BIZCOMMUNITY

How African-city residents are responding to climate change

By Alice McClure and Gina Ziervogel

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It's difficult as an individual, a group or a nation to know how to act when faced with climate change problems. As with other global environmental problems, these challenges are economically, environmentally and socially complex. They come with ethical issues and generate disagreement between different groups of people.

Image source: www.pexels.com

This complexity is particularly apparent in cities where many different groups of people with diverse cultures and perspectives live. And cities, of course, are hot spots for the problems related to climate change.

But the good news is that cities also have the potential to produce solutions to climate change problems because they contain dense networks, technologies and groups of people with diverse perspectives. This was a key message which emerged from the first ever Cities Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change meeting, held in Canada recently.

Science alone can't provide all the answers or solutions for cities grappling with changing climates and extreme weather. Cities' social, cultural, economic and historical differences should be considered when planning any climate-related response. And it's residents, citizens and local authorities who have that context.

That's where knowledge co-production can be useful. It's an evolving research process that recognises the importance of multiple knowledge types and perspectives to build a holistic understanding of complex problems.

The Future Resilience of African CiTies and Lands project uses knowledge co-production by gathering together a number of different people from different areas of expertise and ordinary citizens. This was done across nine African cities: Durban, Blantyre, Cape Town, Gaborone, Harare, Johannesburg, Maputo, Lusaka and Windhoek. These groups then consider people's priorities, cities' histories and contexts, and what role climate science factors into decisions.

These questions guide our research objectives as people from government, NGOs, civil society groups and academia gather face-to-face to discuss and explore contextual issues and potential solutions.

Putting people at the centre

This process has forced researchers to really take local knowledge into account for each city. We've steered clear of a "cut and paste" approach to defining climate risks and responses as much as possible, since each city's needs and threats are different.

Throughout history, science has informed many development decisions. A dynamic has been set up between those who use science and those who produce it that centres the producers. It's difficult to shift from this dynamic to research processes that support inclusive conversations about potential solutions, with a diverse set of values and perspectives.

Such conversations place people at the centre of the research process instead of scientific content. These processes also clearly acknowledge the assumptions and limitations of science, and value different forms of knowledge equally.

Research institutions and donor funded programmes generally place scientific knowledge on a pedestal, especially if it is produced in the northern hemisphere. Many of these institutions and programmes also measure success using rigid frameworks that focus more on targets and outputs and less on how people are learning through such dialogues.

What's been key in our work is that scientific knowledge is not considered more important than the knowledge held by decision makers and civilians. These people understand the effects of a changing climate in context, and can identify the potential responses that fit this context. For example, civilians in Harare have a good idea of how strong political influences intersect with the consequences of severe or frequent drought. People from Botswana can offer knowledge on novel communication approaches to support responses, such as through local community fora called "freedom squares".

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Solutions are emerging

The Future Resilience of African CiTies and Lands project is bearing fruit. For instance, scientists and decision makers in Lusaka are in the process of finalising four policy briefs on water issues in the city. They've reflected on how climate will affect these issues, and come up with potential solutions. These groups sat for several days in the same room to flesh out contextual issues and potential solutions together.

This is different from the usual approach of climate scientists producing information and then passing it down the chain to users of this information.

In Blantyre, Gaborone, Harare, Lusaka, Maputo and Windhoek, city governments are working with scientists, engineers and civilians to co-produce narratives about the future of their cities in the face of climate change. The Namibian capital will be using their narratives, along with other important climate information, in the development of the City of Windhoek Climate

Change Strategy and Action Plan.

Processes like these help to build relationships between governments, researchers and civilian groups, as well as between different departments within government. These networks will support cities' climate change conversations long after the Future Resilience of African CiTies and Lands project ends.

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