



CLIMATE PLANS FOR THE PEOPLE

Civil society and community participation in national action plans on climate change

In 2024, countries will be submitting their new Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) as commitments towards tackling climate change. These plans impact everyone and must therefore be inclusive. Practices across eleven countries show the main actors were not sufficiently inclusive, with many absent stakeholders from communities and civil society organisations. The engagement of people in national climate plans is essential to foster a sustainable, equitable, and inclusive social, economic, and political environment for climate action. To achieve that:

- UNFCCC must insist on including the voices of the most impacted.
- Governments must improve transparency, participation and accountability, by ensuring marginalized impacted groups are included.
- UN agencies and donors must provide support to civil society and actively promote inclusion.
- Civil society should build capacity on climate change, push for inclusion, and support community engagement.

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Cover photo: Participants from local civil society, business and government at an Oxfam workshop on the Nationally Determined Contribution in Nigeria's Bauchi State. By: Kenneth Akpan.

INTRODUCTION

Before the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Brazil in 2025, known as COP30, all 195 countries that signed the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change are expected to revise their national climate plans in the face of worsening climate impacts and an urgency to take 'urgent action and support to keep the 1.5°C goal within reach'.² The message from the United Nations' first Global Stocktake is clear – 'the world needs to raise its level of ambition if the worst is to be averted.' The time for greater civil society and community participation in these national climate plans is now.

National climate plans, in the form of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), refer to the decisions and plans of countries on how they will respond to climate change to meet the objectives of the Paris Agreement. While climate plans and NDCs ought to involve the whole of society, the reality is far removed. Whether intentional or not, countries are lagging in their efforts to be inclusive in drafting their climate plans.

The lack of participation has far-reaching implications. For the climate response to be credible, NDCs must contain commitments and plans from diverse sectors including employment, food and farming, energy and fuel, land use, transport, housing, health, travel, biodiversity and forests, water, and infrastructure. To succeed they will also need to link with key financial and economic policies. Sectoral commitments can disproportionately impact the lives of those who are underrepresented – women, Indigenous Peoples, smallholder farmers, and communities which already bear the brunt of existing climate change impacts. In short, NDCs are about reforming national economic, social and political systems to create a more sustainable future. Inclusive NDCs gives an opportunity to tackle the inequality which goes hand in hand with climate change.

The changes that need to be made to tackle the climate crisis will require all of society to have a say and play a role, from businesses and governments to civil society and community groups. People need and have the right to be part of the discussion and be involved in local and national plans because their insights, experiences, knowledge and solutions are highly valuable, and because the plans will impact them. Rural communities need knowledge and resources to adopt more sustainable agricultural models,³ as well as be more resilient to changing weather patterns, and they also need safety nets to rebuild their communities when a flood, or some other climate-related disaster wipes out their assets. Other actors in society are also impacted as they attempt to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Companies are struggling to transition away from fossil fuels to renewables, and low-income households often simply can't afford to 'go green'. The land, water and other natural resources Indigenous Peoples and other local communities rely on are being contaminated or lost because of mining of transition minerals or renewable energy projects, or because of controversial carbon offsetting schemes.⁴ At the same time, there are a dazzling array of local solutions being developed across society, such as adaptation through climate resilient seeds produced in local breeding

*Nationally Determined Contributions – or NDCs – form the basis for countries to achieve the objectives of the Paris Agreement. They contain information on targets, and policies and measures for reducing national emissions and on adapting to climate change impacts. NDCs also contain information on either the needs for, or the provision of, finance, technologies and capacity building for these actions. Countries communicate new or updated NDCs every five years starting in 2020.*⁴

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programmes, to community-supported local renewable energy initiatives. All of society is affected, should have a voice, and can be part of the solution, driving up the ambition of national plans.

This paper makes the case to governments, donors, civil society, and other stakeholders that national climate plans must be inclusive, and people should be actively participating in them – as a right, as a strategic necessity and as a matter of climate justice.

First, we consider why stronger inclusion in NDCs is both required and essential to increase climate ambition in a way that tackles inequality, and we suggest principles to achieve this. Next, we present the challenges to inclusion based on our review of practices in eleven countries where Oxfam works. While the countries reviewed are all in the Global South, findings in other research indicate similar challenges across the Global North. Finally, we make recommendations on what different stakeholder need to do now to move toward national climate plans which are truly owned by all of society. The intention of this note is not to name and shame individual countries for the challenges they face, but instead, by summarising recurrent gaps and limitations in people’s participation in NDC processes, to highlight what needs to be done to improve participation in all countries. Climate plans are everyone’s business.

‘... Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and inter-generational equity.’⁵

Preamble, Paris Agreement

NATIONAL DETERMINED CONTRIBUTIONS

WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

NDCs are more than just policy documents – they represent the pledges countries make to each other and to their own citizens to address the climate crisis.

