

Policy actions for scaling Africa's climate adaptation: Bridging technical, institutional, and implementation gaps

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Key Messages:

- Africa's escalating climate risks call for a shift from high level, fragmented adaptation commitments to fully actionable NDCs, NAPs, and LT-LEDs.
- The persistent implementation gaps, including fragmented institutions and budgeting challenges, coupled with weak MRV and data systems, require i inter-ministerial coordination, simplified African-specific technical guidelines, and capacity development across national and sub-national levels.
- Scaling up proven practices such as the use of analytical and digital planning tools (FABLE, LEAP), cross-ministerial collaboration, and locally led approaches, can drive more ambitious, inclusive, and sector responsive adaptation, especially within agriculture and food systems.

1. INTRODUCTION

The devastating climate change impacts require a shift from quick fixes to forward looking strategies that are aligned with the international climate policy instruments. The Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), and Long-Term Low-Emission Development Strategies (LT-LEDs) serve as key policy instruments in guiding the African countries in defining the mitigation and adaptation priorities and aligning national actions with the global climate commitments under the UNFCCC framework (UNFCCC, 2015, Articles 4 and 7). The NDCs provide high-level adaptation goals alongside mitigation targets, while NAPs provide more detailed, medium to long term adaptation strategies for reducing vulnerability and building resilience across sectors (UNDP, 2025; GIZ, 2025). LT-LEDs complement these two policy instruments by outlining long term pathways for resilient, low-emission development toward mid-century (UNFCCC, 2022).

Despite the importance of these policy instruments, persistent gaps exist in development, implementation, or tracking. Across the continent, not all countries that submitted their Intended National Determined Contributions (INDCs), updated their National Determined Contributions (NDC 2.0) or submitted their third iteration (NDC 3.0). Additionally, progress on the development of the National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and Long-Term Low-Emission Development Strategies (LT-LEDs) is largely uneven. Case in point, as of November 2025, out of 53 African countries that submitted INDCs, only 41 countries submitted their updated NDCs (NDC 2.0), and just 23 have submitted their third NDC (NDC 3.0) (UNFCCC, 2025). Similarly, about 30 countries have developed their NAPs and only 10 countries have communicated their LT-LEDs (UNFCCC 2024).

Equally, the quality of these policy instruments varies from country to country, further exposing the persistent gaps that limit their implementation and impact. According to 2023 UNFCCC NDC Synthesis Report, many NDCs still present broad, high-level adaptation commitments with limited costing, unclear prioritization, and weak integration with sectoral plans (UNFCCC 2023). Furthermore, several NAPs developed remain insufficiently grounded in comprehensive climate risk assessments, while others lack clear implementation pathways, financing strategies, and monitoring and evaluation system (UNFCCC, 2024, 2025). Where LT-LEDs exist, they often focus more on mitigation than adaptation, with adaptation often addressed at a high level and with limited operational detail (UNFCCC, 2023). These gaps create an impetus to assess opportunities and challenges for strengthening adaptation policies especially in Africa's food and agriculture sector which is disproportionately vulnerable to climate change (IPCC, 2022). It includes examining potential limitations in technical skills, institutional arrangements, data and tracking systems, and available financial support to develop and implement adaptation policies.

Additionally, a wide range of guidelines has been developed to support policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring (UNFCCC, 2025; NAP Global Network, 2024). These guidelines play a critical role in enhancing policy quality by outlining key principles, defining essential elements to be incorporated, and providing direction on the overall policy processes (UNFCCC, 2025; NAP Global Network, 2024). Alongside identifying policy gaps, it is equally important to assess the extent to which existing guidelines address these issues, as this helps inform targeted efforts to close the gaps.

This policy brief presents targeted recommendations for strengthening adaptation policies across Africa. It is by an analysis of relevant regional and international policy guidelines. Together, these reviews provide a detailed characterization of the current adaptation policy landscape, highlighting existing strengths, gaps, and emerging opportunities for improvement. The analysis of technical guidelines further enabled a comparison between identified policy gaps and the areas already addressed within existing guidance, thereby clarifying where future guideline development could add value.

Following these technical reviews, the findings were enriched through stakeholder engagement, validated during a peer-to-peer learning workshop. This participatory process ensured that the recommendations are not only technically sound but also aligned with practical realities, institutional capacities, and on-the-ground experiences within countries. As a result, the policy brief delivers contextually relevant and actionable insights to support more coherent, inclusive, and effective adaptation policymaking across the continent.

