



CHAPTER 2

RESILIENCE, MADE LOCAL: LIFE-AR AND LoCAL

KEY MESSAGES

- Uganda, Malawi, and The Gambia are implementing both the Least Developed Countries Initiative for Effective Adaptation and Resilience (LIFE-AR) and Local Climate Adaptive Living Facility (LoCAL) approaches to Locally Led Adaptation (LLA), but in different ways. While The Gambia opted to modify LoCAL to take on board LIFE-AR elements, Malawi and Uganda chose to have both approaches co-exist, relying on formal and informal channels to facilitate learning between the two.
- In The Gambia, LIFE-AR is supporting modifications to LoCAL to support community and village-level decision-making, ensure 70% of funds reach communities, establish bottom-up transparency and accountability mechanisms, and strengthen local capacity to plan and implement adaptation solutions.
- In Malawi, an emerging question for LIFE-AR, however, is how to interpret and respond to the results of the performance assessments for district councils, without penalizing communities for the inability of their councils to adhere to externally determined rules.
- Uganda is working to establish formal links between LIFE-AR and LoCAL. LIFE-AR uses the national-level Climate Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (CRVA) undertaken by LoCAL to direct investments to the most impacted districts and local governments. The CRVA has been customized by LIFE-AR to be more inclusive of people at the most local level. LoCAL, in turn, has refined its assessments, engaging communities earlier and longer in the planning process.
- Implementing LIFE-AR has provided six key lessons for LLA, including the need for dedicated champions; constant vigilance to avoid elite capture; time to build local expertise; managing complexity in planning and budgeting; strengthening financial management systems; and tailoring the LLA Principles to political realities.