While the Paris agreement sets up the overarching state obligations and objectives for climate action, and UN climate summits (COPs) adopt decisions that should shape each country’s policies and actions, each country is left to decide on the exact measures, in the form of NDCs, to adopt in order to meet the objectives of the Paris agreement. This makes an NDC a vital and comprehensive tool, representing the commitment each country⁶ makes to help meet the goal of pursuing efforts to limit a global temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, adapt to climate impacts, and ensure sufficient finance to support these efforts. NDCs are to be updated every five years with increasingly higher ambition, based on each country’s capabilities and capacities.⁷ At COP28 in December 2023, it was decided that countries should submit updated NDCs by February 2025. These periodic updates represent opportunities for wider engagement of people in national climate plans.

NDCs bring the different elements of climate action together in a single public national commitment, including plans in diverse sectors including employment, food and farming, energy and fuel, land use, transport, housing, health, travel, biodiversity and forests, water and infrastructure. Moreover, NDCs are closely linked to key financial and economic policies, including the budget, taxation, industrial policy, and investment policy of a country.

Given the far-reaching impact of NDCs, and the burdens they may create in society, it is imperative that they are shared fairly. Climate policies, if their burden is not shared fairly, could have disproportionate impacts on the lives of women, Indigenous Peoples, smallholder farmers, and communities who already bear the brunt of existing climate change impacts. Those most affected by climate change and most vulnerable to its impacts should be central to responses to mitigate and adapt to those changes.⁸ It is our view that these communities, and civil society in general, need to be represented in NDCs.

WHY SHOULD THE PEOPLE HAVE A SAY IN NDCS?

People's inclusion in climate decisions is a right

Public participation is not only essential - it is a right recognized in international and regional treaties⁹ and political commitments, such as the Sustainable Development Goals,¹⁰ adopted at multilateral levels and ratified by states. These are rights to a say in how governments respond to the climate crisis and for their views to be considered in the plans. Ensuring participation by people, communities and civil society in national climate planning processes is also consistent with the Paris Agreement. It calls for enhanced public participation in the implementation of NDCs through climate change education, training, public awareness, and public access to information.¹¹ Moreover, 'the Paris Rulebook',¹² says that states should provide information on the planning process they follow, including 'public participation and engagement with local communities and indigenous peoples, in a gender-responsive manner'. Participants should include civil society, the private sector, financial institutions, cities and other subnational authorities, local communities, and Indigenous Peoples. Farmers and rural communities, women and youth also have an important role to play in responding to climate change and meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement.¹³

The agreement recognises the relationship between climate change actions, responses and impacts on one hand, and equitable access to sustainable development and eradication of poverty on the other. In asserting the need for a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent and quality jobs, the agreement insists on the engagement of workers' organisations. It also reconfirms that state parties to the Paris Agreement have human rights obligations and should promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. Finally, the agreement emphasises the importance of the concept of 'climate justice'.¹⁴ A key component of climate justice is procedural justice, which emphasises fair, transparent and inclusive decision-making.

Peru and Uganda: Promising examples of inclusive NDCs

In Peru, Oxfam's partner the National Organization of Andean and Amazonian Indigenous Women of Peru (ONA-MIAP) participated and influenced building consensus among indigenous organizations and bringing crucial issues for indigenous women and their communities to the table in the Free, Prior and Informed Consent process for the regulation of the Climate Change Law. As a result, the National Indigenous Platform on Climate Change was created as an institutional space where the government and indigenous organizations can articulate and discuss indigenous adaptation and mitigation proposals that form the basis for a more inclusive NDC.

In Uganda, Oxfam partner Climate Action Network Uganda held sub-national consultations in different parts of the country to ensure communities impacted directly by climate change were heard during the national climate plan revision and played a role in increasing people's knowledge and engagement on the NDC, especially in vulnerable communities. Further, national climate plans should address the pressing question of how much it will all cost and how much will be covered from domestic sources and international climate funds. Oxfam partners in Uganda and Nigeria are currently exploring citizen's budget monitoring approaches to drive improved governance and transparency in climate budget discussions.

Inclusion is at the core of climate solutions

Including people in national climate plans is not only a right and aligned with climate justice principles but can help counter systems that perpetuate inequality and undermine climate justice. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) acknowledges that 'rights-based approaches that focus on capacity-building, meaningful participation of the most vulnerable groups, and their access to key resources, including finances' can reduce structural vulnerabilities to climate change.¹⁵

The knowledge of local communities about their own ecosystems, is a vital element for effective conservation and restoration. Failing to include such knowledge in climate plans, or implementing plans that are not supported by local people, will likely fail and lead to negative outcomes or increased inequality.¹⁶ For example, a study on Technology Needs Assessments highlighted the value of stakeholder engagement in ensuring such assessments are based on the best available knowledge, and that the needs and preferences of stakeholders are considered.¹⁷ Peru's NDC process is often held up as an example of strong inclusion for a wide range of civil society stakeholders. Peru has consolidated alliances among stakeholder groups, creating mass awareness to support and monitor NDC implementation, and promoting stakeholder engagement and ownership thus improving adaptation capacity and mitigation potential.¹⁸

