



WORKING PAPER

Unpacking Intersectional Approaches to Climate Change Adaptation

Insights from a knowledge co-production workshop

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Introduction

The concept of intersectionality is gaining increased attention as a way to better understand the complexity of social dynamics and power structures as they relate to challenges such as climate change (Amorim-Maia et al., 2022; Garcia et al., 2022; Mikulewicz et al., 2023). In practice, however, the application of intersectional approaches in climate change adaptation policy and practice to date is limited (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022; Mikulewicz et al., 2023). To unpack what it would look like to apply an intersectional approach to adaptation, a group of experts was gathered in a knowledge co-production process in May 2024. The group, a mix of advocates, researchers, and practitioners, explored the concept of intersectionality and discussed how it can be applied to different stages of the adaptation cycle. There was acknowledgement among participants that intersectional approaches are grounded in already-established good practices for adaptation. However, the group agreed that additional elements are needed to intentionally and respectfully address intersecting structures of inequity that exacerbate vulnerability to climate change. The outcome of the discussions was a set of principles grounded in the participants' lived and professional experiences, and that provide an overarching approach for addressing intersectionality in climate change adaptation practice and policy-making.

This working paper introduces a proposed set of principles for applying intersectional approaches to climate change adaptation, drawing on the principles co-produced during the workshop. As a basis, it uses the iterative adaptation cycle as presented in the United Arab Emirates Framework for Global Climate Resilience under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (UNFCCC, 2022, 2023). The contributions of all participants at the workshop are gratefully acknowledged—please see page 14 for a list of



all those who generously shared their knowledge and experience throughout the process. The working paper will interest adaptation practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers exploring how to adopt an intersectional approach.

Why Does Intersectionality Matter for Climate Change Adaptation?

Risks associated with climate change are determined by the interaction of climate hazards (including extreme weather events as well as changing trends) with exposure to these hazards and vulnerability to their negative effects. Social factors strongly influence vulnerability, creating differences within communities and across societies and over time. There is strong evidence that vulnerability to climate change is exacerbated by marginalization and inequities linked to gender inequality, colonialism, and other structures of inequity (IPCC, 2022). What this means is that the people who are disproportionately affected by climate change in a given context are most often those who are intersectionally marginalized—that is, people who are disadvantaged by intersecting structures of inequity, including racism, ableism, ageism, gender inequality, and discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community. People who are intersectionally marginalized tend to be excluded from decision-making spaces and have less access to information, resources, and services; these factors, among others, increase their vulnerability to climate change. At the same time, they have knowledge and experience that can strengthen adaptation efforts, which are more effective when they involve meaningful participation by the groups who are most at risk. Participating in these processes can also enhance their adaptive capacities (IPCC, 2022).

Intersectionality recognizes that we are all located within interconnected structures of inequity that produce both privilege and disadvantage. Specifically, structures of inequity do not operate in isolation; rather, they operate simultaneously and are interconnected and indivisible from one another, creating unique experiences of marginalization for those who experience intersecting forms of discrimination (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989). The term intersectionality was created to describe Black women’s theory and activism concerning their experiences of gendered racism and racialized sexism (Crenshaw, 1989). The concept is also recognized in some Indigenous Knowledge systems, where holistic understandings of gender, culture, and race are present (Clark, 2012; Monture-Angus, 1995 as cited in Clark, 2012).

In recent years, we have seen progress in integrating gender considerations into climate change adaptation, for example, as countries develop their national adaptation plans (NAPs) (Dazé & Hunter, 2024). A growing evidence base illustrates how a gender-responsive approach to managing climate risks is more effective and yields more equitable outcomes than one that does not integrate gender considerations (IPCC, 2022). Gender inequality is often used as the entry point for intersectionality, exploring how gender intersects with other factors such as age to produce advantages and disadvantages. However, this approach may obscure agency and privilege among women and limit flexibility to address other inequalities that may be more important in a particular context (Christoffersen & Emejulu, 2023; Kaijser & Kronsell, 2013).



