

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM D'A 26: Strengthen the role of local authorities in building the resilience of territories to drought

In the eyes of the UNCCD (United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification), the decisive role of local authorities in drought management is by no means anecdotal. From the very first articles of the Convention¹, they appear as key players in the implementation of long-term strategies to combat desertification. States are therefore required to rely on them both to implement programmes related to these strategies and to involve them in their design. This requires the creation of "a supportive environment [...] at higher levels to facilitate action at national and local levels", as the text clearly states.

As the main drivers of their territories, local authorities are closest to the people, economic actors and realities on the ground, and this in a sustainable manner. In the event of a crisis, they are therefore best placed to act quickly and in a targeted manner. They also have an important role to play in the development of responsible and inclusive land governance, a major lever for achieving land degradation neutrality.²

The need to give them a place in climate crisis management was also defended at the 30th Conference of the Parties (COP30) of the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), held in November 2025 in Brazil. But the road to recognition of their role is long: it is only since 2019 that they have been included among the "key stakeholders" with whom the UNCCD secretariat is encouraged to work. They face many challenges, including a lack of resources, rivalries with actors outside the territory and a lack of access to information.

Local authorities of different kinds

The term "local authorities" encompasses a wide range of actors, who differ in terms of their origin, status and sources of legitimacy.

Public authorities... Some are state-based and fall under formally recognised public structures, such as local authorities or decentralised state services. Their legitimacy is based on law or election. These public authorities have an official mandate to lead local development and provide public services, although their powers, resources and autonomy vary greatly from country to country.

... Or not. Alongside them coexist authorities that are not institutionalised by the state but are recognised locally. They derive their legitimacy from tradition, customs or religion. Village chiefs, councils of elders or land masters play a central role in land management, conflict regulation and social organisation. This is particularly true in rural areas, where the state has little presence. The state may recognise their power, which is sometimes exercised in parallel with or in competition with its own.

Complex interactions. The relationships between these two broad categories of actors are sometimes complementary, sometimes conflictual. The resulting local governance is marked by pluralism of norms and powers, as well as by unstable balances shaped by power relations and political, economic and social developments. This results in very different realities depending on the context, making attempts at generalisation difficult.

¹ Articles 2 and 3

² According to the UNCCD, this refers to "the condition in which the quantity and quality of terrestrial resources necessary to support ecosystem functions and services and improve food security remain stable or improve within specific time and space scales and ecosystems".

1 | What are the strengths of local authorities in managing droughts?

With the development of decentralisation, devolution and delegation processes undertaken by many states, the responsibilities of local authorities – and therefore their role – have increased. In West Africa, for example, local authorities with legal personality and financial autonomy have emerged, a development that has been accompanied by a devolution of state services. This empowerment of local authorities reflects their central role in managing or anticipating climate crises such as droughts: they are closest to the population and, as such, have detailed knowledge of the territory in terms of human, economic, biological and ecological aspects.

During the crisis anticipation phase, they are able to identify vulnerabilities, risky practices and emerging tensions at an early stage. They have various tools at their disposal, such as planning and management of essential resources and infrastructure, particularly in the areas of water, land use planning and public services. They also play an indispensable role as an interface between populations, traditional authorities, central government and technical and financial partners. By translating national policies into concrete actions and feeding local realities back to higher levels, they also facilitate the coherence and effectiveness of responses. With their local roots, they can contribute to early warning systems based on the observation of environmental and social developments, and then adapt responses to the specificities of their context.

Because they are permanently present in the territory, they are often the first to mobilise during episodes of acute drought. They are able to quickly identify priority needs or opportunities for access to remote areas, but also to mobilise relevant local actors. In these contexts of high uncertainty and tension, their legitimacy – whatever its origin – helps to establish a climate of trust, which is particularly conducive to the effective dissemination of information. They play a key role in organising appropriate responses for affected populations, including in cases of temporary or permanent displacement. And when they have sufficient autonomy and resources, they can provide operational leadership, coordinate emergency response and serve as effective intermediaries between communities, the state and external partners.