Other potential benefits resulting from the inclusion of vulnerable communities in decision-making include building resilience among vulnerable communities and ecosystems to climate change impacts.¹⁹ political ownership by communities,²⁰ stakeholder buy-in,²¹ fostering effective governance,²² and building whole-of-society consensus on climate action and NDC ambition.²³

Exclusion undermines climate ambition and action in Brazil

Under the previous government led by President Jair Bolsonaro, there was no civil society participation in the first revision of Brazil's NDC. The national Climate Change Forum, a participatory and consultative body of over 650 actors, was paralysed, and its operation restricted to a few people. This was part of a broader strategy to dismantle environmental policies and institutions, including significant budget cuts and the persecution of environmental defenders, which significantly delayed Brazil's climate mitigation, adaptation and resilience agenda. With their absence from official spaces, social movements and civil society organisation (CSOs) felt that their access to relevant information about the country's environmental policy was under-mined. Decisions made behind closed doors by managers were seen, for example, to have affected negatively the measures taken to combat fires and deforestation in sensitive biomes like the Amazon forest, Pantanal and Cerrado.

Inclusive NDCs are central to the global climate efforts

At the end of 2023 the first ever Global Stocktake (GST) – the process to assess collective progress towards achieving the purpose and long-term goals of the Paris Agreement – was completed. The GST concluded that the world is not on track to meet the long-term goals of the Paris Agreement and that now is the time to rapidly accelerate action.²⁴ Since the previous round of NDCs, the GST has not only confirmed that there is more urgency, but also more understanding of the issues, more engagement from government and stakeholders, and there is more reason to believe that planning ministries and finance ministries will respect and follow NDC commitments. The GST also noted that the policies and measures needed to promote climate resilience and low greenhouse gas emission development can be made mutually supportive through whole-of-society approaches and integrated, inclusive policymaking.

There is some evidence to support the assertion that greater participation can contribute to increased ambition. Work by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that many countries – although not all – that were assessed to be more inclusive and gender-responsive in assessment and target setting or used a targeted approach in their consultations, had more ambitious national climate plans both from a mitigation and adaptation perspective.²⁵

The link between NDCs and climate finance is also becoming better understood, with budgets detailing climate finance needs now included in 46% of the plans submitted.²⁶ By the end of 2024 a New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) for climate finance, to address the needs of developing countries, should be agreed, superseding the current goal of US\$100 billion per year. The NCQG will need to consider the needs and priorities of developing countries and support a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development. NDCs will need to be participatory to reflect a whole of society effort to enhanced mitigation and adaptation ambition. As NDCs become more relevant, and the pressure to increase ambition grows, it will become even more important that people become more deeply involved in the discussion.

People are still excluded

Despite the benefits of inclusion, and efforts toward it, there is a growing awareness that in many places key stakeholders are yet to be part of the conversation. The UNFCCC noted in 2021 that 'The stakeholders consulted in NDCs are mainly from government line ministries. While in some instances they include non-governmental organisations and the private sector, local communities are the least consulted stakeholders during the process'.²⁷

The Danish Institute for Human Rights analysed claims made in NDCs submitted by governments, finding that 'Most submissions (90%) refer to stakeholder participation in the development of the NDC or NECP.²⁸ Slightly fewer (81%) identify a type of non-state actor involved (e.g., NGOs, academia, experts). Fewer (69%) explain how participants were involved. More analysis is required to evaluate the quality of this engagement from a human rights perspective.'²⁹ German development agency GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) looked deeper and expressed concern that 'limitations to meaningful participation in NDC processes impact whole-of-society buy-in and implementability'.³⁰

Whether exclusion happens due to lack of resources, as an error of omission, or by design, it is problematic. Exclusion can reflect and reinforce already existing inequalities within and between groups who may be experiencing climate impacts differently. If plans to tackle climate change are being made in isolation by elites and technocrats, without wider ownership, they are likely to fail because they will be less effective, less fair, and less likely to win public backing.

Climate change is everyone's business. Deeper involvement in climate plans will help ensure everyone is on board, is supportive and can play their part. Oxfam believes NDCs should:

- Capture the political agreements and compromises between different parts of the national economy required to reduce emissions – such as in agriculture, the food system, the energy sector, industry, waste, transport, forestry etc.
- Help those most affected by the impact of climate change to be part of climate decision-making spaces and to access financial resources to adapt to climate change impacts such as rising temperatures, water scarcity, and others related to both extreme weather events and slow-onset impacts.
- Ensure that national plans identify and address the impact of climate measures in a way that respect human rights, taking into account age, race, ethnicity, conflict, and economic class. In every affected sector and community, the views of key social groups must be considered, adequately incorporated, while giving feedback on how this was done through structural and inclusive participation processes.
- Be gender responsive. This means not only including women's rights organisations, but that budgets and targets are developed with a gender lens. Awareness raising should also include information about the linkages between gender inequality and climate change.