At the same time, there is increasing recognition, both in research and policy deliberations, that an intersectional approach is needed for effective adaptation that reaches the people experiencing the highest vulnerability. Researchers have emphasized its potential in understanding how power dynamics and institutional structures interact with the impacts of and responses to climate change (Garcia et al., 2022; Kaijser & Kronsell, 2013) and have highlighted the links with climate justice (Amorim-Maia et al., 2022; Mikulewicz et al., 2023). The IPCC states that “risks vary at fine scale across communities and societies and also among people within societies, depending, for example, on intersecting inequalities and context-specific factors such as culture, gender, religion, ability and disability, or ethnicity” (IPCC, 2022, pp. 1–32). The UNFCCC, specifically the United Arab Emirates Framework for Global Climate Resilience, also emphasizes the importance of intersectional approaches as countries make progress toward achieving the Global Goal on Adaptation (UNFCCC, 2023).

An intersectional approach makes sense for adaptation for the following reasons:

- It places the focus on the people who are most intersectionally marginalized in any particular context (Crenshaw, 1989), recognizing that the social factors that influence vulnerability to climate change are context-specific.
- It can enable a more nuanced and accurate understanding of who is most at risk from the negative impacts of climate change—and why—taking intersecting inequities into account.
- It facilitates integration of different knowledges that are valuable for adaptation, including local, Traditional, and Indigenous Knowledge.
- It can address power structures that influence vulnerability to climate change.
- It can strengthen agency¹ and facilitate engagement of the people most affected by the impacts of climate change.

Despite the recognition that an intersectional approach is needed if adaptation is to be just and yield equitable outcomes, many questions remain regarding its application in policy and practice. Indeed, the IPCC identifies intersectionality as a “fundamental question” related to equity and justice in adaptation (IPCC, 2022, pp. 1–62).

The Co-Production Process

In May 2024, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) convened a knowledge co-production workshop, which brought together a small group of advocates, researchers, and practitioners to do a deep dive on intersectional approaches to climate change adaptation. We began by exploring the concept of intersectionality in general, using creative exercises to reflect on and share how we had experienced intersectionality, and the benefits and limitations of different approaches. We then considered the specific challenges and complexities involved in applying intersectionality to climate change adaptation and

¹ Agency can be defined as “the capacity ... to act independently and make choices that shape their lives and the social structures around them. Agency emphasizes the idea that [people] are not merely passive recipients of societal influences or structural forces but are active participants who can exercise their will, make decisions, and initiate actions” (Scholarly Community Encyclopedia, n.p., n.d.). Though typically applied to individuals, the concept of collective agency is also important in work on intersectionality.



identified an initial set of principles. Building on this, we discussed how to apply intersectional approaches in the different stages of the iterative adaptation cycle as conceptualized by the UNFCCC, with its four stages: impact, vulnerability, and risk assessment; planning; implementation; and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) (UNFCCC, 2022, 2023). Finally, we revisited and solidified the principles and discussed how we could take this thinking forward, individually and collectively.

For a topic like intersectionality, in all of its complexity, a co-production process felt essential. The participants in the workshop each brought professional and lived experience that was generously shared to advance our collective understanding of what an intersectional approach to adaptation could look like in practice. Our facilitators guided us through a process where each person was invited to reflect on their own positionality and where we developed a common language for dialogue on the issues under discussion. All knowledge was valued, and the focus was on learning with and from each other, using different techniques that invited inputs in different forms. This enabled us to have open and honest conversations and evolve our thinking throughout the workshop. We engaged with the complexity of intersectionality, acknowledging its context-specificity, the challenges in disrupting power structures, and the need for an iterative approach to get it right. There remain many questions about applying intersectionality to adaptation policies and action, but ultimately, we had a small community that felt we had created something together.



Knowledge co-production workshop participants (please see page 14 for a list of names and affiliations).



