



Climate Risk Narratives: Co-producing Stories of the Future



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Aim of the project

The Climate Risk Narratives project was designed to help foster better uptake of climate information into decision-making processes at the city scale. The narrative process is an engagement device for interrogating, deliberating and building knowledge about climate risk.



Dates

October 2017–September 2018



Countries

Botswana (Gaborone),
Zimbabwe (Harare) and
Malawi (Blantyre)



Discussing a climate risk narrative for Gaborone (Source: A. McClure, 2018)

Aim of co-production:

Climate risk narratives are stories describing a subset of plausible – yet certainly not definitive – futures within the spread of climate projections, intertwined with local context, impacts and vulnerabilities. The Climate Risk Narratives project set out to:

- better understand how people from different backgrounds engage with climate information, particularly the narratives;
- better understand how the narrative process might be refined to suit people from particular backgrounds or accommodate a broader group of stakeholders; and
- develop narratives for Blantyre, Gaborone and Harare with a variety of stakeholders in these cities with the aim of presenting these at a local city forum.

Context:

Within this project, the narrative work has been conducted at the city level within three southern African countries. The approach was developed in response to decision-makers' struggle to interpret climate projections in the form of spatial plots and graphs, with uncertainty presented as ranges of quantiles or similar. Narratives are an alternative to this means of communication. They are textual stories of plausible climate futures to which stakeholders can add their knowledge of potential contextual impacts and solutions.

Who was involved and what were their roles?

The project process was led by a team of researchers from the University of Cape Town (UCT), University of Botswana, Chinhoyi University and the Polytech University of Malawi. The process included co-production of both the project design and of the narratives. Firstly, the core research team, which included researchers from all these universities, co-designed the planned activities and engagements. This ensured that the project was designed in a way that was relevant to each city. Secondly, the core research team, together with a range of stakeholders from the three cities, co-produced the climate risk narratives for Blantyre, Gaborone and Harare. The in-city research partners led the facilitation processes of stakeholder engagements in their respective cities, with the support of the ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability) partners.

How was co-production done?

Build common ground

This project emerged out of another, larger project (FRACTAL) where the actors involved had already worked together and built common ground, laying the foundations and building the relationships for this project.

Co-explore need

In October 2017, the core research team met at a workshop to explore socio-economic related sensitivities in cities of interest, such as outdated stormwater drainage systems, lack of disaster management capacity and informal urban development in floodplains, and how climate might intersect with these sensitivities.

What was co-produced?



- **Project design:** This included the process in each city.
- **Climate risk narratives:** These covered the cities of Gaborone, Harare and Blantyre.



Benefits of the co-production approach

- The co-production process resulted in the start of discussions around the integration of climate information into the work of city officials. The process also raised awareness about the potential climate change impacts in the cities.
- Discussions and the bringing together of various stakeholders led to 'less tangible' benefits, such as relationship-building across institutions and seeing the 'bigger picture' of climate-related issues, as well as potential solutions. These relationships set the foundation for ongoing knowledge exchange on issues of climate change (e.g. the exchange of phone numbers between a representative from the meteorological department in Botswana and other city stakeholder groups).
- The co-production process enabled conversations between knowledge holders in the city, contributing towards increased capacity and receptivity, the ability to 'actively and critically reflect on one's own knowledge and that offered by others' (Scott and Taylor, 2019), towards climate information within the city.

Having spent a day collectively exploring and unpacking these sensitivities, team members from Blantyre, Gaborone and Harare spent some time brainstorming what they thought their city might look like in 2040. As these researchers were not climate scientists, they focused on producing general socio-economic narratives – stories outlining the discussed sensitivities, without a particular focus on climate.

Co-develop solutions

After the workshop, climate scientists reviewed the initial draft narratives for Blantyre, Gaborone and Harare through a climate lens, ensuring that, when overlaying the range of plausible climate futures, the narratives were credible. After receiving this feedback, the narratives were reviewed and expanded further by the in-city researchers and their colleagues.

Using the narrative drafts as a basis, in-city researchers then conducted engagements with government, private sector and civil society organisations and institutions with varying levels of influence over development in each city. Engagement methods included the distribution of a survey co-developed by the core research team, workshops and individual engagements. Through these engagements, city researchers collected information on climate risk perceptions, reactions to the narratives, as well as information on how these narratives might be revised to better capture the ideas of a broader range of stakeholders.

In order for the process to best fit the context, these in-city engagements were slightly different in each city. For example, in Zimbabwe, political turmoil during the course of the project meant that the city practitioners' attention was focused, understandably, elsewhere, and engagements were more challenging to organise. Harare city officials were therefore interviewed individually. In Gaborone and Blantyre, structured and highly participatory workshops were held, to which a variety of participants were invited. Through these various engagements in the cities, the in-city researchers further shaped and developed the climate risk narratives for their city.

Evaluate

After in-city engagements had taken place, the core research team from across southern Africa met again at a second workshop in July 2018. The main objectives of this workshop was to reflect on the processes in each city; to explore the data that was collated and to collectively decide on a set of useful outputs. In particular, the group reflected on the processes in each city and how a variety of stakeholders, in different contexts, received the narratives.

Lessons to learn from:

- **Flexibility:** Responding to the unique dynamics of a specific city or context requires an element of flexibility. Different contexts involve different political and social dynamics that need to be acknowledged and respected.
- **Location-sensitive:** Appropriate co-production approaches are always location-sensitive. It should never be assumed that what worked well in one location will easily transfer to a different area. However, several principles, such as inclusion, and valuing different voices and types of knowledge equally, are readily transferable.
- **Valuing less tangible outputs:** It is important to see the value of the 'less tangible' outputs, such as conversations triggering actions and the building of relationships.
- **Conscious facilitation is required:** To ensure that strong voices do not dominate quiet voices, conscious facilitation is required. However, ultimately, it is inevitable that the final product will reflect a certain set of participants' perspectives. It is therefore important that a set of textual or graphic narratives are not considered the final climate information output for a city to be inserted into decisions. Rather, these stories should be iterated, continuously incorporating perspectives from a broad set of stakeholders.

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