- Ensure the energy transition is just, organised in such a way that those that are most responsible and have the largest capabilities will be obliged to do the heavy lifting, and that affected people have a meaningful say in the design and implementation of transition policies, ensuring that the renewable energy transition reduces rather than exacerbates inequalities and injustice.³¹
- Respect the right of Indigenous Peoples to free, prior and informed consent before adopting measures that may affect them.
- Ensure that the land and water rights of communities and Indigenous Peoples are protected before adopting measures, particularly relating to land use change, which may affect them.
- Align with the country's development priorities and be ambitious enough to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement.
- Include comprehensive budgets, making clear the additional climate finance needed above domestic budgets in low-income countries to meet targets and increase their ambition ('conditional budget').
- Be coherent with other climate plans and policies, such as local and national adaptation plans, and long-term low greenhouse gas emission development strategies (LTSs),³² as well as coherent with energy, industrial and fiscal and other policies. Ideally the climate or environment ministry should be co-leading the process with a finance or planning ministry.

A LOOK AROUND THE WORLD: WHO WAS INVOLVED AND WHO WAS LEFT OUT IN NDC PROCESSES?

Cognisant of the need to overcome inequalities within society which can perpetuate and deepen exclusion of people within national climate processes, Oxfam conducted scoping research in eleven countries where it works to better understand the challenges to inclusion, and to assist governments, donors and civil society address them. The studies were conducted by local researchers in Bangladesh, Brazil, Cambodia, Chad, Indonesia, Kenya, Mozambique, OPT, Senegal, Zambia and Zimbabwe. They were supplemented by learnings from Oxfam's own activities to improve civil society and community engagement in NDC processes in Burkina Faso, Peru and Uganda. Country-specific information can be requested from the author.

The study investigated the weaknesses and strengths in recent national climate planning processes, as well as the factors which have led to the exclusion of the views of climate-impacted communities, of women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and many others. The participation of 'people' can take many forms. In our research, this term encompassed national and local civil society organisations (CSOs), often linked to specific issues, and sectors or social groups. It also subsumed local communities and Indigenous Peoples, often in the form of community-based organizations (CBOs).

Findings: Who was involved?

Based on our research, government ministries, agencies and government coordinating bodies (such as national climate change councils) are, as expected, very much the main actors involved in the development of all NDCs. From a participation perspective, this is not necessarily a problem unless government participation in public consultations, for example, is seen to overwhelm or crowd out the participation of other stakeholders. For example, in one of the most inclusive countries studied, at a national consultation workshop on the NDC, government ministries accounted for almost half of all participants, while civil society and private sector combined made up only 10%.

United Nations (UN) agencies and development partners (such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, UNDP,³³ UNWOMEN, World Food Programme and the World Bank) played a prominent role, in at least three of the national climate plan processes studied, managing processes, or advising governments on the content or preparation process of their NDCs. While these agencies can make valuable contributions, concerns were expressed by some of those interviewed for our research that, because of the climate finance resources the agencies access,³⁴ and the influence they have over governments, they may be inadvertently crowding out civil society and local communities, which may lack the resources and influence of UN agencies.

In many of the countries we studied, consultants were also reported to have played a prominent role in the development of national climate plans. While sometimes necessary, some interviewees considered an overreliance on foreign consultancy firms to be problematic as local expertise was sidelined and national ownership of the process undermined.

Private sector representatives were included in most countries, as were academia and think tanks. At least in two countries, key informants considered this engagement insufficient. Conversely, some processes were seen as overly technocratic in nature, primarily involving scientists and experts, while broader stakeholder representation was limited. The involvement of academia, think tanks and other expert organisations³⁵ in such circumstances was not seen to represent a broad, inclusive process.

In four countries civil society was formally represented in national climate change committees, technical working groups or steering committees along with other stakeholder groups. However, in most countries these structures included only government. Where these structures did include civil society, the latter was often significantly outnumbered by other stakeholder groups.

It is fair to say that, across the countries studied, NDC processes were dominated by elites, including not only government, but also UN agencies, international (and in some cases national) specialised or expert organisations and individuals. Such patterns of participation can, in themselves, lead to exclusion of civil society and communities, especially those based away from big cities, or those who do not feel at ease in settings not designed to take their views, cultures or languages into consideration, or in situations where power relations are highly unequal.

What did civil society participation look like?

While the most recent NDC synthesis report of the UN climate treaty body the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) claims progress in this area³⁶, Oxfam's research suggests that this progress is limited. Apart from Zambia, civil society participation faced many challenges across the countries studied.

Participation by civil society or communities in NDC processes³⁷ was non-existent in two countries and limited in the remaining nine. In other words, communities and civil society were too often excluded. Often, where there was inclusion, it was seen as selective, so that some actors had a higher chance of participation than others, based on their proximity, relationship to the government, or their perceived expertise, while others might be excluded due to lack of resources, or intentional omission. What follows are illustrations of the participation of civil society across the countries we studied:

Zambia: A promising case study in participatory NDCs

In Zambia, the most recent revision of the NDC showed a positive shift toward greater inclusivity and participation compared to the first NDC process. The recent NDC process was guided by a clear road map and a well-planned process, engaged a wide group of stakeholders (often through umbrella organisations), and promoted transparency. Importantly, stakeholders interviewed said that there was government and political will for a process that engaged with stakeholders from civil society.

