be synthesized and formatted for uptake in national and global assessment processes, including the Global Goal on Adaptation, Global Stocktake

and IPCC. Such research and policy engagement efforts can be coordinated through existing platforms, such as the LLA Community of Practice and the Adaptation Research Alliance.

Researchers and practitioners should translate and collate Indigenous and local knowledge on LLA outcomes in partnership with local actors, communities and Indigenous Peoples. As case studies across the world suggest, Indigenous and local knowledge is widely used to inform and evaluate local adaptation actions, yet these efforts remain under-recognized and under-documented. Equitable partnerships and co-productions processes are needed to consolidate this knowledge into formats that actors across the globe can learn from and use to evidence best practices. Communities must be recognized as equal knowledge partners rather than as merely sources of data. They must be meaningfully involved in defining research questions, interpreting findings, owning knowledge products, and benefiting from the resulting evidence. As such, collation of Indigenous and local knowledge requires significant investment and should be coupled with the investments in long-term organizational capabilities at local levels. Because this challenge is not unique to generating evidence on LLA, researchers and practitioners should learn from and align with parallel processes, including ongoing efforts to integrate Indigenous and local knowledge into the 7th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

For funders, governments, researchers and practitioners:

Funders, governments, researchers and practitioners should undertake targeted efforts to enable greater flexibility in the decision-making practices and evaluation frameworks and processes used by funders and governments. On the one hand, there are indications that some funders and governments increasingly recognize and value alternative ways of understanding evidence and LLA outcomes. On the other hand, Indigenous, local and experiential knowledge should not only be incorporated into existing evidence systems but should also be used to help reshape how evidence itself is understood and evaluated. To capitalize on these opportunities, front-runner funders and governments should work in collaboration with communities and accountable knowledge brokers to combine top-down metrics with bottom-up indicators that reflect local priorities, experiences and definitions of success. Such approaches will strengthen LLA evidence generation while enabling more community-legible and relevant results. This process will look different for different funders and governments. Efforts could begin within existing projects and programs, such as the Reversing the Flow program,⁵ funded by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency, and the initiatives of the Green Climate Fund⁶ to increase its support for LLA. Results should be disseminated to inform and encourage others. Further support should be provided by dialogues to bridge the deeper divides in values and epistemologies that have been barriers to advancing LLA.

⁵ <https://english.rvo.nl/subsidies-financing/rtf>

⁶ <https://www.greenclimate.fund/portfolio/areas-of-work/locally-led-climate-action>

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Appendix

This appendix presents summaries of submissions accepted for the Symposium on Strengthening the Evidence on the Outcomes of Locally Led Adaptation, held 3–4 June, 2026, in Bangkok, Thailand.

The contents of the appendix are summaries of initiatives on locally led adaptation that were created by those invited to participate in the symposium. They summed up the initiatives using a form that asked for key aspects, including underpinning financial levers, main outcomes, and lessons for others.

Note: The submissions are presented largely as submitted. The contents are the responsibility of the individual contributors and were not subject to peer review.

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