

Local Minds, Global Impact: Think Tanks for Climate Action in LDCs

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CLIMATE
ANALYTICS

The Case for Establishing Climate Finance-Focused Think Tanks at LDC Universities

As climate impacts intensify, Least Developed Countries (LDCs) face deepening vulnerability and an urgent need to implement adaptation measures. Yet many continue to face capacity and funding shortfalls that limit their ability to identify, seek finance for, and execute ambitious climate actions. As a result, governments are often heavily reliant on external experts for developing proposals that successfully mobilise climate finance.

The *LDC University Leadership for Catalyzing Climate-Adaptation Finance* (UNI-LEAD) project was launched to strengthen internal capacities that address these gaps.

In partnership with the LDC University Consortium on Climate Change (LUCCC) network, the project strengthened the role of LDC universities in supporting national climate efforts, particularly by establishing university-based think tanks that provided technical services on climate adaptation and finance. Unlike external consultants, local universities offer deep institutional knowledge, trusted relationships, and a long-term presence that is crucial for sustainable impact.

By embedding think tanks within public universities, UNI-LEAD helped to unlock national expertise while building domestic capacity for climate planning and access to finance for adaptation.

The project supported the creation of four pilot [think tanks](#):



The Nepal Climate Initiative (NCI) at Pokhara University, Nepal



The Climate Finance Hub (CFH) at Makerere University, Uganda



The INiTiative Reflection and Action for Climate and Climate Financing (INTERFACE) at Cheikh Anta Diop University, Senegal



The Mozambique Community based Adaptation Platform (ADAPTACOMoz) at Eduardo Mondlane University, Mozambique



Responding to Country Needs: Adaptation and Climate Finance in Focus

Each think tank responded to its country's unique needs while navigating the shared challenge of establishing a service-oriented entity within a university system. The sections that follow highlight their journeys, results, and reflections.

Across the four countries, each think tank began its journey by identifying where the greatest gaps lay in national and subnational responses to climate change. Rather than duplicating existing initiatives, the think tanks actively engaged national ministries, subnational governments, and community groups to understand pressing challenges, from capacity shortfalls in adaptation planning to limited access to climate finance. What emerged was a set of targeted, highly contextualized interventions that reflected both national priorities and local vulnerabilities.



In **Mozambique**, the think tank worked closely with subnational governments to update their Local Adaptation Plans, which had remained outdated since 2019. Recognizing a gap in coordination across governance levels, ADAPTACOMoz also supported the creation of Provincial Adaptation Plans, through piloting a province to clarify the roles of subnational authorities and enable them to independently develop funding proposals that can be tailored to the needs of the particular locale. These interventions bridged the divide between national planning and district-level implementation, helping ensure that adaptation efforts were better tailored to on-the-ground risks, and that more local stakeholders were empowered to engage in climate finance access and adaptation action.



In **Nepal**, where glacial melt and erratic monsoons are driving climate-related disruptions, the think tank prioritized building a foundation for evidence-based project development. NCI developed two resource books: one on formulating robust [climate rationales](#), and another on integrating [gender equality and social inclusion \(GESI\)](#) into climate finance. These materials were disseminated through workshops at the national, provincial, and municipal levels, helping government and civil society actors in vulnerable areas like Karnali province and Melamchi municipality improve their project preparation and stakeholder inclusion strategies.