Challenges still exist - lack of involvement of grassroots stakeholders such as farmers, and women's rights organisations - but the process is a promising example of a participatory NDC revision process.

- The first NDC process in one country did involve some CSOs, but mostly those with a close relationship with the government according to those interviewed. CSOs focussed on human rights and social justice issues, or those who were advocating against continued coal extraction, were soon excluded from NDC discussions. Subsequent NDC processes excluded civil society altogether.
- Technical committees and consultation processes in one country did involve civil society (including youth networks), along with other stakeholder groups, but this was restricted to elite civil society groups according to stakeholders we interviewed. Local community-based organisations were excluded.
- In another country, while some civil society representatives were members of the National Climate Change Committee and working groups, there was no clear criteria for their selection among the many other CSOs and institutions that may have had an interest in taking part. Those that were not part of the process were not aware of the discussions.
- In another country, civil society participation in NDC processes was dominated by a few larger international NGOs (INGOs) (including Oxfam for the first NDC process) and the leading national member-based civil

society body; government requests for inputs from civil society went through this body. Similarly, in three other countries, civil society participation was limited to a few larger NGOs/CSOs only or the national member-based climate change network. In one of these three countries, this participation decreased between the first NDC and the NDC revision process.

- In a number of countries, there has been a reliance on a national member-based body or network on climate or environmental issues, and an assumption that such entities represent the needs of communities or priorities of their members in national climate plan processes. However, factors including tight deadlines, limited financial and human resources, and low awareness of the importance of NDCs or national climate planning processes sometimes seem to have hampered some representative networks in fulfilling these roles. For example, in one country, the national member-based body simply did not have the resources to consult with its members or climate-vulnerable community representatives in the second NDC process. This was not always the case though- in another country our research found that civil society overall felt well represented by the CSO network which participated in NDC process, although there was a perception that information from grassroots organisations may have been missed.
- There were many indications that CSO participation was often superficial or tokenistic, and consultative in name only. In two countries, CSO participation was perceived to be ad hoc and on an 'as needed' basis. In a third country, where consultation also seemed ad hoc, invitations to participate in public events were widely distributed but were often sent with little notice and with critical information missing, and the events themselves were mainly based on one-way communication from the conveners rather than genuine dialogue. In another country, where government and civil society recently came together as part of this study to discuss the NDC revision, it emerged that most civil society organisations were participating in NDC activities for the first time, despite claims that earlier processes had been open and inclusive of civil society.

Inclusion in NDCs is a global concern

While the challenges highlighted in this report centre on case studies in low- and middle-income countries where Oxfam works, it should be clear that national climate planning in the Global North also faces many of the same challenges. Other studies, which have focused on richer countries, echo many of Oxfam's findings, such as failures to involve community-based organisations, a lack of accountability on how proposals have been handled, and suggestions that processes had either been limited to informing or consulting, often falling short of deliberative discussions.³⁸ Further, NDC participation is key to consensus building and ownership in every country, and this is increasingly becoming an issue in more affluent parts of the world where climate scepticism is on the rise.³⁹

Who was not involved?

Across all country studies many stakeholders who should have been involved – either because they represent those most impacted by climate change, or by those impacted by climate transition measures, or because they have expertise and insights to contribute – were not.

Stakeholders interviewed for the research referred to certain groups in civil society being absent:⁴⁰

- communities and community-based organisations (nine countries)
- women’s rights organisations (eight countries)
- representatives of Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities (five countries)
- community forestry groups, fisherfolk and agricultural collectives (three countries)
- workers’ rights groups (two countries)
- representatives of people living with disabilities (two countries)
- youth (two countries)
- human rights organisations (one country)

While the exclusion of any of these groups is deemed significant, it is particularly concerning that communities and community-based organisations were excluded in all but one of the countries studied. Given the importance of ensuring climate action is responsive to the needs of those most impacted by climate change, this finding can be seen as a major gap, and resonates with the UNFCCC’s assertion in 2021 that communities are the least consulted stakeholders, after it reviewed nine different types of national reports which are regularly submitted.⁴¹ While not specifically mentioned by the countries we investigated, it is very likely that, with an estimate from 2015 that over 30 million people are displaced across the planet,⁴² conflict also exacerbated exclusion from climate plans and climate responses worldwide. Countries grappling with violent or armed conflict, many of which are also the most climate vulnerable,⁴³ face reduced institutional capacity and resources to elaborate and implement climate policy, let alone run community consultations or implement plans in areas affected by conflict.⁴⁴

WHAT PREVENTED OR LIMITED PARTICIPATION BY CIVIL SOCIETY?

