



Photo by Nancy McNally/CRS

Protecting Our Common Home:

FRAMEWORK AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USAID'S CLIMATE STRATEGY

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PROBLEM STATEMENT

The impacts of the climate crisis continue to escalate daily, as the world experiences increases in storms, record temperatures, and rising sea levels. These changes have and will continue to act as [threat multipliers](#) destroying agriculture and natural resources, disrupting livelihoods, causing mass displacement, and escalating conflicts. More than [30 million people](#) were driven from their homes in 2020 due to worsening environmental factors, and [the World Bank estimates](#) that climate change will push more than 100 million into poverty by 2030.

Climate change disrupts lives and livelihoods and places an unfair burden on the poorest, most marginalized, and often those who have done the least to contribute to the problem. Many of the most at-risk regions for the impacts of climate change are areas that already face extreme poverty - such as

some sub-Saharan countries whose temperatures are rising at [twice the rate](#) of the rest of the world. Additionally, poor individuals living in low-income countries are [less likely to be able to cope with the impacts of climate change, due to diminished ability to access](#) social safety nets, adapt to increasing commodity prices, or migrate if necessary. Climate change [catalyzes inequality](#) and [disproportionately affects](#) women and girls.

It has never been more important for the global community to join together and take aggressive collective action toward protecting the Earth. We must commit to a people-centered approach to address climate change, focused on saving the lives and communities most at risk. Our future depends on developing a more harmonious relationship with the natural world, "our common home."¹

1. Francis. *Laudato Si'*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015.



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CRS EXPERIENCE AND USAID POLICY

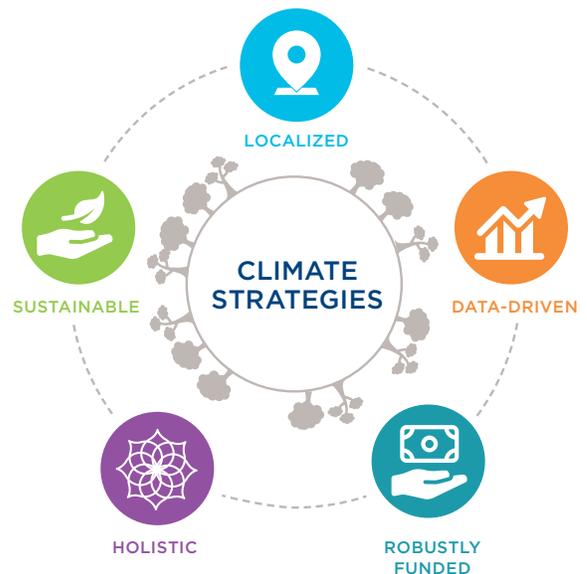
In 2020, the Catholic Church marked the 5th anniversary of Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si*, which calls on us to care for God’s creation. Without immediate action to counteract the causes of climate change, the impacts will be especially perilous for the communities in which we work, who are suffering from the increasing number and magnitude of natural disasters like droughts and floods and the degradation of their ecosystems and landscapes. Those lucky enough to escape the eye of the hurricane or the disaster itself may still be displaced and forced to seek livelihoods elsewhere. These impacts risk exacerbating community tensions over access to resources and social services.

USAID’S [former climate strategy](#), from 2012-18, focused on “accelerating the transition to low emission development through investments in clean energy and sustainable landscapes; increasing the resilience of people, places, and livelihoods through investments in adaptation; and strengthening development outcomes by integrating climate change in Agency programming, learning, policy dialogues and operations.” As USAID drafts and evaluates its new climate policy, it is essential that the needs of the most vulnerable communities are put front and center.

Based on CRS’ rich history of implementing climate programming, we provide the following best practices and recommendations to USAID for consideration in shaping an effective and sustainable policy for the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

USAID must develop and prioritize climate strategies that are localized, sustainable, holistic, robustly funded, innovative and data-driven.



*A **localized** climate approach will enable local communities to lead climate adaptation and influence mitigation approaches, putting lived experience at the center of the approach.*

The new USAID climate strategy should build from a foundation of existing **local knowledge, policies, plans and structures**, contributing its value proposition through capital and funding, technical assistance and/or coordination. To this end, USAID should use and enhance existing approaches to community management of water, landscapes, risk, or other environmental factors and avoid creating parallel or redundant systems or approaches. USAID should continue to invest in local institutions and strengthen technical and organizational capacity, where necessary, to bolster their role in continuing to develop and implement local solutions. New scientific knowledge should be integrated with traditional knowledge rather than contradict it. Programs should also prioritize results-based approaches that avoid prescription, but rather rely on local knowledge and insight for the best way to reach solutions. Coordination between donors, aid actors, and within national and sub-national government structures is essential to effective locally implemented programs; the USG should invest in capacity strengthening, where necessary, to enhance coordination efforts related to climate programming.

