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Centre for the Study of  
Violence and Reconciliation  
Working towards peaceful, equal and  
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# ACTIVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: THE KEY TO EFFECTIVE CLIMATE ACTION AT THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL

The people most affected by climate change are the ones who best understand the problems they face. They see solutions that experts living outside their communities might not – what will work, what won't, and why.

At the municipal level, affected communities are essential to developing effective policies and actions to deal with climate impacts. Their active participation in mapping the local situation and designing, planning, implementing and monitoring the response leads to more effective climate action.

This brief recommends structures and procedures that municipal councils and administrations can adopt to ensure a participatory approach to climate change responses in South Africa. Municipalities that ensure active participation can benefit not only from the expertise of local communities but also from their increased buy-in and support.

## Responding to the long-term impacts of climate change

Effective climate action responds to both the immediate and the long-term impacts of climate change. At the municipal level, climate change is most visible when there is severe flooding, a drought, and other catastrophes that we usually handle through disaster management. Less visible are the profound climate harms that communities experience over the long term.

When climate impacts are serious, lives are lost – a loss that can't be repaired. People also lose homes and belongings they have gathered over a lifetime, and are forced to build a new life elsewhere or stay in a vulnerable situation. They lose livelihoods and food security, due to dying livestock and crops or jobs they can't reach. Children lose access to education

because of destroyed infrastructure, disrupted transport networks, ruined school supplies, or having to stay home to care for affected family members.

Health suffers, both directly through injuries, diarrhoeal diseases, respiratory disorders and other illnesses, and indirectly because of ruined healthcare infrastructure and blocked access. Mental health suffers too, with trauma triggering fear and anger, anxiety, depression and other long-lasting challenges, which affect not only the individual but also the family and community, even across generations. Cultural practices are disturbed, especially when people lose access to where their family members are buried.

Since communities vulnerable to these kinds of climate harms are often also vulnerable to poverty, security issues and other deep-rooted challenges,

effective climate action means more than good disaster management – it means responding to the complex needs and solutions identified by the people who are most affected.

## Recommendations: Going from consultative to participatory

The Climate Change Act of 2024 makes public participation a requirement of climate change responses, starting with metropolitan and district municipalities and extending to all state organs with functions affected by climate change, including municipal councils and administrations.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2002 makes detailed provisions for structures

and procedures that enable not passive public participation, but rather participatory governance in partnership with local communities.

These provisions go beyond newspaper announcements and one-off public consultations – they set up processes that actively involve local community members in decision making and implementation.

The following recommendations present municipalities with concrete options for participatory climate action, which feed into provincial and national efforts.

- **Assessment:** Map the local situation, main stakeholders, and key entry points to use as the basis for planning municipal climate actions. Working with a community-based environmental organisation and representatives from areas affected by climate impacts makes the mapping process more inclusive and accurate, and helps remove obstacles. The assessment identifies:
  - The individuals and communities most affected by climate change and the immediate and long-term climate impacts they have experienced.
  - The full range of civil society stakeholders – including nongovernmental, business, traditional, religious, educational, professional and other stakeholders – with long-standing relationships of trust with the survivors and the capacity to support them in collaborating with the municipality.
  - Providers of mental health and psychosocial support, legal advice, and other services that are already present in affected communities and available to complement municipal climate responses.
  - Existing municipal frameworks, services and events that can help with participatory climate action.
  - Local barriers to participation, e.g. lack of disabled access, gendered care expectations,

### Examples of participatory climate action at the municipal level:



- *A truth-telling process on climate harms and solutions*
- *A memorial for climate losses*
- *Trauma healing support*
- *Targeted infrastructure repairs*
- *Mobile clinics*
- *Climate change education, including arts-based approaches*
- *Knowledge exchanges on climate-smart agriculture*
- *Community-led waste management*
- *Membership in international municipal climate justice networks*
- *Measurable corporate responsibility, e.g. in the mining sector*
- *Reskilling workers for a climate-resilient economy*

1 South African laws and policies on issues affected by climate change consistently mandate public participation, including the National Environmental Management Act, the National Water Act, the National Environmental Management: Air Quality Act, the Disaster Management Act, and the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy, among others.

mental health challenges, geographic location and illiteracy.

- **Representative advisory council:** Set up a council with at least three representatives of survivors of different ages, genders and backgrounds – in addition to civil society and government stakeholders – to meet at least once per quarter and advise the municipal council and administration on climate impacts and responses.
- **Participatory design and budgeting:** Allocate a significant portion of the annual budget to climate actions led by affected communities. Create meeting spaces for community members to 1) propose actions, 2) select representatives to develop the proposals into projects with detailed budgets, and 3) vote on the projects the municipality will implement, while making sure the process is transparent and designed to deal with local obstacles to participation.
- **Integrated development plan:** Use the assessment results, advisory council inputs, and participatory design process to mainstream participatory climate action in the municipal development plan, fleshing out the disaster management section to include long-term climate impacts. The plan includes individuals most affected by climate change in the leadership structures of climate actions.
- **Community-based committees:** Support the establishment of local climate action committees, building on existing community structures, but also increasing representation and inclusion, especially of young people, women and other sidelined groups. These committees are empowered to gather information and opinions from community members and feed them into municipal design, implementation and monitoring processes.
- **Regular community monitoring meetings:** Collaborate with the advisory council and the community-based committees to organise quarterly public meetings that allow the municipality to learn about changes in the local situation and stakeholders, evaluations of climate-related structures and procedures, proposals for interventions, and other community inputs. These meetings include dedicated time for councillors and staff to report back to community members.
- **Capacity building:** Invest funds and time in the education of community members as well as municipal councillors and staff on climate change, immediate and long-term climate impacts, and mainstreaming participation in climate actions.
- **Accessible communication:** Make information about municipal structures and procedures, council meetings and hearings, votes on municipal matters, notifications and requests for public comment, and processes for submitting petitions and complaints easy to access and understand for all community members.
- **Informed consent:** Use informed consent to manage expectations and make clear that community participation is voluntary and that benefits or services don't depend on participation.
- **International and national collaboration:** Connect with other municipalities investing in participatory climate action to learn, attract support and have impact at a larger scale.

To learn more, visit <https://www.csvr.org.za/transformational-justice-for-climate-justice>



## ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF VIOLENCE AND RECONCILIATION

The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr) is an independent non-governmental organisation established in South Africa in 1989. CSVr is a multi-disciplinary institute that seeks to understand and prevent violence, heal its effects and build sustainable peace at the community, national and regional levels. Through our research, advocacy and psychosocial support work, and in collaboration with communities affected by violence, we seek to enhance state accountability, promote gender equality and build social cohesion, integration and active citizenship.

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