

Bridging the gap: Experiences of engaging end users in climate change risk and vulnerability planning in southern Africa

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Southern Africa is likely to be significantly impacted by future climate change with the latest climate change projections for the region indicating that both temperature and evapotranspiration are likely to increase into the 21st century. Understanding these climatic changes and their possible impacts on society is essential in critical sectors in southern Africa in order to improve strategic adaptation responses. Until fairly recently work investigating the impacts of and responses to climate change tended to be more prolific in the northern hemisphere. In Africa there are fewer scientists per capita, and academia struggles even more to retain talent since the public sector is under-resourced and does not have the level of prestige of its northern counterparts. As such, climate change information has not been easily accessible in southern Africa; and has tended to be provided in a minimally usable format, at spatial scales inappropriate for local level planning, with little translation, capacity building and follow-up with stakeholders involved in decision-making. That said, increased public awareness of the issue, and the concomitant growth in political commitment to mitigation and adaptation, has made the need for accurate communication more pressing. This paper highlights several key attempts to bridge the science-policy/practice divide in the southern African context. South Africa's Department of Science and Technology recently published a Risk and Vulnerability Atlas that presents selected findings regarding global environmental change impacts in sectors such as agriculture, health, biodiversity, water and coastal/marine zone. It was conceived and designed with the goal of providing up to date global change and vulnerability information at regional, national, provincial and municipal levels. Such information, made available through the Atlas in spatial and non-spatial format, has begun to serve the increasing requests by stakeholders in Southern Africa for information about global change impacts on key sectors in the area. Case study projects were included in the Atlas in order for scientists to demonstrate, in a practical way, how typical research findings accessible in the Atlas can be used in decision making and policy formulation. The volume has been distributed by the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) to each district and local municipality in the country to help inform decision-making. Within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a number of calls have been made for improved planning under climate change, and for access to climate change information as well as mitigation /air quality information, not least by the SADC Secretariat themselves. For example, at the March 2011 meeting of the SADC Programme on Science and Technology Support for Climate Change Response, SADC member states indicated increased access to climate change information (projections and updated impact studies) as a priority in undertaking response and adaptation; as part of in-country gap analysis around climate change. Further, in a specific country example, in Mozambique, The study 'Impacts of climate change on disaster risk in Mozambique' (Phase I), completed in May 2009 by the National Institute for Disaster Management (INGC), comprehensively determines potential climate change implications for Mozambique; with a portal providing access to the latest climate change information and impact/vulnerability data now under construction. Information access here is designed to support the formulation of a National Strategy on Climate Change/Disaster Risk Reduction for the country, as well as other planning/policy initiatives. As a further example, a USAID funded project is currently underway to build capacity amongst the SADC member states in understanding information on climate change impact and risk in the context of SADC early warning strategies and planning around risk.