2. METHODOLOGY

The policy brief's methodology draws on three interconnected strings of work: a scoping review of the technical guidelines, in-depth policy analysis of the key policy instruments (NAPs, LT-LEDs, and NDCs 3.0), and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange among the African practitioners.

2.1 Scoping review of the technical guidelines

The scoping review of the existing technical guidelines aimed to identify gaps, opportunities and entry points for strengthening the design, implementation

grounded in a comprehensive review of adaptation policies, complemented

and tracking of climate policies. Guided by the adaptation cycle, the review was organized into four themes: Policy design, Implementation, Tracking (M&E), and Crosscutting. The Policy Design theme (N = 8) covered guidelines that provide frameworks for conducting climate risk assessments, prioritizing adaptation actions, setting clear objectives, and alignment with national and international frameworks. The Implementation theme (N = 3) assessed guidelines that outline how adaptation plans are translated into action, including institutional arrangement and coordination, capacity development and training, and financing and budgeting. The Tracking (M&E) theme (N = 17) assessed guidelines for reporting adaptation progress, including establishing baselines, developing indicators, and strengthening the data systems. The Crosscutting theme (N = 10) captured guidelines spanning multiple stages of the adaptation cycle, delivery mode, assessing their relevance to food and agriculture systems, evidence of practical use, clarity of target users, potential for scalability and replicability, alignment with adaptation needs, inclusiveness, and long-term sustainability.

2.2 Policy analysis of the key policy instruments

The policy analysis focused on three key climate policy instruments – NDC 3.0, NAPs, and LT-LEDs. It drew on submissions from all countries that had developed at least one of these instruments as of September 2025, including nine countries with NDC 3.0 submissions, 30 countries with NAPs developed, and 10 countries that had communicated LT-LEDs. The analysis assessed the level of ambition, policy completeness, institutional arrangements, financing frameworks, MRV/MEL systems, and alignment with

UNFCCC technical guidance. It also examined coherence across mitigation, adaptation, and long-term strategies, as well as the readiness of these instruments for implementation at national and subnational levels. Given the uneven availability of policy instruments across countries, particularly the wider uptake of NAPs compared to LT-LEDS, the analysis adopted a cross-instrument approach, reviewing all available submissions irrespective of country. This enabled a comparative assessment of strengths, gaps, and actionable entry points across Africa's climate policy landscape

2.3 Peer-to-peer learning exchange

The Peer-to-Peer Knowledge Exchange was conducted through a series of structured roundtable discussions with representatives from 11 African countries: West Africa (Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso), Eastern Africa (Kenya, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda), and Southern Africa (Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe). Participants included senior officials from ministries of agriculture, livestock, and environment, as well as national leads responsible for coordinating NDC and NAP processes. Countries were purposively selected to ensure a mix of those that had advanced in developing key policy instruments and those still progressing, creating space for mutual learning. The discussions enabled practitioners to share firsthand experiences in developing and implementing climate policies, highlighting persistent challenges, and identify practical approaches that have proven effective within their national contexts

3. RESULTS

The triangulation of evidence from the scoping review of the technical guidelines, policy analysis (NDC 3.0, NAPs and LT-LEDS), and peer-peer learning exchange revealed a consistent set of gaps and strengths in technical and operational

guidance, implementation and systems readiness challenges, and potential practices and opportunities for scaling adaptation ambition.

3.1 Technical and operational guidance

Across all three evidence streams, a clear gap emerged in the availability, usability, and contextually relevant technical guidelines for climate adaptation in Africa. The scoping highlighted that while several guidelines exist for adaptation planning and tracking, very few guidelines provide practical direction for implementation, with only three guidelines identified for addressing implementation, compared to eight for Policy Design, Ten for cross-cutting and 17 for Tracking (M&E). Even where strong guidelines exist, for instance the *World Bank Reference Guide for Policy Design* or the *updated NAP Technical Guidelines*, they tend to be highly technical, providing limited guidance for subnational applications (UNFCCC, 2025). The peer-to-peer discussions further confirmed that many practitioners were either unaware of the existing guidelines or found them too technical and inadequately adapted to their national realities. This disconnect between existing regional and international policy guidelines and the operational needs for the African countries is reflected in the quality and structure of key policy instruments, including NDCs, NAPs, and LT-LEDS, which are often high-level with limited specificity on implementation pathways, costing methodologies, institutional arrangements, and monitoring and evaluation frameworks. As such, it emphasizes the need for simplified and actionable technical guideline that reflects Africa's limitations, including data availability and access challenges, institutional capacities, and sectoral priorities.