Points of Convergence: Key principles for intersectional approaches to climate change adaptation

One of the main takeaways from the co-production workshop was that intersectional approaches to adaptation share features that are synonymous with good adaptation practice, including local leadership, participatory processes, and combining scientific information with Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge for decision making (CARE, 2016; IPCC, 2022; World Resources Institute, 2025). However, there was also agreement that adopting an intersectional approach requires more than the typical good practices developed by the adaptation community over the last two decades. Together, we identified a set of working principles that we feel are important for advancing intersectional approaches in adaptation policy and practice, as shown in Figure 1 and explained in the following sections. The application of these principles by adaptation practitioners and policy-makers is intended to lead to particular outcomes from each phase of the adaptation cycle; these are described in the following section. Like adaptation, adopting an intersectional approach is an ongoing process, requiring attention and effort throughout the iterative adaptation cycle.

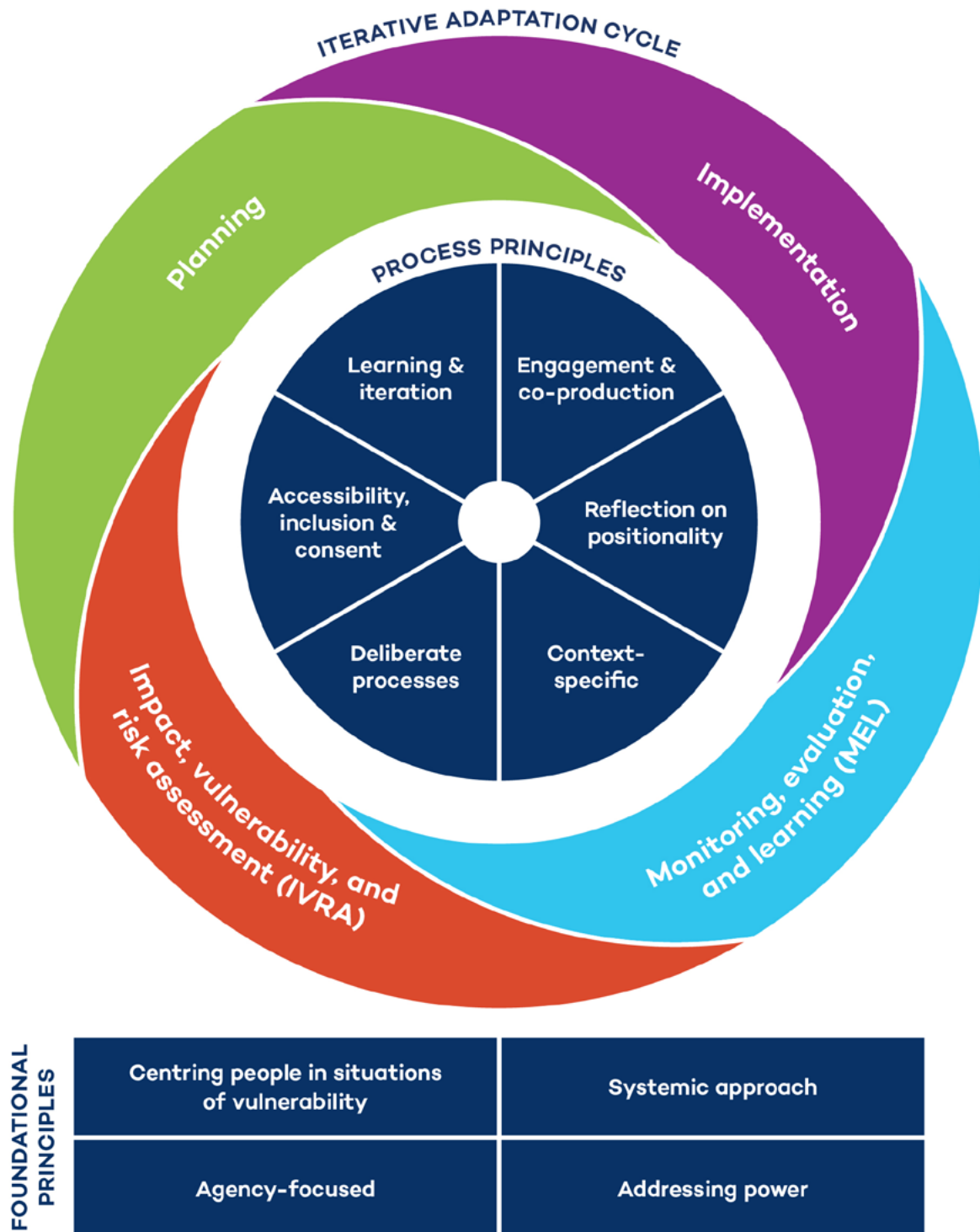
Foundational Principles

Foundational principles concern the intention and framing of adaptation. As shown in Figure 1, they are at the core of the process, guiding all aspects and providing the basis for applying the process principles.

An intersectional approach to climate change adaptation begins with an intention to **centre people in situations of high vulnerability**, recognizing that these are most often people who are marginalized by intersecting structures of inequity. This implies that all actors involved have internalized the idea that adaptation will only be effective if it centres justice and equity. Adaptation must be framed as systemic, recognizing that structural vulnerabilities must be addressed in order to sustainably and equitably build resilience to climate risks. Intersectionally marginalized people must be positioned as rights holders, emphasizing their agency, not just their vulnerability. Intersectional approaches to adaptation, therefore, build on and strengthen existing capabilities and promote collective action. This demands **a focus on power**, in terms of understanding how it influences vulnerability to climate change and an intention to disrupt harmful power structures that exist in adaptation decision-making processes.



Figure 1. Principles for an intersectional approach to the iterative adaptation cycle



Source: Authors (iterative adaptation cycle based on UNFCCC, 2022).



Process Principles

As described in Table 1, process principles are more practical and must be applied throughout the iterative adaptation cycle. Figure 1 shows the entry points throughout the adaptation cycle for these principles to be applied.

Table 1. Process principles

Process principle	Explanation
