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# Localizing Climate Action:

## The Path Forward for Low and Middle-Income Countries in the MENA Region

By Josiane Atallah

Floods. Fires. Death. Disease. These recurring themes have popped up in news cycles around the world over the past year. The devastating floods in Saudi Arabia[1] and Libya[2], the wildfires[3] raging across food-trapped Syria's agricultural plots, and the projected increase in heat-related deaths in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) by the end of the century[4] all find their cause in one common source: climate change.

The UN defines climate change as the "long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. Such shifts can be natural… [or due to] human activities [that] have been the main driver of climate change, primarily due to the burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas."[5]

Its implications are increasingly alarming. While some indicators help scientists and policy makers predict the possible climate impacts to come, the severity, frequency[6] and scale of these events are difficult to predict[7]—as well their significant impacts to the economy, infrastructure, food security, human health, and the environment.[8]

Climate change prevention, preparedness, education and response on a global scale remain largely under-funded[9] and widely disputed.[10] But the increasing occurrence of climate impacts[11] will be felt with particularly devastating effect in the low and lower-middle income countries and communities (LLMIC) which face these challenges disproportionately.[12]

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The MENA region also faces these same global trends on climate funding, policy and accountability. In this region they are especially challenging because it contains some of the world's least climate resilient countries.[13] As the World Bank observes: "MENA countries are very vulnerable to climate change impacts as they are naturally affected by harsh climate conditions extremely high temperatures, limited groundwater and rainfall and scarce agricultural and arable land."[14] Climate change is likely to exacerbate these conditions, and lead to increased food insecurity, conflict, and migration.

The complexity of its context, and a significant lack of information and data, make the processes of climate change prevention, adaptation, mitigation, and response in the MENA region unique. This is no surprise when global aspirations of climate resilience fall short due to the contextual challenges posed by factors including information scarcity, conflict, poor governance, and limited economic and human capital.

So how can the MENA region cope with accelerating and deepening climate impacts? To assess and account for the unique challenges of the region, this study will examine existing attempts by individuals, local communities, the private sector, governments, and the region to do so. It will also provide recommendations for humanitarian, development, government, and funding agencies on how to best allocate resources in order to support response in local communities.

## Funding Remains a Significant Barrier for MENA's Vulnerable Communities

A key shortcoming of global climate reform in the MENA region is its reliance on economic reforms and foreign investments that remain minimal, if not absent, in the countries of that region.

Capital flows to support climate change initiatives to both the public and private sector in MENA have been amongst the lowest in the world[15]—and what funding exists is disproportionately divided amongst countries in the region. For example, Morocco and Egypt collectively received around $700 million between 2013 and 2019 from the Clean Technology Fund (CTF) to fund various clean energy, market readiness and pilot programs, whereas the region's least developed countries (LDCs)—Djibouti and Yemen—received only $72 million collectively.[16] These funding disparities not only increase existing gaps in climate readiness, but the use of targeted funding prevents vulnerable groups from accessing funds for development and job creation.

Financial institutions and governments in MENA also have a greater role to play to establish an enabling environment for investments in "more socially, environmentally and economically sustainable activities."[17] Diverting investments to the green transition will bridge the gap needed to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs), which is currently estimated at $230 billion annually in the Arab World.[18] It also will support the efforts of communities to mitigate the effects of climate change, diversify their economies, advance job creation and increase resilience.

## Assessing Factors Which Compound the Crisis

Socioeconomic and institutional disparities between (and within) MENA countries play a

significant role in their ability to prepare and respond to crisis.[19]

Recent earthquakes in Morocco are a key example of this factor. The 6.8 magnitude earthquake that hit near the Atlas Mountains in Morocco in September 2023[20] exposed the vast differences in authorities' ability to respond in rural versus urban areas, especially because of the challenging geography and poorer infrastructure of rural areas.[21] As *The Economist* observed: "In the villages hit hardest by this month's quake, residents cannot afford to reinforce their houses."[22]

There are no direct linkages between earthquakes and climate change, but this catastrophe does suggest similarities to the challenges posed by large scale climate disasters. For instance, earthquakes tend to aggravate existing fault lines in systems that should be mitigated through increased and more equitable development in less developed and rural areas.

