

Bringing generations together for climate action: lessons from Nepal and Uganda



Above: Participants of an intergenerational dialogue on climate change, held in Birgunj town, Parsa district, Nepal on 6 January 2024.

“An intergenerational approach encourages two or more generations to work together for their mutual benefit and to promote greater communication, understanding and respect.”

Bringing generations together for change →

“An inclusive, intergenerational response is the only way to address the climate crisis that will define the lives of every person of every age over the next century.”

A rising force of change: older people and climate action →

The climate crisis affects everyone, yet it is those living in low- and middle-income countries, who have done least to contribute to the crisis, who are affected the most. Nearly 90 per cent of the world’s young people (aged 10–24 years) and 68 per cent of older people (aged 60 years and over) live in these countries.¹ Shifting power and resources towards inclusive locally-led climate action has never been more important.

Older people are at high risk from extreme weather events such as cyclones, flooding, drought, and heatwaves.² But this is only one side of the picture – older people also possess the knowledge and capacities to contribute positively to climate action, from locally-led adaptation efforts to global advocacy for climate justice.

The project is a collaboration between:



In contrast to the usual portrayal of older people as vulnerable, young people are often represented as an active force for tackling the climate crisis, while at the same time they can lack the decision-making power to bring about change in their own communities and at national and global levels. At times young people are perceived as victims of the climate crisis, with older generations blamed for destroying their futures. But as Charlotte Unruh, Ambassador for the Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations explains:

“The real divide is not between young people and other generations. The real divide is between those who have more power to change things, and those who have less.”³

Charlotte Unruh

We think that it’s time to move beyond these simplistic narratives of younger and older people in relation to the climate crisis. Given the urgency, the need for different groups and generations to combine their power and potential for the wellbeing of people and the planet has never been greater. The climate crisis affects all age groups, now and in the future. By fostering intergenerational solidarity, we can strengthen our collective response.

Intergenerational climate dialogues

Between August 2023 and March 2024, [HelpAge International](#) → and [Restless Development](#) → together with a researcher from Newcastle University (working with the [Living Deltas Hub](#) →) supported a pilot activity to test assumptions about the value of an intergenerational approach to support locally-led responses to the climate crisis.



We collaborated with local partners and facilitators in Uganda and Nepal to co-design a series of dialogues in rural and urban locations for younger and older women and men to share their experiences of climate change, coping strategies and ideas for future action. Our shared commitments to meaningful participation and valuing lived experiences, with a sensitivity to power dynamics, underpinned the design.

Separate dialogues were arranged first with young people, and with older people, followed by a joint dialogue to bring both generations together. This staggered approach is informed by HelpAge’s guide, *Bringing generations together for change* → and the World Health Organization’s (WHO) guide *Connecting Generations* →. Each dialogue session lasted around three hours and brought together between 10 and 20 people for lively discussions and group activities. A total of 101 people participated (48 women and 53 men). All participants were compensated for their time and travel to these sessions.

The dialogues encouraged participants to reflect upon and discuss the wide-ranging impacts of climate change on themselves and their communities, including on health and wellbeing, livelihoods, and cultural practices. They provided spaces for sharing:

- **lived experiences** of climate change and its impacts across different generations, from extreme weather events to environmental degradation over time;
- **coping strategies** of different generations, from past to present;
- **ideas for action** to mitigate and adapt to climate change and work towards sustainable futures for all.