Reflection on positionality	Actors involved reflect on and transparently communicate their own positionality and how this influences their engagement with the process, in terms of the biases, assumptions, and power dynamics that may come into play (Sultana, 2007; Yip, 2023).
Context specific	Processes are designed with a solid understanding of the context, built through secondary research and direct engagement with relevant actors at different levels and deepened over time. Approaches focus on the intersections among inequities that create the most significant disadvantage and are most relevant for adaptation in the particular context.
Deliberate processes	Processes are deliberately constructed to be inclusive, promote dialogue, and enable meaningful participation by all. This influences decisions around data collection and analysis, the structure and facilitation of discussions, and participants in the process, among others.
Learning and iteration	Learning—including from missteps and failures—is intentionally nurtured and internalized in an iterative approach, supported by reflexive practice that values differing types of knowledge. All involved embrace the complexity of intersectionality, with an understanding that we probably won't immediately get it right.
Accessibility, inclusion, and consent	Engagement spaces are accessible to people with disabilities and others who may face barriers to participating. The language used is relevant and understandable, and methods are only as complex as necessary to achieve an intersectional approach. All engagement respects existing decision-making processes and representation structures and, where appropriate, is grounded in free, prior, and informed consent (United Nations, 2007). Safeguards are in place to protect people in situations of high vulnerability.
Engagement and co-production	Processes emphasize engagement and co-production, not consultation or extraction. Diversity in experience and knowledge is valued, and shared ownership and accountability are established.

Source: Authors.



Applying the Principles to the Iterative Adaptation Cycle

Figure 1 shows what we are aiming for in applying intersectional approaches throughout the iterative adaptation cycle, which consists of four main phases (UNFCCC, 2022; 2023). Achieving this involves an ongoing commitment to the foundational principles, coupled with the application of the process principles throughout the cycle. In practical terms, this involves deliberate actions in each phase, as described in the following sections. It's important to note that these phases are not as linear as they may appear in Figure 1—in reality, different activities within the phases are occurring simultaneously—for example, a more detailed climate risk assessment may be undertaken during the planning phase to inform development of specific adaptation actions, and MEL activities are occurring throughout the cycle (NAP Global Network, 2023). Though we are presenting a practical approach, the challenges associated with applying these principles shouldn't be underestimated, especially in situations where time and resources are constrained.