The new climate strategy should also promote USAID’s role in helping **link experience at the subnational level to national law and policy, and vice versa**. This can include supporting knowledge management processes and reporting frameworks that ensure sharing of lessons learned both horizontally among implementing partners and vertically with beneficiaries and national governments, which will help communities and NGOs. It can also include capacity strengthening for local civil society to work with its own government(s) to formalize good climate practices, and to harmonize local and national policies. For example, CRS’ work in East Africa successfully created community governance structures and policies to regulate grazing animals on “resting” land at the local level, which was a very positive development for the community. However, because the community had come to the decision through a consensus-based approach at the local level, they realized they had no legal ability to hold others accountable for these agreements. A harmonization of local and national policies would allow for local decisions like this to be reflected and enforced

at a higher level. To influence policy change, CRS experience has indicated that communities benefit from vertical relationship building. USAID projects should connect local leaders and civil society to governing bodies, and make connections to allies who play their respective roles to influence national policy, such as the United Nations, INGOs with longstanding presence, business leaders or others. The USG can also support this work through creating feedback mechanisms to build and act on what is happening at the local level.

Finally, USAID can promote localization of climate policy by **centering local community groups as possible conveners and connectors**. This includes promoting deeper engagement with a wide variety of stakeholders, including private sector and extension workers. For example, USAID could set up an alliance for an innovative, locally led climate adaptation model to establish systemic linkages among stakeholders (e.g., policy makers, inter-government agencies, scientists, extension workers, private sector, CSOs and community members) and ensure continued access to user-driven climate services after the project ends. USAID’s [Community Health Roadmap](#) is a good example of an initiative that mobilized a broad spectrum of stakeholders toward a common goal; this model could be replicated and adapted for a climate focus.



Photo by Nancy McNally/CRS



SUSTAINABLE

*A **sustainable** climate approach will invest in programming with a goal of longevity and the intention that the local community will continue to resource, plan, and implement the activities long after USAID funding and staff have left the area.*

To develop sustainable programs and build resilience, USAID should **pair short-term success with long-term impacts**. The communities where CRS works have immediate needs, and it is important that program participants see a clear connection between their immediate lives and the work being done to address climate change - particularly climate projects with longer time horizons, or no immediate impacts. USAID can support this through its climate activities by both meeting immediate needs through livelihoods creation or diversification and/or conflict reduction, while also addressing longer-term issues such as harmful land practices and carbon emissions. CRS has implemented such dual-impact programs and seen success. In Vietnam, our programs restored and maintained mangrove forests to protect from harmful storms and improve soil and water erosion while also linking to long-term livelihood opportunities such as eco-tourism, including a sustainable business of selling shells and oysters. Similarly in Lesotho, CRS' approach to watershed management paired land clearing activities with Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILC) and community governance.



Photo by Jennifer Hardy/CRS

This program led to improvements in water retention and prevention of land degradation, as well as increased community participation in climate work in the short-term and, in the long-term, led to

improved governance diversified livelihoods of the poorest, most marginalized, and un-served communities in watersheds.

Another key aspect to sustainability is **addressing the root causes of the climate-induced disaster itself**. For example, in Latin America, working on flood disaster response exposed the need to address a broader water management strategy that looks at the watershed level. This also extends to addressing environmental issues in our preparedness and response strategies - e.g., examining whether building materials are locally available, or how to reduce our carbon footprint with the materials we choose to use in shelter responses.

Finally, the climate strategy **should elevate the environmental impact and conservation angle of USAID's work**. Based on a broad review, USAID's Country Development and Cooperation Strategies climate work seems to be primarily channeled into agricultural and livelihoods programming that focuses more on livelihoods and economic growth than environmental sustainability. Utilizing frameworks such as the [doughnut economy model](#), which illustrates the space between social foundations and the environmental ceiling in which inclusive and sustainable economic development takes place, can create a more comprehensive and holistic approach to climate change. The strategy can also help create close convergence between climate and environmental issues, beginning with assessments and ending with merged outcomes and indicators.