In examining phenomena on a systems scale, it is important to adopt an intersectional lens. This helps us understand the ways that climate exacerbates current inequalities, and accounts for the unique needs of vulnerable groups that largely go unaddressed. For instance, Low and Middle Income (LMI)[23] countries in MENA have a reduced ability to adapt and respond to climate change due the compounding effects of conflict, political instability, and corruption, among other factors.

The increasing death tolls which followed recent flooding in Libya demonstrated the dire effects that sustained conflict and corruption create in the wake of a climate crisis. The severity of weather caused dams in Derna, Libya to break, leading to catastrophic flooding. Why? Dams in this region which were built between 1973 and 1977 had not undergone maintenance since 2002.[24] This essential caretaking had been neglected as the city witnessed years of conflict under multiple factions, and a subsequent rivalry between the two existing administrations deferred repairs until disaster finally struck.

Lebanon's "solar-power boom"[25] amidst the economic crisis provides another example. A speedy but unregulated boom in solar and alternative power companies seeking to offset the increasing power outages has been accomplished[26]—but not without accompanying problems. The increased demand for solar has gone largely unregulated, with materials sourced from questionable suppliers. This carelessness has led to electrical damage—and, in some cases, fires.

Another lesser-discussed outcome of years of sustained conflict is the lack of adequate data to understand population changes and communal needs. The absence of this information minimizes the ability of decision makers and donors to make informed decisions on where to best allocate resources, leading to disproportionate development.

A final factor is that local actors lack the resources and autonomy they need to address these challenges. As Frederic Wehrey, a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, notes: "[A] longtime preference for centralized, top-town policies by insular, autocratic, and repressive Arab regimes—ubiquitous, in varying degrees, despite the initial hopes of the 2011 Arab uprisings—has translated into a reluctance to permit or encourage the sort of grassroots, bottom-up activism that is necessary to build effective climate resilience."[27]

As a result, and despite varying degrees of agency, local structures remain cut off from the pivotal discussions and resources that would build the resilience and capacity of their own communities to establish structures for swift response. These localized responses are extremely efficient in addressing immediate needs,[28] yet they are not always able to scale and expand their reach due to lack of funds, government support, or adequate structures to scale.

## How Can Climate Action Be Localized?

As crises of any nature emerge, countries often look for international support to address immediate needs and assistance. Yet nations also must look within their own existing capacity (as well as the limitations of their systems and structure at every level) in order to be better prepared to prevent, mitigate, adapt and respond to climate change.

Sustained and significant collaborative efforts must be forged in a unified way with the international community, funding and financial agencies, governments, as well as the private sector. The goal would be to adopt a more localized approach to climate action with following components:

**Adopt innovative financing models.** Funding flows cannot depend solely on large scale investment in existing structures. The opportunity and need to invest in smaller scale responses is equally important to drive innovation in the sector. Multiple existing models can be replicated, with a focus on shifting resources to localized structures to better equip them to prepare and respond.

One key element is funding local government agencies by adopting the United States' FEMA Resources for Climate Resilience model[29] in funding local governorates or municipalities to become more climate resilient, especially prior to the wake of emergency. FEMA's aim is "supporting community climate action through information, preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery, grants, and field operations." This model is pivotal not only for funding, but also to bridge the significant knowledge gap around climate action, and potentially scale up successful interventions from the grassroots to the national level.

Adopting this approach also will enable local communities to be better informed and prepared, enabling them to pilot and expand programs that fit their context, culture, and complement their existing community resources. To adopt this model, governments can work to allocate a percentage of their yearly budgets to increased investment in local structures, particularly in enhancing infrastructure and developing localized multi-hazard early warning systems.[30]

Local governments play a pivotal role in that as well. Most local government entities in MENA are underfunded, and their relationship and legal jurisdiction is not always clear.[31] By investing in the technical capacities of their staff, local government entities, should the legal frameworks be possible, can seek non-governmental funding through business development and sustainable income activities.[32]

Engineering a shift to flexible funding models by advocating to (and collaborating with) development and humanitarian agencies is also important. Humanitarian and development organizations play an increasing role as inter-

mediary organizations in the MENA region. They drive funds to local communities, promote localization, and offer support in scaling locally led, informed, and designed initiatives. Though they play a pivotal role in supporting the access to funds to local organizations (where traditional donor funding models still require intermediaries) these organizations also can play a pivotal role in advocating to donors to increase access to unrestricted, flexible, and contingency funding to prioritize climate change response. In parallel, larger institutions can also encourage local organizations to allocate some funds for prevention and contingency planning in the wake of climate disasters.