Devolving Decision Making

Addressing Structural Inequalities

Patient, Predictable, Accessible Funding

Investing in Local Capacities

Building Understanding

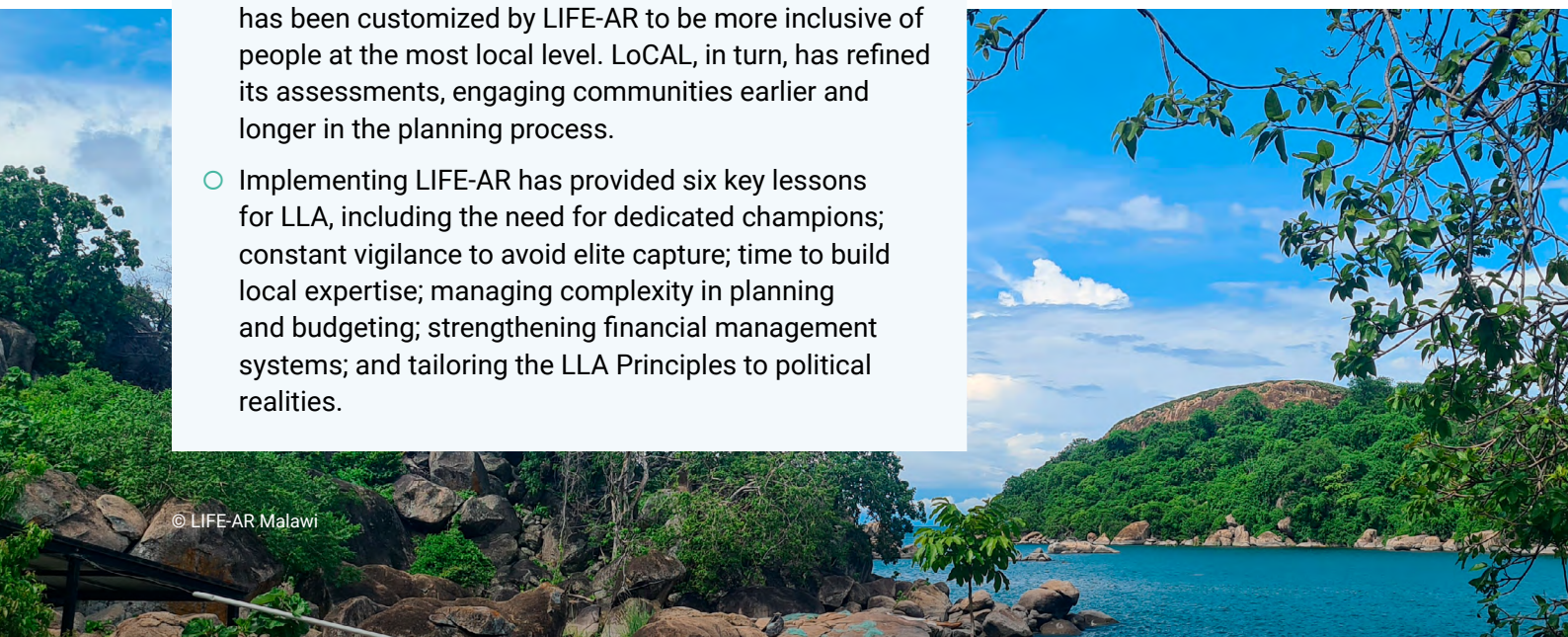
Flexible Programming and Learning

Transparency and Accountability

Collaborative Action and Investment

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Devolving Climate Finance to Communities in Uganda
- Getting Money Where It Matters
- Three Countries, Three Approaches
- Informing Implementation of the LLA Principles
- Six Lessons From LIFE-AR
- Learning and Sharing While Sustaining Impact





The thing we are happy with and we are benefiting from is that the funds are going direct to the location of the investment, which has never happened before.

Catherine Animate, Natural Resources Officer of Kibaale District in western Uganda

DEVOLVING CLIMATE FINANCE TO COMMUNITIES IN UGANDA

Natural Resources Officer Catherine Animate knows the lands of Kibaale District in western Uganda intimately—the soil, the seasons, and the fragile balance that sustains her community through small-scale farming and animal husbandry.

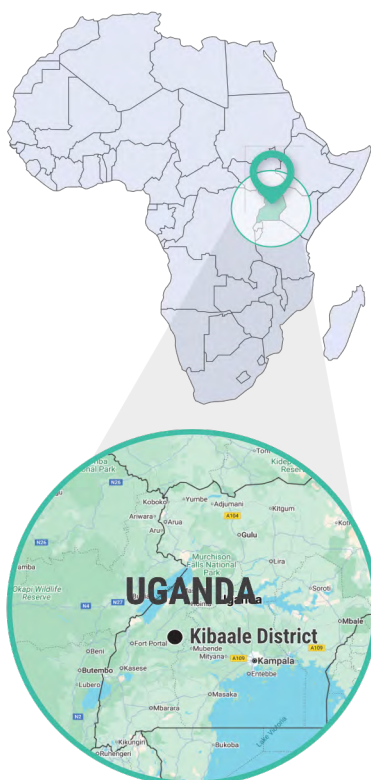
Having worked there for more than 25 years, she has witnessed many changes. The land before her now is not the same as it was decades ago. Droughts last longer, rains arrive later—and when they do, they often come with torrential floods and fierce winds that destroy homes, wash away crops, and tear through public infrastructure. Catherine has watched families lose their livelihoods overnight, struggle to rebuild, and face repeated disasters.

The impacts ripple through the community, but do not affect everyone equally. In Kibaale, traditional gender roles shape how climate change is felt. Men usually prepare land for cultivation and rear livestock, while women are responsible for raising children, collecting water, and cooking. These roles leave women and children particularly vulnerable when resources become scarce.

In the parish of Rusenke, for instance, water sources first become inaccessible because of flooding during the rainy season and then dry up due to drought. Women must walk further to collect water, often from unsafe ponds and stagnant pools that threaten the health of their families. Sometimes, they must pull their children out of school to help carry water home—a painful trade-off that deepens poverty and limits opportunities for the next generation.

For Catherine, these are not just bare facts. These are the struggles written on the faces of her neighbors and friends, and the daily reality of a community she has spent her life serving. She has also witnessed the limited impact of solutions that arrive ready-made, blind to community needs and to the different needs of women and men. In recent years, she is convinced that the solutions must begin with the people who not only feel the pain, but know the remedy.

Recently, however, she has begun to sense a shift—and this time, it feels different.





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Boreholes, such as this one in Kibaale district, Uganda, reduce the burden of fetching water for women and children.