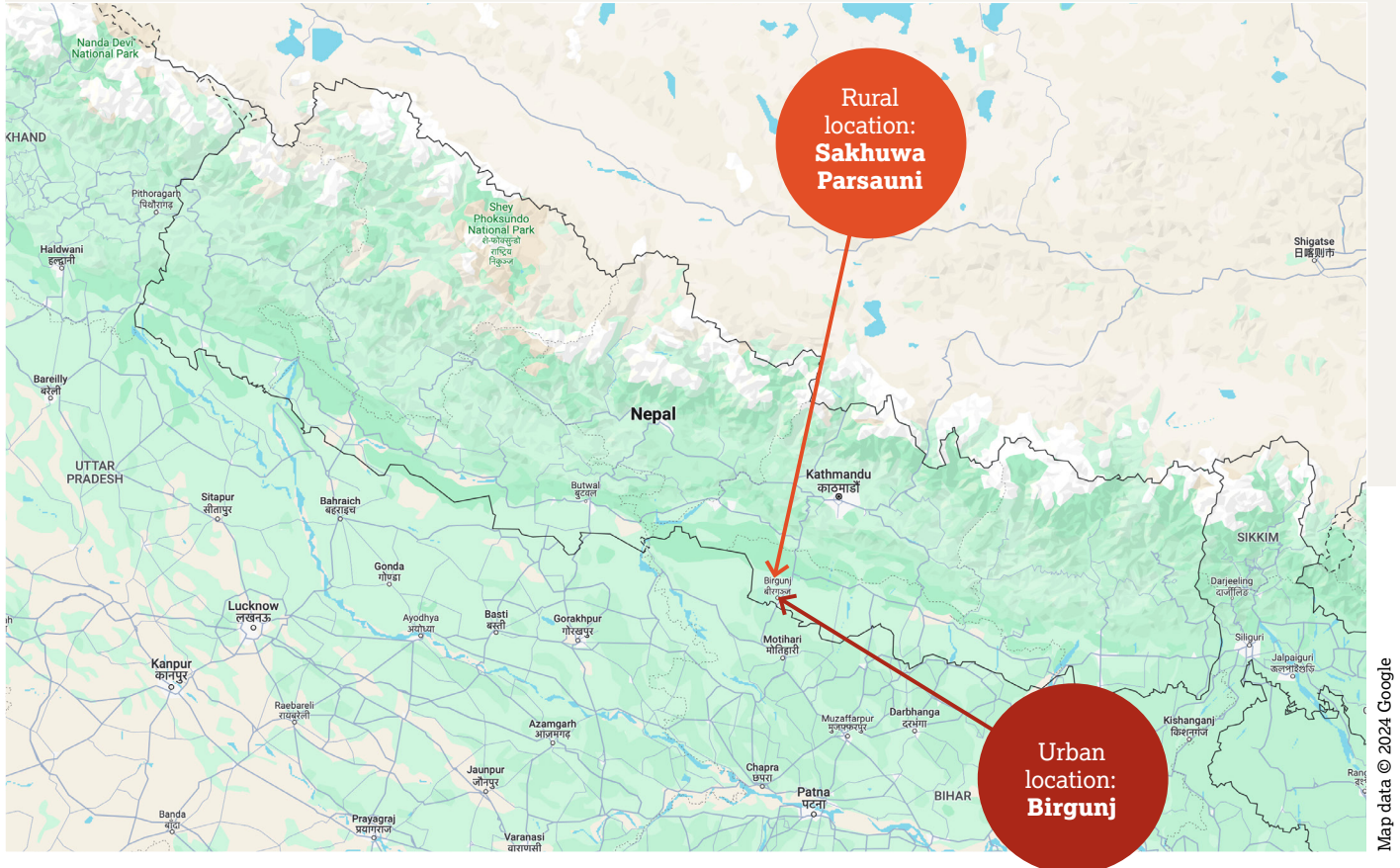
An ethos of collaboration and a commitment to learning were key features of the initiative. An online Learning Event in February 2024 brought together 23 participants involved in the pilot from HelpAge, Restless Development, Newcastle University, local partner organisations, and the three facilitators. This provided the chance to exchange experiences, reflections and ideas around intergenerational approaches to respond to climate change.

On the frontlines of the climate crisis

Nepal

The dialogues took place in rural and urban locations within the Parsa district of Madhesh province, in the lower Terai region.

The local partner is the Social Organization District Coordination Committee, Parsa (SODCC →).



Map data © 2024 Google

The Terai region of Nepal is prone to flooding, drought, forest fires and increasingly unpredictable monsoon patterns.

“We have gone a whole eight months without any rain!”
Older participant, Nepal

“Heat is unbearable during the summer months when we work in the fields.”
Younger participant, Nepal

