

Southern African Adaptation Colloquium 25-26 November 2013 SUMMARY OF EMERGING THEMES AND ISSUES

The Southern African Adaptation Colloquium was held in Cape Town on 25-26 November 2013, with presentations and discussions taking place under 6 sessions, organised by theme:

- Enablers of and barriers to adaptation;
- Links between disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation;
- Physical climate science and adaptation;
- Mainstreaming adaptation;
- Communication, knowledge-sharing and strengthening the community of practice;
- Ecosystem-based adaptation and ecological infrastructure.

The key issues that emerged are briefly highlighted:

Increased vulnerability

According to Francois Engelbrecht (CSIR), current climate science indicates that the global climate system is becoming less variable. Additionally, there is a clear signal that Southern Africa is warming, which will increase the existing risks of extreme weather events such as droughts and flooding (Engelbrecht). With the resulting increase in vulnerability, the need for adaptation is stronger than ever (Sheona Shackleton, RU).

Interdisciplinarity

It was clear from many of the presentations and discussions that greater inter- and trans-disciplinarity were needed to deal with the social impacts of climate change. Singular perspectives on climate change and adaptation fail to reveal intersecting factors, while the integration of multiple perspectives was found to be greater than the sum of their parts (Christina Culwick, GC-RO). According to Culwick, the reframing of problems from a broader perspective forces those involved to think beyond the conventional boundaries. It was agreed that partnerships and synergies should be encouraged, both by government and the private sector (Penny Price, WC Gov), and climate change adaptation should be embedded in “business as usual” (Mark Stafford Smith, CSIRO). The use of incentive structures with longer term perspectives was seen as the best way to achieve this (Lisa McNamara, SSN). The current reality that should be addressed, according to Anna Taylor (ACC) is that “adaptation is too political for the technicians and too technical for the politicians”.

Communication

Closely related to the previous theme, the need for better communication became apparent as a key issue.

Several things need to be done to bridge the disconnect between researchers and practitioners. There is currently not enough information about how adaptation practitioners use climate information, and it is not known how well adaptation practitioners understand the uncertainties in climate projections: this should be rectified so that climate information can be tailored to the end-users (Joseph Darron, CSAG). The traditional one-way flow of information needs to be challenged (Nick Hamer, RU), and the connection between climate science and indigenous information should be better-recognised (Mandy Barnett, SANBI). Hamer also showed that when communities are involved, there should be more emphasis on exploration than explanation.

Champions

Individual people with passion and dedication were recognised as a driving force behind successful climate change adaptation (Taylor). Albeit a vital component of successful adaptation, it was recognised that the South African climate adaptation community tends to be too reliant on strong individuals, which can leave a program, project or system vulnerable should that person leave (Taylor).

Ethics

The ethics of climate research and practice emerged as an important theme. It was noted that where practitioners interact with and influence communities, there is a danger of abuse, whether intentional or unintentional (Bruce Hewitson, CSAG). Similarly, where there is funding involved, transparency is even more important so as to avoid irresponsible decisions (audience).