3.2 Implementation and systems readiness challenges

Evidence from the policy analysis and peer to peer learning exchange exposed deep structural barriers that limit Africa's ability to translate adaptation ambitions into large scale action. While many African countries have articulated strong priorities, particularly in agriculture, water, and ecosystem, implementation readiness remains low due to financing, weak institutional coordination, and insufficient Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems. For instance, countries like Zambia and Benin continue to face bureaucratic challenges that influence data access and reporting, while Kenya struggles with sector specific emission factors and Uganda's mobile livestock systems complicate the MRV processes. Institutional fragmentation remains a big issue, with ministries working in silos, consultations being inconsistent, and overreliance on external consultants undermine national ownership and continuity. Furthermore, many policy instruments lack costed implementation plans, measurable adaptation targets, or clear alignment between national and subnational levels. The LT-LEDs, where they exist, remain heavily mitigation focused and insufficiently integrate adaptation. Collectively, highlighting that challenge is not only the availability of policies, but the capacity, systems, and governance frameworks required to effectively operationalize the existing policies.

3.3 Good practices and opportunities for scaling adaptation

Despite persistent gaps, the findings also highlight a growing set of promising practices and innovations that demonstrate Africa's potential to scale climate adaptation. For instance, technology and innovation is increasingly gaining traction for its use in integration of agriculture priorities within the key policy instruments. For example, Benin uses the FABLE Calculator and NEST (Nexus Solutions

Tool) to model sustainable agriculture and land use scenarios to quantify emissions reductions and policy trade-offs, as well as optimize integrated planning across energy, water, land, and climate sectors for low emission strategies, respectively. Zimbabwe uses LEAP (Low Emissions Analysis Platform) and the FAO EX-Ante Carbon balance Tool (Ex-ACT) to identify mitigation and adaptation priorities. Similarly, Cross-ministerial coordination was reported for Kenya, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Zambia, and Zimbabwe to enhance the robustness of the development process for NDC 3.0 while also reducing overreliance on consultant and consequently strengthening ownership. Additionally, countries such as Rwanda and Togo demonstrated that integration of community voices such as farmers, local governments, and civil society ensured that adaptation actions remained grounded in local realities. These best practices present scalable entry points for strengthening governance, embedding locally led adaptation, enhancing sectoral integration, and accelerating Africa's transition from high-level commitments to transformative climate action.

4. Conclusion and recommendation

The quality, specificity, and readiness of NDCs, NAPs, and LT-LEDs remain largely uneven, despite Africa's accelerating climate impacts that require a shift from fragmented and broad commitments to clear and practical adaptation strategies. The evidence from the review of the technical guidelines, policy analysis and peer-to-peer learning exchange, consistently reveal significant gaps in operational guidelines, limited institutional coordination, financing challenges, weak MRV/M&E systems, and challenges in aligning national ambitions with the subnational realities. These systemic weaknesses impede implementation and risk widening adaptation gap at a time when

Africa's agricultural resources are dwindling, becoming increasingly vulnerable.

Similarly, innovations and good practices demonstrate progress is both possible and scalable. Countries are strengthening cross-ministerial collaboration, integrating community voices, and experimenting with analytical tools to inform the agricultural priorities to ensure adaptation is locally grounded. These emerging practices illustrate clear pathways for advancing adaptation ambitions, if supported by stronger and Africa specific operational guidelines, improved institutional and data management systems. Scaling climate adaptation in Africa therefore requires a deliberate effort to bridge the gap between policy intention and implementation reality, ensuring that adaptation becomes systemic, inclusive, and high impact across sectors and levels of governance.

Recommendations for strengthening climate adaptation in Africa are:

- i. Develop simplified, context-relevant Technical Guidelines

for strengthening the climate policies, particularly on implementation.

- ii. Strengthen the national systems and institutional coordination to improve implementation readiness.
- iii. Scale utilization of analytical tools and locally led practices to accelerate the adaptation delivery.

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