For the first time, her community is being given a voice in deciding how funds should be used to help them adapt to these changes. The Least Developed Countries Initiative for Effective Adaptation and Resilience (LIFE-AR) is channeling funds directly to parishes through a Devolved Climate Finance (DCF) mechanism.

“The thing we are happy with and we are benefiting from is that the funds are going direct to the location of the investment, which has never happened before,” she says. “With LIFE-AR, the parishes are also much more involved. Each parish was able to identify their climate needs and solutions and participate in planning for the resources allocated.”

Catherine and her colleagues provide technical support and facilitate planning sessions where men, women, and children share their priorities. Funds go directly to elected parish climate change committees, who are mandated by the community to lead decision-making, community engagement, and project monitoring.

With the first tranche of funding, the people of Rusenke parish installed boreholes to reduce the burden of fetching water for women and children. The lessons learned from this first round will inform the next round of decisions by the community and their local governments. The community is now more trusting of a local government that is willing to listen and respond to their needs, and more willing to work with them, shoulder to shoulder, to confront the shocks of a changing climate.



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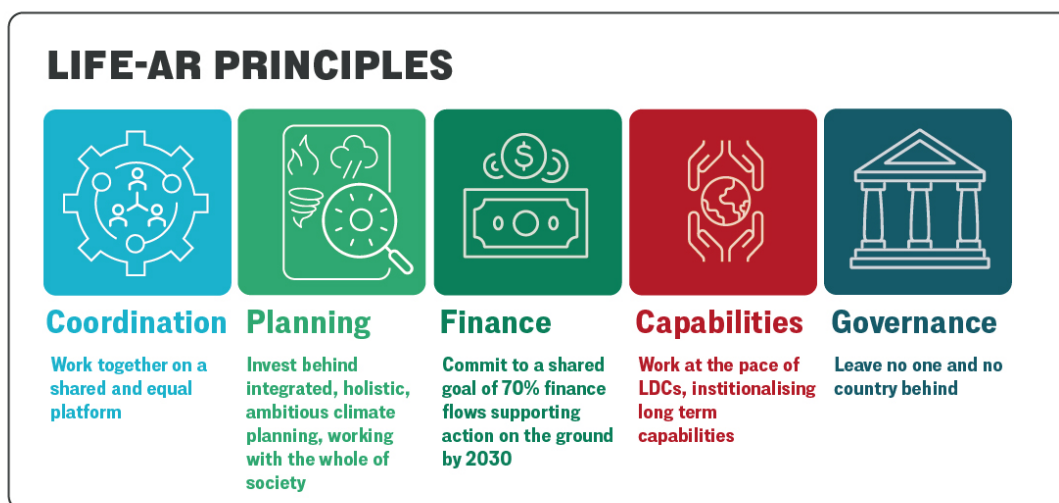
GETTING MONEY WHERE IT MATTERS

Channeling devolved and flexible funding directly to affected communities is a central tenet of locally led adaptation (LLA), but also perhaps the most difficult to achieve. At every step of the way, from international fund providers and institutions to national and local governments, ceding the power to decide how the funds should be used is arguably one of the biggest challenges to effective LLA. This is the challenge that LIFE-AR set out to overcome, as described in Chapter 2 of the *2024 Stories of Resilience* report.

Least Developed Countries (LDCs) designed the LIFE-AR initiative to transform how climate action is prioritized, financed, coordinated, and evaluated. At the heart of LIFE-AR is the **LDC Compact**, which includes a set of principles, a set of offers from the LDCs, and a set of asks for development partners. Recognizing that climate finance is currently ineffective because it relies on short-term projects and funding that is delivered top-down through expensive intermediaries and consultants, the Compact calls for:

- Long-term, predictable climate finance
- Locally driven decision-making
- Stronger integration of local knowledge
- Reduced reliance on expensive intermediaries

As of 2024, this Compact has been **signed** by 10 LDCs and 11 development partners.



Six pilot countries (Uganda, Malawi, The Gambia, Bhutan, Ethiopia, and Burkina Faso) are creating **national platforms** and **delivery mechanisms** to channel funds directly to communities, building on existing processes and institutions. These homegrown systems oversee investments, ensure accountability, and integrate the LLA Principles into domestic governance. New tools, funding procedures, and responsibilities are introduced to shift people's understanding of how governments can or should operate.