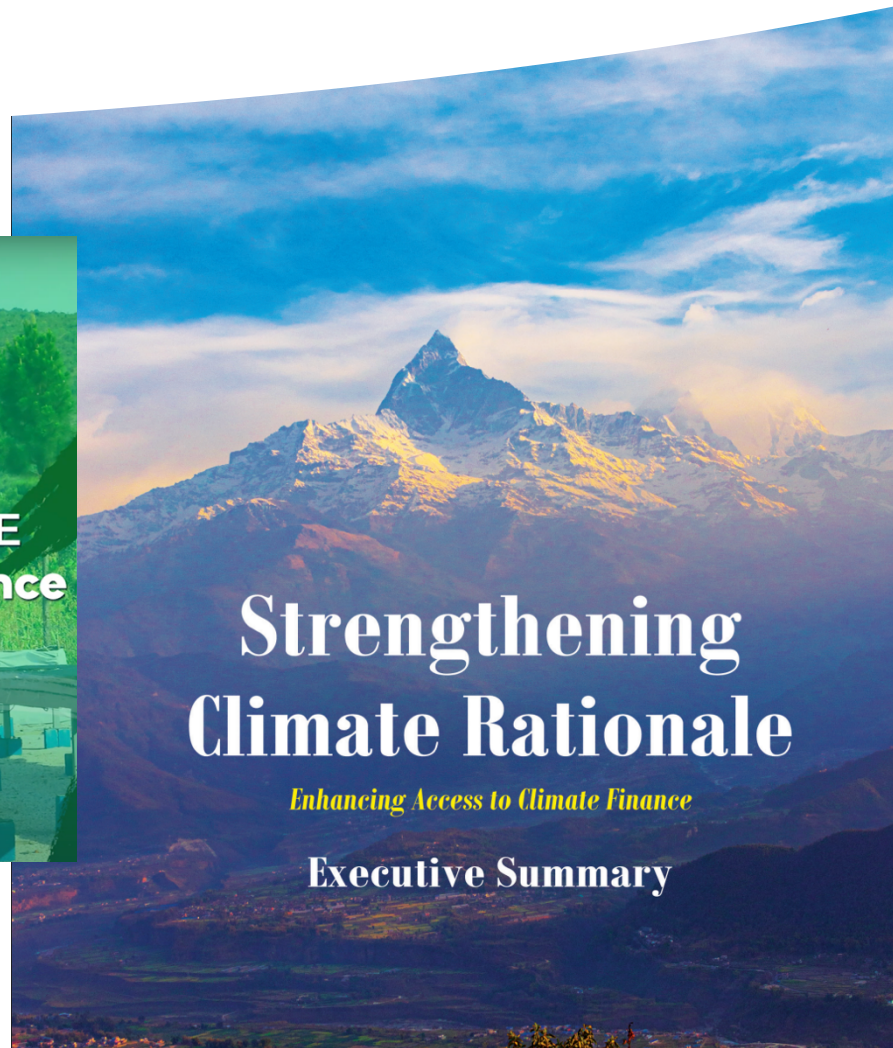


Senegal's think tank focused on closing data and capacity gaps in key sectors identified in the country's National Adaptation Plan, including agriculture, renewable energy, coastal zones and urban resilience. INTERFACE established university-government multi-stakeholder task forces for these key sectors to jointly identify priority actions and build credible climate rationales in collaboration with government ministries, accredited entities to climate funds, and civil society. These efforts were particularly timely given the growing challenges facing the country— including coastal erosion, shifting rainfall patterns, flooding, and rising temperatures —and they laid a foundation for stronger public-sector collaboration with the think-tank on project development.



In **Uganda**, the think tank took a multi-pronged approach to strengthen the country's climate finance architecture. CFH supported Uganda's Climate Finance Unit (housed in the Ministry of Finance, Economic Development, and Planning) in developing a national climate finance tracking tool aligned with Paris Agreement reporting needs, while also producing [short films](#) and awareness materials to communicate climate finance priorities more broadly. In parallel, the think tank engaged universities and NGOs in building a pipeline of professionals through short courses, master's programmes, and technical training, including a new Master of Sciences (MSc) in Climate Finance. These interventions directly addressed the country's limited technical capacity to access and manage funding for adaptation.

Taken together, these interventions underscore the value of *university*-based think tanks in aligning technical support with country-driven climate goals. Their ability to listen, adapt, and act has enabled each to carve out a distinct yet complementary role within their national climate ecosystems — one rooted in both local knowledge and long-term institutional presence.



Working Across Sectors: Stakeholder Engagement in Action

A core strength of the think tanks established under UNI-LEAD has been their ability to convene a wide range of stakeholders, from ministries and municipalities to community-based organizations and academic peers. This cross-sectoral engagement has not only broadened the influence of the think tanks but also ensured that their services are grounded in domestic needs and ownership.

Each think tank adopted a deliberate and context-specific approach to engagement. Several examples illustrate how services provided by the think tanks were cognizant of, and responsive to the expressed needs and priorities of different stakeholder groups:

- **In Mozambique**, the think tank began by mapping communication and collaboration needs among government actors, youth and women's organizations, and local communities, to ultimately develop a platform where civil society could interact regularly with academic experts. This positioned the university as a trusted capacity-building partner, particularly for subnational entities.



- **In Nepal**, the think tank conducted a structured stakeholder analysis to understand the needs of key institutions, starting with the Ministry of Forestry and Environment. They then organized trainings at the federal, provincial, and local levels to ensure inclusive participation in newly developed climate finance resources.



- **Senegal's** think tank began by conducting extensive consultations with ministries and key stakeholders, subsequently establishing strong sectoral linkages between university, government, civil society, and private sector representatives through forming multi-stakeholder working groups aligned with national adaptation priorities.



- **In Uganda**, the think tank actively cultivated both formal and informal relationships with actors ranging from the Climate Finance Unit to student associations and university departments. Across all cases, success stemmed from a careful balance between top-down coordination and grassroots responsiveness.



Inclusivity was not treated as an afterthought but rather was embedded into the fabric of each think tank's design and activities.



