



RURAL VOICES ON THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN SOUTH AFRICA



Rural Action for
Climate Resilience



SOCIAL CHANGE
ASSISTANCE TRUST



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Rural vulnerability to climate change

Climate change is triggering a range of impacts in South Africa, from **increasingly intense and frequent fires and floods, to heatwaves and droughts**. Rural South Africa is more vulnerable than urban areas, due to high exposure to impacts and limited resources to respond. The Rural Action for Climate Resilience (RACR) project focuses on **building preparedness and local understanding of climate impacts**, through working with rurally located community-based organisations (CBOs) and faith leaders in Northern Cape, Western Cape, and Eastern Cape.

Background

In 2023 alone, parts of the **Eastern Cape experienced two bouts of serious flooding**. In Port St Johns, the floods early in 2023 received national government's attention, but many affected people had not received sufficient support to recover when more flooding hit in October. In the **Western Cape, a province which has historically struggled with high temperatures and drought, experienced some of the worst flooding in years**. Meanwhile, in September and October, the **Northern Cape experienced wildfires that authorities struggled to control**.

To differing degrees in the three provinces, **climate impacts are compounded by ailing infrastructure**. Leaking pipes worsen water shortages. Poor stormwater and drainage management exacerbate floods. Insufficient firefighters and fire-fighting equipment delay the response time for fires. **Climate-induced damage to infrastructure** (roads, housing, water pipes, cables) **threatens service delivery**, requiring resources for restoration



Port St Johns after the January 2023 floods (images shared by RACR participants on Whatsapp).

in already resource-constrained environments. In short, **climate impacts degrade already compromised infrastructure, threatening basic services** in all three provinces.

South Africa's current policy environment and governance practices overlook the need for a multi-faceted and decentralised response to climate change. **Insufficient engagement with diverse rural contexts results in generic climate solutions** that are inappropriate. **Municipalities are crucial in a local climate response**, given their mandate to maintain infrastructure and supply basic services. But **local governments struggling with finances, capacity, and mismanagement do not prioritise climate change**. In reality, **people are feeling climate impacts** with minimal buffering from government.



Community members in Merweville, Western Cape build a ferrocement tank to store water.

Rural experiences of climate change impacts



Women work in a community food garden that was supported by the RACR project through Mount Frere Paralegal Advice Centre

The following was articulated by participants in the RACR project concerning their experiences of climate change in rural South Africa.

Climate change is already impacting people's lives. It is disrupting food systems and local economies, impacting infrastructure and access to energy, water and sanitation. Successive and repetitive climate impacts accumulate and create damaging long-term consequences, undermining resilience.

Climate Change increases the burden on women expected to care for their families, especially **in rural areas with traditional, and oftentimes patriarchal, communities.** For example, if water is limited due to drought, vegetables can become stunted, **forcing women to walk further to fetch water, exposing them to harm along the way.** Additionally, when there are **climate disasters, like flooding, an increase in gender-based violence is reported.**

Loadshedding, from the failing energy fleet, and insufficient alternative energy infrastructure threatens people's lives. Due to the lack of alternative energy sources, women collect firewood for cooking, contributing to deforestation and erosion that worsens floods, while increasing exposure to gender-based violence and smoke-induced respiratory illnesses. **Crime and gender-based violence increase in unlit areas,** without electricity or during load shedding. Water availability is affected by load shedding where supply relies on electric pumps.

Long-term impacts of climate-induced destruction, after a flood for example, include the lack of food, housing, healthcare, service delivery, closure of small businesses due to disrupted supply chains, and the damage and disruption of schools threatening the education of learners. **A community recovering from long-term climate impacts, is more vulnerable to future impacts.** Successive impacts **gradually deplete resources to respond and undermine resilience.**



Muddy paths within an informal settlement near Uitenhage after heavy rains in October 2023



Climate change impacts hinder local government's provision of basic services, yet municipal officials do not understand climate change or recognise its impacts. Community-based organisations and faith groups are filling in the gap that municipalities leave.

Government's development approach prioritises natural resource extraction and is self-serving, benefiting mining interests. **It does not replenish the earth or benefit local communities.** Specific concerns were raised regarding mining and fracking that provide short-term jobs while creating long-term threats to clean water availability, local health, traditional subsistence livelihoods dependent on natural resources, and buildings from mining explosives used.

Suggestions from the ground

Multiple burdens are placed on local community organisations and faith groups to bridge the gap between poor service delivery and the needs of communities, amidst increasing climate impacts. Project participants suggested the following to build local resilience.

Encouraging local solutions

Localised assistance: Communities experience different climate change impacts and require tailored assistance, rather than “silver-bullet” solutions. Government can actively support community-based projects with grants for community development.

Municipal Capacity building: Municipal officials can engage and attend workshops run by community-based organisations, to enhance their understanding of local climate impacts and what is needed locally to build resilience to climate impacts.

Prevention of Gender-Based Violence: Community gender-based advocacy and awareness efforts must be supported to address gender-based violence that contributes to gendered climate change vulnerability. Support is needed to address traditional limitations imposed on women, such as accessing funds, land tenure, and decision-making power.

Effective public participation: Public participation needs to be meaningful. Dates and locations should be communicated ahead of time and not change multiple times. It should be clear how public participation has influenced a concept, policy or approach taken by the government, to create transparency around the impact of public participation. In particular, special efforts should be placed on enabling women to be involved in public participation.

Food sovereignty and water access

Food: Municipal land can be leased for community food gardens and permaculture trainings.

Sustainable seed banks: The government can encourage community-run seed banks for indigenous, non-genetically modified seeds that can be hubs for seed swaps.

Water: Municipalities can provide support water access, through jojo tanks, or sharing information on water harvesting and conservation techniques, such as rooftop rainwater harvesting, or mulching garden beds to conserve moisture. Mandated municipal maintenance of water infrastructure prevents and address leakages.

Employment: The Community Works Program (CWP) can support food garden workers, providing a stipend while they work and learn skills that can be applied in home gardens and elsewhere.



The Amanzi community food garden that Interchurch Local Development Agency supported through the RACR project.



RACR participants at the 2023 Eastern Cape regional workshop map their communities to identify climate risks

Responding to local climate impacts

Climate Preparedness: Public campaigns are needed to build flood awareness and local responses, while also informing communities on what government resources exist to respond, so municipalities can be held accountable.

Effective early warning systems: Early warning systems (for storms, flooding, extreme weather, wind) are needed so that people can prepare themselves. This requires effective information and awareness raising in appropriate settings, such as at schools, or in lines of SASSA queues for collecting grants.

Government and Community collaboration: Local governments can collaborate with community organisations, to co-create disaster preparedness and response plans, conduct firefighter training and build local fire-fighting responses.

Solar energy solutions: Support can be provided to install community owned solar energy infrastructure that connects to the grid, to establish local energy production and generate income for communities from feed back into the grid. Where mini-grids are more appropriate, the scale needs to be capable of generating energy for more than just lights.

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RACR participants at the 2023 Western Cape (top) and Eastern Cape (bottom) regional workshops



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More information on the RACR project can be found at www.ruralaction4climate.org.za