Building on the detailed description of the LIFE-AR process provided in last year's report, this chapter describes how implementation is progressing in Uganda, Malawi, and The Gambia. It goes a step further to explore how LIFE-AR leverages the lessons of the earlier work by the UN Capital Development Fund's Local Climate Adaptive Living Facility (LoCAL), which was described in Chapter 7 of the *2022 Stories of Resilience* report.



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Community members in Pader district, Uganda, take part in a training session on tree planting.

Tested in over 30 countries, LoCAL provides performance-based climate resilience grants as a top-up to the regular development budget transfers from national to local governments. These additional funds can be used to either climate-proof ongoing development investments or support standalone resilience-building projects. Local adaptation plans and programs, informed by participatory climate risk assessments, identify community needs and capacities, and are integrated into local development planning and budgeting processes. Grants are then disbursed as part of the local governments' development budgets. After implementation, performance is assessed to determine how effectively the top-up funds have been used to build resilience and adapt to climate change. The findings from these assessments directly inform future grant allocations, rewarding stronger performance and promoting continuous improvement.⁷

The experience of LoCAL gave LIFE-AR's early adopters valuable insights and opportunities for innovation in establishing systems supported by LIFE-AR. For example, LoCAL demonstrated the feasibility of channeling climate finance to local governments through existing public financial management systems. LoCAL also introduced innovative minimum conditions and performance tracking to encourage stronger financial management and better responses to climate risks.

THREE COUNTRIES, THREE APPROACHES

Uganda, Malawi, and The Gambia are implementing both LIFE-AR and LoCAL, but in different ways. While The Gambia chose to modify LoCAL to take on board LIFE-AR elements, Malawi and Uganda chose to have both approaches co-exist, relying on formal and informal channels to facilitate learning between the two.



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LoCAL has invested US\$ 4 million in various projects in The Gambia, from poultry and horticulture to boreholes and culverts.

The Gambia: A Little Bit of Both

LoCAL has been operating in The Gambia since 2018, investing US\$ 4 million in 10 projects, including boreholes, culverts, poultry, and horticulture. Grants were allocated to Ward Development Committees responsible for several villages. Participatory climate risk assessments were conducted by local expert teams, incorporating the needs of women and people with disabilities. Members of the Committees and the expert teams were trained in participatory planning for adaptation and resilience building and on financial management.

Recognizing LoCAL's strengths in community empowerment, The Gambia's LIFE-AR team hired a Gambian consultant to critically explore how LoCAL could be aligned with the LIFE-AR Principles. Overall, the findings show LoCAL's commitment and approach to community empowerment successfully delivered over 70% of funds to communities and created tangible adaptation and economic benefits.⁸ However, some gaps, relevant to the LIFE-AR Principles and the LDC 2050 Vision for a climate-resilient development pathway, were identified:

- Limited community involvement and participation. The assessment found that LoCAL did not operate at village level directly, including during project implementation.
- Insufficient integration of local meteorological data, climate information services, and sustainable capacity strengthening for the decentralized structure for more meaningful empowerment.
- Weak gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) consideration and measures.
- Delays in fund transfers and restricted choices for community investment in terms of meeting their specific needs.
- Limited application of a whole-of-society approach.
- Limited knowledge sharing, particularly with communities and government agencies.



“The finance must flow direct to the local level,” explained Modou Cham, from the Ministry of Environment Climate Change and Natural Resources of The Gambia. “Previously, there were delays, with reductions in the amount of money reaching the community. The best approach is to reduce the intermediaries.”

Following national workshops to find ways to address these gaps, an assessment of the preparedness of village-level committees and other roles to directly receive funding was undertaken. These committees then received training in planning and financial management.

LIFE-AR is now supporting modifications to LoCAL, as shown in Table 1, to:

- Use domestic climate data.
- Empower community/village-level decision-making.
- Establish bottom-up transparency/accountability methods using monitoring, evaluation, and learning methodologies and communications.
- Ensure at least 70% of funds reach communities directly.
- Mainstream gender equality and social inclusion policies.
- Conduct capacity needs assessments and develop a curriculum for strengthening the capabilities of local governments, councils, ward and village development committees to plan and implement adaptation actions.