In Mozambique all engagement activities sought an even gender balance and strong youth participation. This broad inclusivity was important for engaging vulnerable communities in climate risk mapping and validation processes. The think tank also ensured that sensitive discussions — particularly those concerning marginalized groups — were handled with care and confidentiality



In Nepal gender and inclusion were central themes in both the development of the GESI-focused (Gender Equality and Social Inclusion) resource book and the design of workshops, which prioritized participation from indigenous and flood-affected communities. In Senegal, the model included task forces with inclusion of female representation, often led by women, and encouraging intergenerational exchange between junior and senior member



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The **Uganda** think tank has intentionally worked toward gender balance within the think tank and during training sessions, which covered GESI aspects. The think tank also aimed for at least 40% of the trainees to be women in each session.

Securing lasting impact will require strategic partnerships beyond the initial project. The think tanks are actively moving in this direction. All the think tanks are working towards formal Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with their respective government agencies responsible for climate action

NEPAL

In Nepal, for example, the think tank team has begun working towards establishing MoUs with both the Ministry of Forestry and Environment and various municipality governments. Government officials and other universities are also members of the Board of the think tank, thus institutionalizing multi-stakeholder partnerships.

MOZAMBIQUE

Mozambique's team has initiated conversations with bilateral agencies such as the Swedish development cooperation office and institutions like UNCDF and ENABEL, while also eyeing closer collaboration with the country's GCF National Designated Authority and Climate Finance Unit.

SENEGAL

Senegal's think tank is seeking to expand its national footprint from four to eight thematic taskforce groups and is pursuing regional collaboration through the LUCCC network and partners in The Gambia and Burkina Faso. A draft MoU is currently under review to enhance collaboration with the Ministry of Environment. Institutional partnerships will also be reinforced with accredited entities such as the Centre de Suivi Écologique (CSE), La Banque Agricole (LBA), and other relevant institutions.

UGANDA

In Uganda, the think tank is consolidating its partnerships across four categories — academic, research, policy, and development — including participation in donor coordination forums and expanding research collaborations under the LUCCC umbrella.

These experiences affirm that university-based think tanks can serve as credible, inclusive, and technically robust conveners across the climate landscape. Their ability to navigate both academic and policy spaces, while maintaining trust with civil society, positions them as essential connectors in the climate finance and adaptation ecosystem. As they look to scale, sustaining this multi-stakeholder orientation will be key to maintaining their relevance and deepening their impact.

Lessons Learned and Messages to the LUCCC Community

Establishing a functioning climate think tank within a national university is no small feat, particularly within a short project timeframe and shifting institutional landscapes. For the think tanks piloted under the UNI-LEAD project, the experience revealed both the opportunities and obstacles inherent in developing service-oriented academic institutions for climate action. Their reflections offer valuable lessons for other LUCCC members or university-based initiatives seeking to follow a similar path.





One of the most consistent lessons related to the *dual nature of engagement*. While formal channels – such as government letters, memoranda of understanding, and official endorsements – were essential for credibility and institutional buy-in, informal relationships proved just as critical. In **Uganda**, building trust with ministries and civil society networks often began through personal connections and prior collaborations. **ADAPTOCOMoz** similarly benefited from established ties between Eduardo Mondlane University and key government agencies in **Mozambique**, allowing the think tank to begin work even before it was fully formalized. Across countries, striking a balance between formal procedures and informal access was key to unlocking cooperation and sustaining momentum.



A second takeaway was the importance of *grounding activities in national priorities and local realities*. In **Senegal** and **Nepal**, the think tanks conducted deliberate mappings of stakeholders and needs before designing interventions, ensuring that their services were aligned with ongoing government efforts. Local leadership and credibility were also important: each think tank emphasized the value of leveraging university reputations and existing in-country expertise to gain traction with national and subnational partners.



All think tanks highlighted the *centrality of capacity building*, both as a service to be provided and for the think tank staff themselves. Several teams spoke of the challenge of setting up new institutions within large university systems, often without clear pathways or financial models for sustainability. Despite these constraints, the think tanks found ways to contribute meaningfully to technical skill development. The introduction of a Master's programme in Climate Finance in **Uganda**, the production of resource books on climate rationales and GESI in **Nepal**, the training of stakeholder working in climate adaptation and climate finance in Senegal, and the support to subnational planning processes in **Mozambique** all speak to the transformative role think tanks can play in strengthening the readiness of national systems to access and implement climate finance.



Finally, *the barriers to accessing international climate finance* remain a recurring theme. While each think tank aimed to support their governments in navigating these complex systems, the underlying challenges – from burdensome application procedures to capacity gaps in proposal development – continue to limit progress. This fact reinforced the idea that climate finance readiness is not a single milestone, but an ongoing process requiring institutional strengthening, long-term advisory support, and flexible funding.

For universities and organizations looking to replicate the UNI-LEAD model, these lessons underscore the need for both pragmatism and patience. Building an effective climate think tank is as much about relationship-building and relevance as it is about technical expertise. With the right mix of institutional support, trusted networks, and adaptive strategies, national universities can serve as durable engines for climate action in LDCs – not just during project cycles, but for the long haul.