More broadly, their long-term presence in the territory enables them to ensure continuity between prevention, emergency management, reconstruction and development. They can support transitions between the short and long term, promote local ownership of actions and ensure their sustainability when external actors withdraw. By capitalising on past experiences, they help to improve preparedness mechanisms and strengthen territorial resilience, which includes good land management. Their role in land governance, securing usage rights and land use planning is crucial in preventing conflicts, limiting forced displacement and strengthening the resilience of territories.

2 | What difficulties do these local authorities face?

Structural constraints linked to decentralisation that is still too limited

In many contexts, decentralisation processes remain incomplete: the responsibilities transferred to local authorities are not accompanied by effective powers, sufficient decision-making scope or appropriate resources. This is particularly true in the areas of agriculture, water, climate and land, where centralised decision-making and public policies tend to persist. This mismatch between tasks and resources undermines local authorities' capacity to act and innovate, particularly during complex crises such as droughts.

The legitimacy of local authorities is sometimes contested

Tensions between local public authorities, decentralised state services, traditional authorities and specialised technical services are frequent, particularly around control and access to scarce resources, which may be captured by local or national elites. These power relations – which lead to the marginalisation of certain groups such as women, young people, pastoral populations and minorities – undermine the legitimacy of local rules. This difficulty is exacerbated by the lack of clear mechanisms for intersectoral cooperation and coordination. This can complicate the implementation of cross-cutting strategies, which are essential in the face of systemic crises. In contexts where there is strong pressure on land, this competition between authorities, combined with the plurality of norms, can exacerbate conflicts.

Too few qualified personnel and insufficient resources

Many local authorities lack resources, both in terms of skills and technical tools and in terms of funding. Without technicians and operational tools, it can be difficult for them to plan for, anticipate and manage drought crises. In emergency situations, this fragility translates into difficulties in maintaining basic services, coordinating interventions and absorbing additional human and financial costs. The crisis then exacerbates the structural vulnerability of local administrations, particularly in rural or marginalised areas. As for financial resources, two difficulties arise. On the one hand, financial transfers from central government are often insufficient or unpredictable. On the other hand, international aid funding remains fragmented, sporadic and largely conditioned by priorities defined at other levels. These weaknesses limit the capacity of local authorities to take long-term action and plan coherent responses to increasingly recurrent droughts.

A lack of access to information

Local climate, hydrological and environmental data are often incomplete, outdated, difficult to access or hard to use. This lack of information reduces the ability to anticipate events, particularly when it comes to setting up early warning systems and integrated territorial planning. This increases local authorities' dependence on external actors. These constraints lead to territorial planning that is too often reactive rather than proactive. Without institutional flexibility, financial resources, technical capabilities and appropriate data, local authorities manage emergencies without being able to leverage them for structural and sustainable transformation.

3 | Ways to support local authorities

In the field, a number of actors are seeking ways to improve and strengthen the capacity of local authorities to respond to droughts. There is no ready-made solution, as often very different contexts must be taken into account. But some avenues are emerging.

Local authorities are developing new mechanisms to clarify and strengthen local resource governance. This is the case in the community of Fada in Burkina Faso, which has trialled a model of local governance of forest resources based on an integrated management approach. Developed in support of the process of transferring powers initiated by the State, this mechanism has made it possible to recognise in concrete terms the role of local communities in natural resource management, while giving them access to real economic levers. The revenue generated has helped to strengthen local autonomy. A similar dynamic is emerging in Côte d'Ivoire through climate governance: the State is developing territorial climate plans with green budgets. These are based on local planning tools.

In fact, combining planning and climate anticipation is one of the innovative strategies that can stabilise the work of local authorities. The United Nations Capital Development Fund offers the LoCAL mechanism, which gives local authorities access to climate resilience funding, provided that planning and accountability frameworks are in place. In Côte d'Ivoire, where this mechanism is being implemented, the momentum is reinforced by government support through the revision of the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC 3.0). Beyond the formal exercise, planning appears to be a key tool for moving from reactive crisis management to a proactive approach.