Impact, Vulnerability, and Risk Assessment

During this stage, the focus is on understanding the risks that climate change poses to human and ecological systems. According to the IPCC, the degree of risk depends on the interaction of climate hazards with exposure of people, ecosystems, infrastructure, and other assets and with vulnerability, in terms of susceptibility to harm and limitations in adaptive capacity. It may also be influenced by responses to climate change (IPCC, 2022). Assessing risks, therefore, requires an integrated approach that considers the current and projected impacts of climate change, how these influence hazards, which elements of human and ecological systems are exposed to these hazards, and where vulnerabilities lie. Intersectionality is relevant for the assessment of both exposure and vulnerability; for example, people who are intersectionally marginalized may live in more hazard-prone areas, or they may lack access to services that would increase their adaptive capacity. They may also benefit less from (or experience the negative impacts of) adaptation and mitigation efforts.

Intersectional climate risk assessments provide the foundation for integrating intersectional approaches in adaptation planning processes. They help identify who is most at risk from the impacts of climate change, how structural inequities influence exposure and exacerbate vulnerability, and how adaptation responses may reinforce (or disrupt) structures of inequity. This understanding can point the way to adaptation pathways that will build resilience of intersectionally marginalized people to the impacts of climate change.

An intersectional approach to risk assessment begins with participatory data collection processes, including a range of methods and sources that provide insights into power dynamics and structures of inequity. The teams leading these processes must reflect on their own position in relation to the participants and take this understanding into the engagement process, making efforts to avoid bias and correct power imbalances. For actors that may not have been previously involved in climate change adaptation, there may be a need to strengthen knowledge on climate change and how it links to their priorities in advance to enable meaningful participation. This is further strengthened by facilitation methods that



allow all voices to be heard. These assessments must be informed by disaggregated data and Indigenous Knowledge and local knowledge, combined with the best available climate science. Importantly, the data must be analyzed intersectionally, providing insights into the unique ways in which the structures and categories of inequity interact to exacerbate vulnerability to climate change. The assessment must be completed with the involvement of affected people and/or organizations led by and advocating for marginalized groups (hereafter, equity organizations), ensuring ownership over the data and the analysis by these groups.

➔ **Intersectional Climate Risk Assessment Focused on Structures of Inequity**

Planning

The planning phase involves the identification and prioritization of adaptation actions that address the identified risks. Actions may be identified for specific sectors, regions, and/or communities. Prioritization is generally completed through a multicriteria analysis process, which may consider factors such as urgency, cost, technical and social feasibility, and potential impact on vulnerable populations and ecosystems, among others (Chaudhury et al., 2016; Van Ierland et al., 2013; Watkiss & Dynzynski, 2013). Roles and responsibilities for the implementation of adaptation priorities are determined, the costing of the actions is completed, and implementation strategies are developed. Often, the planning stage also involves investment in the enabling factors for implementation of adaptation actions, including engagement of relevant actors, establishment of institutional arrangements, and capacity strengthening. Ultimately, the aim of the planning phase is to integrate climate change in decision making and budgeting (Hammill et al., 2019).

Participatory planning processes with diverse actors involved are generally good practice for adaptation; intersectional approaches require intentional engagement of equity organizations and affected people. Planning methodologies must equalize power in a process where all experiences and perspectives are valued and the agency of people who face discrimination is emphasized. Adaptation actions that address structures of inequity and aim to improve outcomes for people in situations of high vulnerability should be prioritized, recognizing that resources for adaptation should be targeted where they are most needed. This may require weighting criteria related to social vulnerability more heavily in multicriteria assessment processes, and/or grouping adaptation actions that respond to different needs, with priority given to those that will benefit intersectionally marginalized people—in the knowledge that this strategy will also ultimately benefit those less vulnerable (Crenshaw, 1989).