Civil society input is not valued

Government representatives were interviewed in most of the country studies. One found that government bodies do not always have a clear picture of what civil society could contribute to national climate planning processes. Because of this poor understanding, governments do not then deliberately engage with civil society. As shown in Table 1, government perceptions of what civil society could contribute, are much less than what civil society itself believes it can contribute. Research in another country also found that governments do not always know who from civil society they

should be engaging with, and sometimes reach out to less credible or legitimate civil society stakeholders. Divergent perceptions of the role of civil society in such processes have also been noted by the Independent Institute for Environmental Issues, which has discussed government perceptions on the purpose of participation in three countries.⁴⁵ Oxfam’s current research also revealed a perception among some in one government that their NDC reflected pre-existing government climate commitments and policy frameworks that had previously been developed with community needs in mind or with civil society input. Thus, participation by civil society in the NDC process itself, and possibly in NDC implementation or monitoring, was not seen as necessary. In three countries, Oxfam also noted a view that participating NGOs and CSOs automatically represented local communities and Indigenous Peoples, which suggests a need to be mindful when assumptions are made about legitimacy and representativity.⁴⁶

Table 1: Example of stakeholder perceptions on civil society value in NDC processes in one country

CSO perceptions of their value	Government perceptions of civil society value
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing relationships on which partnerships for climate action can be based. • Supporting implementation, monitoring and reporting on climate action. • Contributing research. • Developing tools to track implementation. • Bringing the views of communities, and vulnerable and marginalised groups into the process. • Enabling other stakeholder’s engagement through convening power. • Enhancing transparency and accountability of the process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amplifying different voices. • Fostering inclusivity. • Enriching the NDC process and its outputs

Restricted civic space prevented participation

In all the countries, civic space⁴⁷ was, to varying degrees, constrained. Restrictions on the ability of civil society to gather or to express opinions in four of the countries studied, or the explicit criminalisation of civil society in another, have limited the participation of civil society in national climate planning processes (and other areas of public policy). In Brazil, the severe limitation of public participation for the revision process in 2020 represented a backwards step while, by contrast, the first NDC process in 2015, under the previous government, was considered by many to be relatively open and inclusive. The situation is expected to change for the better during the forthcoming revision following the election of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, leading a quite different government with a strong public commitment to inclusion and tackling inequality.

‘We had very limited time and budget and needed information to feed into the NDC report as soon as possible.’

Consultant supporting one government’s NDC revision process.

Lack of government resources impeded inclusive processes

In two of the countries surveyed, the interviewees reported that NDC processes were often characterised by limited human and financial resourcing by governments. This is also echoed by Oxfam's own experiences in broadening civil society and community engagement in NDC revision processes in Burkina Faso and Uganda.⁴⁸ The research found that, in practice, this meant governments did not have sufficient funds to support the logistics necessary to enable wide participation in meetings, especially beyond national or provincial capital cities. NDC processes were often considered to be hurried, and consultations were conducted with insufficient prior notice, giving little time for review and preparation. It was also noted that invitations to participate in public consultations were sometimes unclear on the key discussion points. These limited the opportunity for civil society and communities to participate effectively.

Online consultation processes – sometimes conducted as an alternative to in-person meetings – did not necessarily allow for meaningful engagement and did not overcome access barriers because of limited internet access or prohibitive cost in many places.

National climate plan processes were often considered to be too technical, made worse by a lack of information – such as draft documents – shared prior to and during consultations, limiting the ability of civil society to prepare and provide inputs in a proper and considered manner.

Stakeholders from four countries also noted that NDC processes often lacked clear mechanisms or guidelines to guarantee effective, structural, inclusive and meaningful participation by civil society and communities. As a result, public consultation sometimes appeared fragmented and segmented, or, in two countries, influenced by personal connections. Practically, this meant unclear timelines for consultation or engagement, and a lack of direction on how and when to engage in advance. Also, there was inconsistency over time in how governments engaged with civil society because engagement was discretionary, and sometimes focal points for the NDC shifted between government ministries or agencies.

Civil society lacked capacity and resources

Alongside the challenges of governments in ensuring inclusive climate plans, communities and civil society also faced hurdles that complicated their participation.

Oxfam's research found that knowledge of the nature and significance of national climate plans, and the impacts they will have in areas of key concern to civil society and climate-affected communities (such as agricultural and land use transformation, household energy and community resilience) is often quite limited within wider civil society, particularly at community level. This is the case even in countries where other parts of civil society, especially environmental or 'climate' NGOs, are actively engaged on climate issues. This knowledge gap can limit the ability of wider civil society to engage in national climate planning processes or the extent to which they show interest in and request inclusion in such processes. Interviewees stressed that awareness of climate change, and of the economy-wide

Government goals and actions must be presented in a manner that is accessible and culturally appropriate and responsive to local communities. Non-party stakeholders can play a principal role in enabling the delivery of tailored, concrete policies and actions that sit within national contexts.

Open Letter from Southeast Asian non-Party stakeholders.

impact of planned mitigation and adaptation measures, is limited within civil society, especially among groups not focussed on climate issues.