In turn, large development and humanitarian agencies need to undergo internal reforms to increase their tolerance for risk. In the wake of a crisis, increased financial flexibility is needed to be able to allocate the appropriate resources quickly and effectively. Systems must be put in place to balance compliance with urgency, including internal waiver systems, budget pre-approvals and adaptive mapping of local available stakeholders and markets.

Investing in entrepreneurship is also essential. Scarcity is often a key driver of innovation, particularly in areas where resources are limited. The need for innovative, cost-effective, and sustainable practices can democratize spaces for innovation and entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship bridges that gap in MENA, and in recent years, an increasing focus of this work has been green transitions and food security. Despite the growing interest, models of entrepreneurship financing and capacity building remain largely competitive, funneling vast ideas and opportunities into select ventures that would yield high returns, and neglecting the potential of multiple smaller scale ventures that have the potential to perform on a smaller scale. Investing in entrepreneurship does not only mean pouring funds into ideas and startups that have performed well, but also expanding micro-loans and micro-grant structures to enable the space for experimentation and learning. The failures, learnings, and smaller scale innovations of some ventures remain an untapped source of wealth that could further inform the private sector and in national strategy.

**Another pathway to localizing climate action is acknowledging culture and context.** This happens when we look at the past and bring more diverse voices into shaping responses. Context is often seen as the structural barriers that make interventions more complex. But what is often neglected is a conversation about a vast depth of local wisdom that has existed for decades which can be utilized and scaled. The case of adaptive architecture in Morocco is a key example.[33] The simple historical building techniques that are part of this community's cultural heritage can be adopted on a larger scale to enhance cooling and heating systems, improve insulation, and prevent flooding of houses.

When considering which solutions to adopt, communities often look to experts to provide them. Yet local communities, and a diverse range of local actors, have consistently been first responders and movement builders when it comes to climate. These leaders have included youth groups, native groups, farmers, schools, and religious institutions, but few of them have been consulted and represented in decision making. Locally informed design must consult a wider range of local actors, and account for the experiences of people with disabilities, refugees and migrants and vulnerable groups who go unheard but are deeply affected by climate crises.

**Establishing pipelines to policy pathways is also essential.** Localization plays a critical role in ensuring that local communities, especially those closest to the problems, have the resources they need to lead. Success never resides in silos, and expanding localized responses to the national level would make the replication and institutionalization of successful interventions and critical learnings into an area of national growth.

**Data collection on both a national and local level is a key activity.** An immense lack of data in some countries in MENA—as well as an additional lack of data obtained in rural areas or amongst vulnerable groups—means countries often do not have the information necessary for adequate planning. At times, this information exists informally, and can be found within close-knit communities which know each other well. For instance, religious institutions, municipal figures and schools all have access to this sort of information in various ways. Documenting not only demographic data, but also more granular counts of informal structures and businesses, communal practices and other factors can become key data for decision makers. It will allow them not only to make better choices on how to allocate resources, but also to understand which existing structures can be utilized when needed.

**Finally, establishing communication circles and consultation groups** between various localized structures and policy makers is also essential. Successful localization strategies are not found on the periphery of events, and they can be effectively consulted or scaled on a national level to yield wider success. National and sub-national governments, as well as external stakeholders, play a key role in furthering these efforts and creating links between communities. Different local entities might be consulted on national policies, or even on wider international strategies. This will ensure that local priorities are considered during design—and that local successes are considered models for further potential interventions.

## The Power of Localized Response

In crises and challenges as complex as climate change, where the effects are disproportionally spread amongst communities, it is essential to create proportionate and collective ownership and resource distribution to prevent, mitigate, adapt and respond to these challenges. As governments and international agencies struggle to respond and pivot to the complex disasters and hurdles that continue to emerge, local entities have been—and will always be—present. They will lead the efforts to equip their communities with necessary skills and infrastructure. They will transfer essential knowledge, mobilize resources, and lead the response in the wake of the crisis. They will, most importantly, work to rebuild in the aftermath of crisis.

Thus, the solutions we are seeking to climate impacts in MENA must be local. These communities possess the speed, scale or cost effectiveness for effective response. Governmental, non-governmental, and financial institutions, as well as the private sector, must all play their role in supporting the agency, resource allocation and scale offered by localized climate solutions.

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