TABLE 1: Examples of Modifications to LoCAL through LIFE-AR in The Gambia

LoCAL	ADAPTED LoCAL	LLA PRINCIPLE
Climate information from outside The Gambia	Climate information from the Gambia National Meteorological Agency	5
Investment menu covering six thematic areas	Open menu enabling community innovation	1
Allocation formula based on ward size and population	Flexible formula with larger initial sums and 70% of funds reaching the local level	6
Wards report to technical and steering committees for donors	Village leadership reports to communities on progress as well as to ward development committees and donors	7
Capacity-building by external consultants	Academic and training institutions from The Gambia provide capacity-building	4
Governance structure focuses on equality of representation of women	Governance structure includes a GESI working group to ensure mainstreaming at all levels	2

Malawi: Parallel Systems, Shared Learning

Malawi is implementing LoCAL in three districts—Nkhotakota, Mulanje, and Mwanza—and LIFE-AR in three districts—Salima, Mangochi, and Rumphi. The two programs take different approaches to planning and finance delivery, providing an opportunity for those involved to share experiences and learn from each other.

The strength of LoCAL is the use of existing government systems for planning, budgeting, and channeling funds. While communities are consulted during the participatory climate resilience and vulnerability assessments that identify adaptation priorities, district councils make the final decision on what to fund. Accountability of the councils to the communities is assessed during annual performance assessments.

LIFE-AR uses a more granular, participatory, and grassroots approach, focusing heavily on gender equality and social inclusion. Participatory assessments are conducted at village level, with particular efforts to articulate the differing priorities of men and women in relation to climate risks. The adaptation priorities identified in these community meetings then become the core focus of LIFE-AR funding.

LIFE-AR has relied on Malawi's own institutions to develop a mechanism based on their understanding of conditions in-country. One emerging question for LIFE-AR, however, is how to interpret and respond to the results of the performance assessments for district councils, without penalizing communities for the inability of their councils to adhere to externally determined rules.

"People feel more included under LIFE-AR," says Yamikani Idriss, LIFE-AR's National Technical Lead. "It's easier to make progress when villagers see their views taken seriously."



Signing of the grant agreement with communes selected for LIFE-AR investments in Malawi.



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Queuing for the election of the Parish Climate Change Committees in Kaabong, Uganda.



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Uganda: Parallel Systems, Integrated Leadership

LoCAL has been implemented in Uganda as of 2016, and LIFE-AR as of 2020. LoCAL decides allocations based on the national poverty index and population, with grants to each district ranging between UGX 300,000,000–800,000,000 (approximately €70,000–90,000). LIFE-AR offers UGX 170,000,000 (€40,000) to each parish, with three or four parishes currently targeted in each district (approximately UGX 500,000,000 or €120,000 for each district), with more parishes to be added in the future. LoCAL uses standardized performance measures, which are used by the Prime Minister's Office to assess progress. LIFE-AR intends to develop performance measures with the communities.

Both LoCAL and LIFE-AR are managed by the Ministry of Water and Environment, so mutual learning flows through informal channels. For instance, experience with LoCAL informed the design of Uganda's DCF mechanism, and LIFE-AR used the national-level Climate Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (CRVA) undertaken by LoCAL, together with the Prime Minister's Office's National Disaster Risk and Vulnerability Atlas, to direct investments to the most impacted districts and local governments. LIFE-AR now uses a version of LoCAL's participatory, which has been customized by LIFE-AR to be more inclusive of people at the most local level. LoCAL, in turn, has refined its assessments, engaging communities earlier and longer in the planning process.

Uganda is working to establish more formal links between officials in the two initiatives. This could include scheduling Steering Committee (highest level of governance) meetings for both initiatives on the same day, chaired by the Permanent Secretaries of the Ministries of Environment and Local Government. Joint monitoring processes are being discussed, where the same team will monitor both programs. LIFE-AR has also established a new Community of Practice (CoP) in Uganda, initiated with virtual webinars, and intended for LIFE-AR to share lessons with the wider LLA community in the country and beyond. As the CoP is coordinated by same key line ministry that supports both LIFE-AR and LoCAL, the intention is to broaden the CoP to foster wider learning on LLA initiatives across the country.