Civil society builds its own capacity to engage in NDC process in Burkina Faso

Oxfam's partners in Burkina Faso came together in a 'People's NDC Alliance', including the national NGO umbrella group (SPONG), the national rural women's network, youth organisations, environmental journalists and others to read and analyse Burkina Faso's NDC. The thirteen CSOs read and analysed and then, with a wider network, formulated recommendations on adaptation and participation for a more ambitious NDC, using the 'People's NDC' tool⁴⁹ developed by the Climate Land Ambition and Rights Alliance (CLARA) to support self-education and group mobilization around national climate plans. The alliance is now well prepared to engage in the second NDC revision process in 2024.

Another challenge noted in several of the studies, was that limited human and financial resources impact CSOs' ability to engage in national climate planning processes, especially for community-based organisations. For example, our research found that CSOs may not have the funds to travel to meetings (which is problematic if governments also cannot cover those costs) or have staff available to engage in consultation processes or to coordinate with their members or community partners. The language used in consultation processes can also limit participation, particularly when official languages used in national climate planning processes are not widely spoken at the community level.

These issues are potentially among the more straightforward to address in future support plans, given the wide range of climate finance and technical resources being deployed to support NDC processes, especially through the NDC Partnership,⁵⁰ the main global initiative providing technical assistance and funding to NDC processes. In addition to multiple local initiatives taken by bilateral donors around the world, other key global initiatives which might allocate additional funding to support and promote deeper levels of inclusion in NDC revision processes, include UNDP's Climate Promise programme, and the Green Climate Fund's Readiness programme, which, in line with its 10- year strategy, prioritises 'meaningful stakeholder engagement'.⁵¹

In some countries, it was noted from stakeholders that civil society actors may be distrustful of each other, and show very limited collaboration, networking and communication. This limits their ability to work together effectively in national climate planning processes. Further, the CSOs most engaged in such processes will have climate change and environment knowledge and experience but may lack, for example, knowledge and sensitivity when it comes to other issues such as agriculture, land rights, conflict and fragility, human rights and gender equality – all of which are linked to issues of climate justice. They may also lack the deep economic knowledge needed, including a good understanding of how economic and financial policies are made.

Does participation mean influence?

Regardless of how civil society was able to participate in national climate planning processes, the extent to which participation by civil society influenced the outcomes of those processes was often limited or unclear. For example, the consensus reached by working groups or technical teams (even when they did involve civil society) were not always reflected in the final NDC. Stakeholders in two countries specifically noted that important recommendations from civil society on the inclusion of sector-focussed mitigation were ignored. Furthermore, governments in our study usually failed to explain if and how inputs made by civil society were incorporated into NDCs.

Our research found that there is little transparency and accountability toward local civil society or communities, though there were exceptions. In Zambia workshops were held for all stakeholders to validate the outputs of the NDC process, and in Senegal the government organised validation sessions with various CSOs, including with COMNACC, the National Committee on Climate Change, which convenes non-state actors in Senegal. Meaningful consultation, and the building of broad ownership in the process and outcome, should require communication from government back to all stakeholders on how their inputs were considered in the drafting of the NDC. Without such accountability, participation in NDCs risks being superficial and tokenistic.

CONCLUSIONS

While civil society and community perspectives were probably not intentionally excluded in most cases, the research conducted suggests a lack of sufficient intention, knowledge, structure and resources to enable inclusive and effective participation by civil society and climate-affected communities in national climate planning processes.

The picture emerging from these findings is one in which genuine inclusion depends on three things:

- Governments must understand and commit to meaningful participation of civil society and communities, rather than offer superficial opportunities for consultation as a 'check box' exercise.
- Civil society and communities need access to consultation space, capacity and knowledge to take advantage of the opportunity to engage in NDC processes.
- NDCs are about reforming national economic, social and political systems to create a more sustainable future. It gives an opportunity to tackle the inequality which goes hand in hand with climate change. A common understanding that NDCs offer this opportunity will help to collectively build an equal and sustainable future for all. By doing so, NDCs can bring both governments, communities and the whole of society together.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The climate is changing, and it will affect us all, but those who have done the least to cause the climate crisis are the ones who are suffering the most.⁵² The following recommendations indicate ways in which different stakeholders can help ensure all of society, not just governments, joins the effort to limit global temperature increases to 1.5°C and adapt to the impacts of climate change in a way that simultaneously reduces, rather than entrenches inequalities, improves people's lives, and garners public support.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNFCCC

- As part of decision-making on NDC features at COP29 in 2024,⁵³ require that all NDCs are genuinely and demonstrably participatory to help build the ambition called for by the GST,⁵⁴ champion locally led solutions, and ensure the needs of the most impacted by climate change are prioritised. For instance, a participation benchmark can be developed and included as part of NDC submissions to ensure more meaningful participation of groups that are currently excluded or that have limited participation.
- Require that NDCs demonstrably reflect the expressed needs of those most impacted by climate change in their plans and budgets to feed into a more credible global finance goal (NCQG).