HOLISTIC

*A **holistic** approach should consider and account for the whole person and community being affected by climate change, in addition to the environmental impacts.*

Governance, peacebuilding and social cohesion elements should be incorporated into all projects, rather than exist as stand-alone activities. As climate change makes natural resources increasingly scarce, peacebuilding and building social cohesion will be more important than ever to ensure climate challenges are not further exacerbated by conflict and vice versa. This idea is reflected in USAID's own [Nature, Wealth, and Power framework](#), which highlights the importance of interconnecting environmental work with vertical and horizontal social cohesion efforts. This kind of integrated programming and its benefits on the community could include: improving local capacities to manage disputes around natural

resources; strengthening community structures for inclusive, equitable natural resource management; accompanying the development of resulting NRM plans and their application; improving cohesion among diverse groups to reach consensus for the common good; improving vertical relationships between communities and governments at multiple levels; and/or supporting the development and implementation of equitable policies.



Photo by Philip Laubner/CRS

It is also critical to **understand the role of social and behavior change in climate work**. USAID and civil society need to engage in a critical conversation about why people act certain ways, and how incentives can be used strategically to influence decision-making both at the grassroots and the policy level. Faith-based partners and religious groups play a unique role in raising awareness and influencing how people behave vis a vis climate change, and often are able to leverage their position to influence public policy.

ROBUSTLY FUNDED

*A **robustly funded** approach will ensure that local actors have access to sufficient, flexible, and timely funding to implement climate interventions.*

Financing is one of the major barriers to sustaining local solutions. Across the board, in most countries, financing subnational community-driven solutions to climate is the missing piece. For example, in 2017

in Ethiopia, the national strategy for Community Based Adaptation was downscaled to regions and districts, and every sector at the district level was considering climate as part of its sectoral planning. However, a lack of resources to address these issues has stifled annual development plans from implementing these approaches. Global adaptation funding commitments must be met, including the balance between resources available for adaptation and mitigation, and ensuring increases in climate finance do not come at the expense of existing investments in poverty reducing development. The adaptation funding should also be prioritized to reach the subnational needs of the communities most vulnerable to climate impacts.

It is also important to **utilize available financing mechanisms as early and effectively as possible**. USAID should consider how to take early action as early warnings arise before the disaster happens, including providing forecast-based finance. This will result in faster responses, with potentially less damage to lives, well-being and communities. Two existing positive examples of financing mechanisms that could be expanded are the [START Network](#) and/or country-based pooled funds (CBPFs), both of which create the opportunity for more timely and appropriate funding. For example, with the West Africa Rapid Response Fund (RRF) project, USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs is working with CRS to provide multi-year humanitarian support in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Niger, and Mali. The RRF mechanism has been designed to meet unanticipated needs as they emerge, ensuring rapid, short-term, life-saving assistance through water sanitation and hygiene (WASH), multipurpose cash,



Photo by Michael Stulman/CRS

and shelter and settlement interventions. Through organizational and emergency response capacity building, the project emphasizes the use of local partner networks to deepen its sustainability and transition while meeting the needs of 120,000 individuals.

DATA-DRIVEN

*An innovative and **data-driven** approach will create a culture of forward-leaning and evidence-based decision making at all levels of climate policy development and implementation.*

Climate policy should be **structured to drive innovation and adapt existing interventions** to be as effective for the context as possible. The global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic wrought havoc on many institutions, in some cases it revealed the innovation and adaptability of international NGOs, local institutions, and the communities they serve – including that remote interventions are possible and effective. These technological innovations make interventions more accessible, cost-effective, and eco-friendly. Moving forward strategic choices will need to be made about when to go into the field, accounting for the resulting carbon footprint that presents, and when there is no need. Innovation could further come from integrating climate tools and activities into other kinds of programming – such as utilizing solar panels in schools or health clinics.

To keep up with the evolving needs of climate change, it is essential that USAID **invest in developing evidence-based data banks, tools, and infrastructure** in priority countries, which can be utilized in creating and implementing climate policy and programs. Evidence-based tools should be user-friendly and approachable, to ensure that

local communities are able to use the information to enhance their work through data-driven decisions. It is also necessary to understand the political environment and where the levers of change exist within countries, so that such tools are aligned with countries' existing climate policies and priorities.

Data-driven decision-making requires **effective and agile assessment and monitoring and evaluation tools**. When evaluating programming, it is also important for USAID to keep realistic timelines in mind, recognizing that the effects of climate changes are incremental over long periods of time and adapt monitoring requirements accordingly. One way to keep this timeline in mind is to create feedback mechanisms to build on and act on what is happening at the local level so that communities and leaders can use data for their own decision-making and priority setting.



Photo by David Snyder for CRS