INFORMING IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LLA PRINCIPLES

The experience of implementing LIFE-AR and LoCAL in the same countries provides valuable insights into putting the LLA Principles into practice.

The first principle of devolving decision-making to the lowest appropriate level is interpreted differently by the two delivery mechanisms, leading to distinct approaches with their own advantages and trade-offs. Delivery mechanisms supported by LIFE-AR are designed in-country and focus on financing grassroots decision-making at the village or parish level. LoCAL, meanwhile, integrates community perspectives into decision-making but channels them through higher-level local government institutions—the district councils. Both approaches have clear merits.

Enabling decision-making at the most local levels, as LIFE-AR does, requires a longer set-up period. Interviewees from Uganda and The Gambia explained how they worked hard to support strengthening of capabilities to manage funds and make informed decisions. LoCAL, on the other hand, has been able to bed in more quickly and deliver funding by working with institutions that already have established and trusted systems for managing financial risk.

Interviewees from all three countries noted that LoCAL's approach remains more top-down, as final decisions are made by government authorities with input from communities.⁹ LIFE-AR places greater responsibility on community-led institutions to make decisions. This approach also helps address structural inequalities.

In The Gambia, efforts to integrate LIFE-AR and LoCAL are focused on ensuring that decision-making bodies are both legally constituted and inclusive by design. As Annet Nakyeyune from the International Institute for Environment and Development explains, this includes representation of women, young people, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups, ensuring that adaptation plans reflect diverse perspectives.

Another key insight relates to the fifth LLA Principle, which emphasizes the need to base adaptation on reliable climate information. LIFE-AR has worked to integrate domestic meteorological services with local and Indigenous knowledge, helping ensure that adaptation measures are both evidence-based and rooted in community realities.

The two mechanisms also differ in how they establish institutional legacies—systems that allow countries to retain administrative and financial skills over the long term. Both LIFE-AR and LoCAL promote participatory planning, monitoring, and the integration of climate information, but LIFE-AR is challenging the norm and going further by strengthening grassroots institutions to manage funds directly. It also relies on domestic expertise, involving national meteorologists, academics, and financial managers rather than outsourcing to international consultants.

On one hand, this approach demands a greater upfront investment of time and resources to build funder confidence that local systems can manage funds safely. On the other hand,

it creates long-term value, as local people gain skills and experience with each funding cycle, gradually reducing dependency on external actors.

In Uganda, LIFE-AR collaborates with institutions like the Makerere University Centre for Climate Change Research and Innovations (MUCCRI). Similarly, in The Gambia, it partners with the University of The Gambia and The Gambia Rural Development Institute to support planning processes. These partnerships are building a cohort of national experts capable of leading future adaptation planning, ensuring quality assurance, training, and innovation.

LIFE-AR's deliberate avoidance of international consultants reinforces this approach. It encourages governments to rely on local staff, academics, civil society organizations, and training institutions, creating a pool of domestic expertise that will continue to deliver benefits for years to come. However, this process is slow and resource-intensive, especially since local institutions often face limited staffing and financial constraints.

Establishing the systems that make LLA work requires time and patience, particularly when the goal is to ensure that the process is fully owned by the host country. It requires predictable, long-term funding that allows governments and communities the space to experiment, learn, and adapt over time.

Flexibility is also critical when monitoring LLA initiatives. While involving communities in deciding what to measure and how to measure it can make monitoring more meaningful and inclusive, it also demands significant resources in the short term. Over time, however, these participatory approaches strengthen local ownership, improve accountability, and lead to more sustainable outcomes.



Community consultations, such as this one in Malawi, are essential to implementing LLA.



SIX LESSONS FROM LIFE-AR

Reforming climate finance was never going to be straightforward. The old system carries significant inertia, and shifting towards new ways of getting resources where they are most needed requires both innovation and persistence. Implementing LIFE-AR has provided six key lessons on implementing the LLA Principles.

1. LLA needs dedicated champions

LIFE-AR's way of working represents a fundamental departure from how development programs are usually designed and delivered. Its strong emphasis on government leadership places greater demands on public officials, requiring them to take on new roles in research, oversight, and implementation.