➔ **Adaptation Plans That Address Intersecting Structural Inequities and Prioritize Equity in Outcomes**

Implementation

During the implementation phase, human, technical, and financial resources are allocated for the implementation of the priority adaptation actions. The transition to implementation often involves a process of matchmaking between adaptation priorities and financial sources and instruments to put the appropriate resources in place. Investments are made in adaptation that include “hard” actions, such as the development of climate-resilient infrastructure and



the deployment of technologies that address climate risks. “Soft” actions are also important, particularly when these involve investments that improve systems and capacities for adaptation, strengthen social networks and safety nets, and address the drivers of vulnerability. Implementation of adaptation actions is enabled by strong leadership, intentional engagement of different actors involved in and affected by implementation, and the availability of finance for implementation, among other factors (NAP Global Network, 2023).

An intersectional approach in implementation requires a range of different strategies. First, adaptation actions targeting the people and communities who are most at risk must be allocated the necessary human, financial, and other resources to be effective. At the same time, all adaptation actions must be approached with consideration of how benefits to people who are highly vulnerable can be maximized, and harm avoided. Free, prior, and informed consent is essential for people who are affected by any of the proposed actions to ensure that they have the opportunity to understand the implications and raise concerns before implementation moves forward. Safeguarding is also essential when engaging people in situations of vulnerability in adaptation actions to ensure their safety, security, and dignity. Further, to ensure equitable participation and benefits from the implementation of adaptation actions, there may be a need to invest in enabling activities, such as specialized training, child or elder care, or accessibility supports. To ensure the sustainability of investments in resilience building, predictable, long-term funding that strengthens equity organizations is critical.

➔ **Equitable Opportunities and Outcomes From Implementation of Adaptation Actions for Intersectionally Marginalized People**

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

This phase involves monitoring progress on implementing adaptation actions and evaluating the performance of implemented adaptation actions, in terms of effectiveness, equity, and sustainability, among other criteria. It also involves capturing the learning emerging from adaptation efforts to improve performance over time. MEL of adaptation is supported by systems that involve data collection and analysis, documentation, and intentional efforts to capture learning. Effective MEL promotes transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement of adaptation efforts (Beauchamp et al., 2024).

While not unique to an intersectional approach, one of the most important starting points in MEL is to centre accountability to people, not funders. Too often, adaptation initiatives are focused on meeting targets established by actors who are not familiar with the context and who may emphasize short-term, quantitative metrics rather than outcome-oriented methods that can capture nuance and systemic change. There is rarely tracking of those who are not benefiting from adaptation. An intersectional approach in this phase involves participatory methods that capture diversity and involve affected people and/or equity organizations. Data must be disaggregated to capture differences across social groups, and analysis must focus on intersections of inequities. MEL must assess changes in resilience of the people and communities in situations of high vulnerability, capturing failures and unintended negative impacts as well as successes. This allows evaluation of equity in adaptation outcomes, as well as learning about intersectional approaches.



➔ Tracking Progress on Intersectional Approaches and Reaching People in Situations of Vulnerability

Where to Go Next: Outstanding questions

The principles described in this working paper provide a starting point for applying intersectional approaches throughout the iterative adaptation cycle. They attempt to address the question of what is needed for an intersectional approach, building on the already-established principles for inclusive adaptation, which, while important, may not succeed in identifying and addressing intersecting structures of inequity that exacerbate vulnerability to climate change. They introduce a set of practices that we believe will begin to address the complexity of intersectionality while strengthening solidarity among equity organizations and creating more effective policy processes.

Questions remain as to how disaggregated data can be analyzed in a truly intersectional way and how adaptation pathways can be identified to respond to intersectional climate risk assessments. There are inherent challenges in working toward processes that equalize power while ensuring that adaptation processes are scientifically robust, as this requires integrating different knowledges that may not always be in alignment. In addition, adaptation actions that address structural vulnerabilities are often harder to fund, more complicated to implement, and more difficult to monitor and evaluate than those with more immediately tangible outcomes (for example, an investment in climate-resilient infrastructure or nature-based solutions for adaptation). In short, taking the theory of intersectionality and applying it to the practice of adaptation will be a process of ongoing learning and iteration, but these efforts will undoubtedly pay off in terms of more just and effective adaptation to climate change.

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