

-Focusing on Current Realities- It's time for the impacts of climate change to take centre stage

By Anne Hammill

With the passing of yet another Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Milan in December 2003, governments, NGOs and civil society found themselves reflecting on the progress, challenges and investments that have characterized the global effort to address climate change. Much of the most recent attention on this global effort has been on the survival of the Kyoto Protocol, the first legally binding international agreement that would commit industrialized countries to reducing their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. While the likelihood of Russian ratification—and therefore the Protocol's entry into force—remains unclear, the threat of human suffering and ecological collapse continues to rise alongside GHG emissions.

This focus on future emissions reductions must not divert attention away from the current realities of a changing climate. Even if the reduction targets of the first Kyoto commitment period are achieved in full and on time, it is unlikely to lead to the stabilization of GHG concentrations in the short or medium term. Reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have confirmed that climate change is under way, and communities must now take steps to respond.

Policy responses to climate change must not be limited to addressing the source of the problem—i.e., emissions reductions, or mitigation—but must

include measures that help communities to adapt to its impacts. Selling adaptation to donors and governments will not be easy, however, as it is a process involving less tangible and less measurable inputs and results than emissions reductions. What's more, in many instances it is a process best left to local-level actors building upon existing assets and experiences, rather than externally initiated and centrally orchestrated.

In fact, adaptation must start with measures that reduce the vulnerabilities

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people now face, as they are likely to become more prevalent as global temperatures rise. The poor are especially vulnerable to today's climate risks. Settlement on marginal or unstable lands, such as steep slopes or low-lying coastal areas, heightens their exposure to the impacts of climate-related hazards like landslides or floods. Heavy dependence on ecosystem services can place their welfare and survival at the mercy of environmental conditions. As the availability and quality of natural resources decline due to natural and human-induced pressures, so does the viability and security of their livelihoods. Limited capacities and resources for responding to climate stresses constrain their ability to meet basic needs and move out of poverty.

If the poor and most vulnerable are the adaptation priority, then the actual process of adaptation must be based on their livelihoods. By understanding the dynamics of poor people's livelihoods, we can begin to see how they will be affected by climate change impacts, how they might respond with the resources they have, and how these conditions can be reflected and built upon for successful adaptation strategies.

Given the role of environmental settings and natural resources in shaping the exposure and vulnerability of poor communities to climate impacts, adaptation measures must include ecosystem management and restoration (EM&R) activities, such as watershed restoration, rangeland rehabilitation and mangrove reforestation. By enhancing the natural systems that support and protect livelihoods, vulnerable communities can maintain local safety nets and expand the range of options for coping with disruptive shocks and trends.

But, as decades of community environment and development projects have shown, the effectiveness of EM&R can only be realized with the help of mutually supportive enabling activities that address financial, economic and community development needs. This reality highlights two important messages for those communities and decision-makers who are undertaking the design and implementation of adaptation measures: (1) the process of adaptation must be firmly rooted in ongoing sustainable development efforts; and (2) there are many hard-won lessons from a range of disciplines (i.e., disaster risk reduction, poverty reduction, natural resource management, etc.) that can inform the adaptation process.

Tapping these lessons and building upon existing knowledge—including traditional knowledge—will ensure the development of robust and locally-relevant adaptation measures.

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