While this approach delivers long-term benefits, it has required dedicated champions within governments to build momentum. These individuals have played a key role in convincing stakeholders that LIFE-AR supports their priorities and aligns with national objectives. Progress has also depended on working at the pace of national governments, ensuring ownership and alignment rather than forcing externally driven timelines.

2. Constant vigilance is necessary to avoid elite capture and external control

The LLA Principle on shifting decision-making closer to communities comes with risks. LIFE-AR recognizes the danger of local elites capturing planning processes to divert investments toward their own locations or economic sectors, leaving historically marginalized communities behind.¹⁰ In some contexts, powerful individuals have been known to influence the decisions of parish climate change committees to serve their interests. Interviewees stressed that constant vigilance is required to prevent such scenarios.

A related challenge arises when non-local actors—such as government agencies, international development organizations, or donors—dominate the conversation about what counts as acceptable climate adaptation.¹¹ In response, LIFE-AR insists that host countries and local level actors/communities retain control of programs and that delivery mechanisms be co-designed with the whole of society, ensuring diverse voices at the local level are meaningfully included.

3. Building domestic expertise takes time

LIFE-AR deliberately chooses to work within existing national structures and prioritize local consultants over international ones, reflecting its goal of building long-term domestic expertise. However, this approach can be slow and resource-intensive due to limited institutional experience and constrained capacity in many countries. For instance, just designing LIFE-AR's delivery mechanisms took over a year in Uganda, Malawi, and The Gambia.

While the LLA Principles emphasize the importance of patient and predictable funding, this slow pace can be challenging for funders, who often face pressure to demonstrate quick, tangible results to their taxpayers. LIFE-AR is committed to showing donors that its approach leads to more sustainable, long-lasting impacts and better value for money compared to traditional short-term projects.



A meeting of the LIFE-AR steering committee in The Gambia.



4. Managing complexity in planning and budgeting

LIFE-AR's whole-of-society approach makes planning more inclusive but also more complex. Involving a wider range of actors—from local communities to national authorities—creates more responsibilities to manage, and extra steps in decision-making processes.

This complexity can cause tensions with annual budget cycles, particularly when national systems are not well aligned with evolving community needs. For example, in The Gambia, national budgets are tied to five-year development plans that reflect the priorities of foreign aid donors rather than local realities.

Additionally, short-term project funding has historically shaped local planning processes, making it harder to build sustained participatory decision-making systems. A key challenge for LIFE-AR is to reconcile community-led priorities with existing budgetary frameworks.

5. Financial management systems need strengthening

In Uganda, LIFE-AR has had to rely temporarily on the International Union for Conservation of Nature to manage and hold funds on behalf of government institutions. This interim measure was designed to reassure donors while Uganda works to strengthen its own financial systems and improve its capacity to handle international climate finance.

6. No “right way” to implement the LLA Principles

There is also no single “right way” to implement LIFE-AR or indeed the LLA Principles. Experiences from participating countries demonstrate that approaches to learning vary and should be tailored to political realities. Clear objectives, combined with a solid understanding of what is politically feasible, are essential to designing effective programs.



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Inspection of the investment site is undertaken in Pader district, Uganda.

LEARNING AND SHARING WHILE SUSTAINING IMPACT

Development programs are often shaped by those who finance them, unintentionally limiting local ownership. When funder priorities dominate, programs can overlook the knowledge and capabilities of communities to understand climate impacts and develop solutions.

A climate finance system driven by local actors and priorities requires greater collaboration at every level of decision-making. Bringing together civil society, academia, and local and national governments not only broadens the range of perspectives but also enables more holistic, context-specific solutions.

LIFE-AR's country-led and inclusive approach is designed to build on existing systems, like LoCAL's, while also developing homegrown capabilities and innovating new mechanisms where needed.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel for every program; learning should be encouraged across efforts to implement LLA. Structures for recording successes and challenges are emerging organically in countries such as Malawi, but there is a need to formalize these learning processes, such as the Community of Practice initiated in Uganda, so that insights are shared widely, rather than lost when key individuals move on.

To ensure LLA is implemented most effectively, the creation of systems for continuous learning should be prioritized, ensuring that experiences inform future decisions and enable innovation across programs. A collaborative, collegial atmosphere fosters learning more effectively than competition between initiatives—a lesson underscored by the experiences of both Malawi and Uganda.