Alongside these institutional mechanisms, local authorities are also seeking to support collective learning, innovation and the promotion of endogenous knowledge, all of which are ways of encouraging skills development and the development of more appropriate responses to drought situations. In the areas covered by the International Climate Cooperation Programme (PCCI), the "Climate Advice Clubs" have opted to create collective learning spaces bringing together producers, technicians, researchers and local authorities. By combining technical support, participatory research and local governance, these clubs enable solutions to be tested, their effects to be evaluated and their adoption to be promoted. In the same vein, the dissemination of sustainable land management and ecosystem restoration practices in Burkina Faso relies on farmers' organisations and community actors, with a targeted effort to provide training and capacity building.

Because innovation and "good answers" can also come from elsewhere, other communities are focusing on decentralised cooperation. This can lead to unprecedented and productive exchanges, which are part of long-term support including financing, capacity building and coordination between actors. Mainly in France, but in close collaboration with partner local authorities in Africa and elsewhere, cooperation and exchange networks run by the Water Solidarity Programme support the sharing of experiences and the dissemination of integrated approaches linking water governance, food security and citizen participation. Thanks to projects such as Ecosan, which brings together Burkina Faso and the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region, adaptation solutions for water and sanitation management can be shared over the long term.

4 | Where further action is needed

Fully recognise the role of local authorities within the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and give them the means to act

Resilience to drought is built first and foremost at the territorial level. To achieve this, it seems necessary to recognise local authorities and communities within the Convention as key players in implementation and to institutionalise territorial governance of adaptation. This means giving local authorities effective financial and legal resources, thereby indirectly strengthening their legitimacy vis-à-vis States, which will help to facilitate the transfer of powers.

- ⇒ This recognition must be accompanied by targeted strengthening of local competences through continuing training, the recruitment of specialised profiles (environmental technical advisers, territorial engineers, mediators) or learning by doing. Green budgets, vulnerability mapping and early warning systems must become common tools for local action, rather than isolated initiatives.
- ⇒ Donors and technical partners have a decisive role to play in directly financing local authorities. Without direct access to resources, local authorities remain confined to an executive role, even though they are on the front line when it comes to dealing with the effects of drought.

Developing participatory governance and multi-stakeholder consultation at the territorial level

Supporting communities in structuring consultation frameworks involving public authorities, traditional authorities, civil society, producer organisations, economic actors and citizens appears to be key. These key tools help to improve the dissemination of climate information, data sharing and accountability for decisions taken, all of which are essential levers for strengthening trust, local ownership of actions and the legitimacy of authorities.

- ⇒ This participatory governance must be based on the promotion of local expertise and endogenous knowledge. These must be documented, recognised and integrated into territorial climate plans, land management strategies and adaptation measures. By combining scientific knowledge and local practices, communities can develop more appropriate, socially just and sustainable responses to desertification and drought.

Excerpts from the bibliography used:

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Pradhan D., 2020. Local customary laws and decentralised community-based disaster mitigation. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 477.

This document is part of the Désertif'actions initiative, which seeks to better understand how to improve the resilience of territories to drought. It is based on a specific bibliographic analysis as well as on country workshops and webinars held in the run-up to this event, which will take place from 25 to 28 March 2026 in Djerba (Tunisia).

Intended for Désertif'actions participants and contributors, this note aims to explain the importance of the role of local authorities in anticipating and managing crises related to these climatic events, and how they can be supported in this role.

It should help to strengthen the arguments that can be put forward by civil society representatives at COP17 of the UNCCD.

List of countries that contributed to this note through their preparatory workshops: Burkina Faso, Canada, Côte d'Ivoire, France.

Find the reports from the preparatory workshops and webinars on the website desertif-actions.org

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