Sustainable and just solutions to the climate crisis must be founded on meaningful and effective social dialogue and participation of all stakeholders, including Indigenous Peoples, local communities and governments, women, and youth and children.

Outcome of the first global stocktake (paragraph 9)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS

- Improve the transparency of NDC decision-making processes in the run up to the 2025 deadline for revised NDCs and beyond in the implementation process. Report on the design and implementation of NDCs and their impact on the country's development goals.
- Establish mechanisms or benchmarks in line with the Paris Agreement and the Paris Rulebook that refer to the inclusion and participation of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women, youth and other marginalised groups. These must guarantee and demonstrate that NDC processes are participatory and inclusive and can include:
 1. Facilitating engagement and participation, either directly or through civil society.
 2. Identifying barriers to participation related to gender norms, disability, language, economic, cultural, poverty, age, conflict, and other factors, and making adjustments to overcome those barriers.⁵⁵
 3. Showing how civil society and community inputs were considered in the process.
- Ensure that policies and strategies are designed to address existing inequalities and prioritize the most vulnerable populations. Incorporate principles of equity and social justice into the development of NDCs by considering the needs and perspectives of marginalized communities, especially those impacted by climate change, and by measures to tackle climate change.

- Provide adequate resources and capacity building to enable all stakeholders to participate effectively in the NDC process, especially in climate-impacted areas, and among constituencies potentially impacted by measures to tackle climate change.
- Strive to ensure a whole of society approach in national climate planning, monitoring and implementation, recognising that measures being considered will have different impacts, based on ethnicity, gender, geographic location and economic status.
- Ensure commitments made in each country's NDCs help achieve climate justice and reduce inequality, including addressing issues of racial, gender and socioeconomic injustices.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UN AGENCIES, TECHNICAL COOPERATION AGENCIES AND DONORS

- Support governments at all levels with technical assistance and capacity building specifically to develop and implement participatory, inclusive and people-centred NDCs.
- As part of ongoing support for NDC processes, whether revision, monitoring or implementation, support the participation of all stakeholders, especially marginalized communities, youth, and women, and take steps to remedy the situation where this does not happen.
- Facilitate knowledge sharing and peer learning among countries to promote best practices in inclusive NDC development and implementation.
- Providing funding to support local civil society to participate in climate planning, and NDC processes specifically, including to do the things contained in the 'recommendations for civil society' below.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

- Advocate that governments establish mechanisms or guidelines that guarantee participatory and inclusive NDC processes, both in revising plans, and in monitoring and implementing them.
- Monitor the design and implementation of NDCs to ensure that they are inclusive, and people-centred.
- Seek innovative ways to partner with governments to make NDC processes more inclusive and people centred.
- In advance of NDC discussions, engage across networks and alliances to prepare for NDC processes, including to develop shared positions on the actions needed for mitigation and adaptation and to advance the interests of the diverse and vital parts of society collectively represented by these networks.
- Partner with community-based organisations, human and women's rights groups, Indigenous Peoples, farmers, fishers and their communities, among others, to ensure inputs to NDC processes reflect the needs of those most vulnerable to climate change and promote human rights and gender equality.

- Where knowledge in climate-impacted communities and civil society beyond environmental groups is low, support increased awareness on climate change, the implications of the impending climate transition, and points for consultation and engagement in NDCs, National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), LTSs. and other relevant climate processes.

Useful resources include the 'People's NDC' tool⁶⁶ from the CLARA alliance, designed to help civil society and Indigenous groups understand and get involved in national climate change response plans. The NDC Partnership's 'Climate Toolbox' is also a rich resource of helpful materials for government and civil society.⁵⁷

NOTES

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Research methodology

This brief report is based on the results of a multi-country investigation. Oxfam commissioned research in eleven countries, where Oxfam has not been actively engaged in NDC processes (mostly) but where it implements climate justice programs. The countries are Bangladesh, Brazil, Cambodia, Chad, Indonesia, Kenya, Mozambique, Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Senegal, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The research groups in each country used a variety of methods including scoping reviews, stakeholder interviews, surveys, and other tools to answer the main research questions. The country-level studies were documented in reports, and peer-reviewed for comprehensiveness and accuracy.

The questions considered in the research process included:

How were NDCs developed? How was civil society consulted?

How much space was given for civil society to influence and participate? Were civil society perspectives actively excluded or side-lined?

Were relevant groups included? Were relevant groups who should have been included left out?

Has the process respected Indigenous Peoples' right to free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC)?

Was civil society participation in NDC processes sufficient?

Did consultation processes promote transparency, minimise inequality and avoid the exercise of undue economic or political influence in the design and implementation of NDCs?

In addition to the above, Oxfam also gathered information and country-level reviews from 3 countries where it has been actively engaged in NDC processes - Burkina Faso, Peru and Uganda. These reviews evaluated Oxfam's and our partners' experiences with NDC processes. While the reviews in these countries was not aimed directly at understanding how participatory and inclusive NDCs have been, we were able to distil important insights into NDC processes from them



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