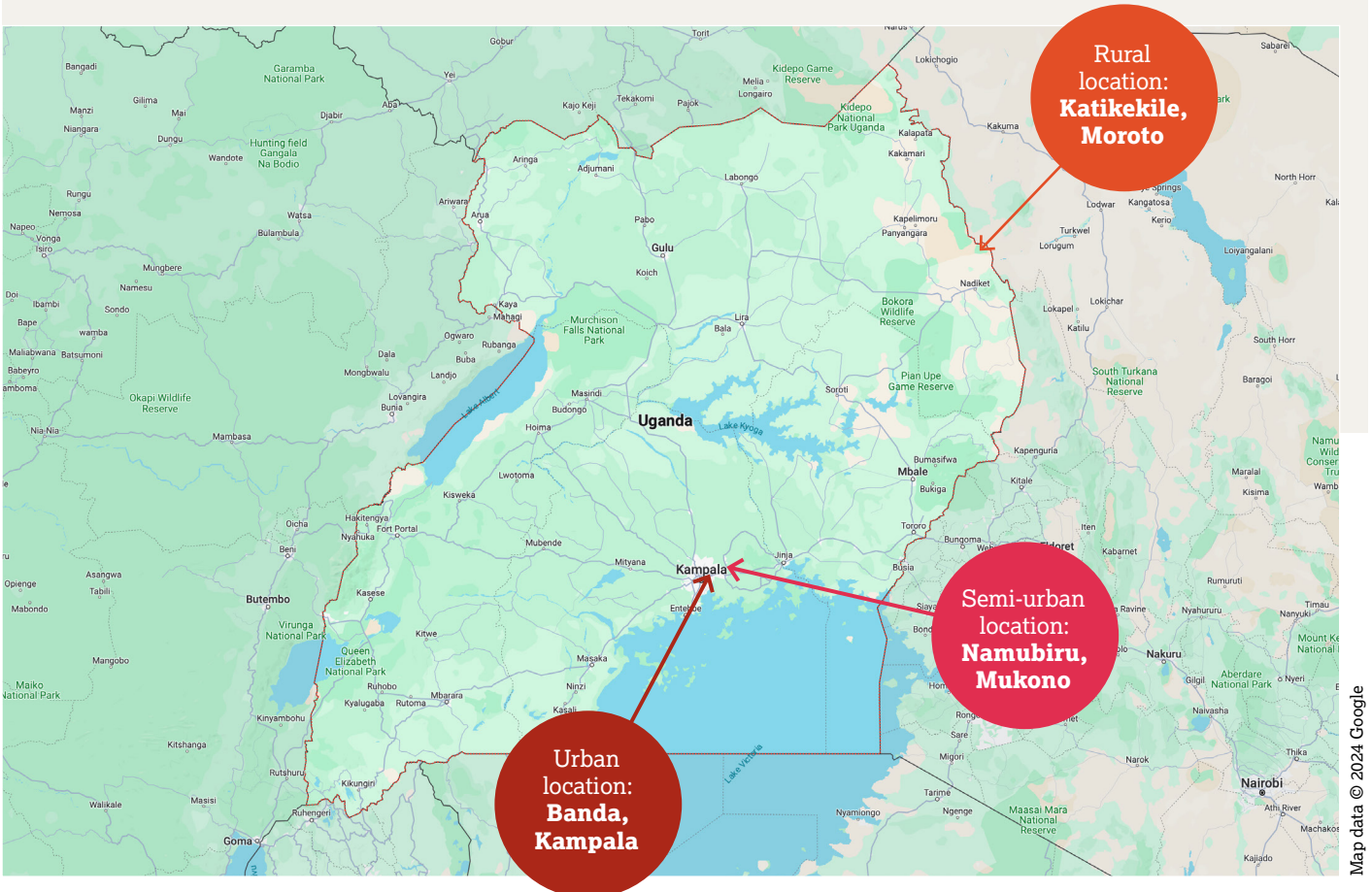
A common discussion point in both areas was the “unbearable” heat and its impacts on health, children’s education and daily life. There are high levels of migration overseas among younger people. Anupi Devi, a 63-year-old woman from the rural area explained:

“We are the only ones left here. All our children have settled in cities. There is no hope here because there isn’t any crop farming left to do without water, and no [other] employment opportunities.”
Older participant, Nepal

Uganda

The rural dialogues took place in the northeastern Karamoja region, and the urban dialogues took place in the capital Kampala, and in nearby semi-urban Namubiru.

The local partners are Karamoja Youth Effort to Save Environment (**KAYESE** →), Karamoja Agricultural Pastoral Development Program (**KADP**) and Reach One Touch One Ministries (**ROTOM** →).



The Karamoja region in northeastern Uganda has been experiencing extreme drought and famine for several years. The resulting scarcity of natural resources and food security has forced people to migrate or find alternative livelihoods such as charcoal production, mining, and cattle-raiding – all of which have further negative impacts on the environment and social relations. As one participant explained:

“...there is a lot of hunger these days and people are becoming disunited in their families, no respect is given to each other like in the past and this is because of climate change. In those days you could go to a relative or friends to ask even for a tin of maize, but nowadays people have become disunited and you cannot get anything in case of hunger.”

Older participant, Karamoja

The urban and semi-urban areas, where dialogues were held, also face unpredictable weather patterns with increased periods of drought and severe and dangerous flooding, both of which impact food security.

“Homes are washed away and people are displaced as the floods get worse every year.”

Younger participant, Kampala

“Floods lead to destruction of people’s food and lives.”

Older participant, Namubiru

Learning to inform future programming

The pilot initiative demonstrated the value of intergenerational dialogues as a foundation for inclusive locally-led climate action. Together with the facilitators and partner organisations we identified some of the critical requirements for future programming, and the multiple advantages of this approach.

“Intergenerational approaches to future climate planning and policy will become increasingly important in relation to the management, use and valuation of social-ecological systems.”

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)’s sixth annual assessment →

Adopt an intersectional lens

During the pilot activity, younger and older women across all four contexts participated actively in mixed gender dialogues with male facilitators. In some contexts, it will be important to create separate spaces for women, or for other groups with less power. To ensure the intergenerational dialogues are inclusive, particularly in the context of gender and age-based hierarchies, it is critical to recognise additional intersecting identities including disability, ethnicity, caste, class, education level and economic status, and how these may impact on people’s participation in the dialogues.

Keep it local

Local partner organisations are pivotal to the success of intergenerational dialogues and their follow-up. They understand the context best, and have close connections with community members, who trust them. They also have established relationships with relevant government agencies, and other non-governmental organisations, with the potential to influence and collaborate with them. It is critical that any intergenerational work on climate change aligns with partners’ existing work and is informed by their skills, experience and priorities.

“Local communities and institutions are at the front lines of climate change impacts and offer valuable expertise and innovative solutions to address the climate crisis.”

Locally Led Adaptation: From Principles to Practice →



Working with local facilitators is also important, to benefit from their knowledge of context and ability to communicate in the appropriate language. This is key for ensuring the meaningful participation of older people. In the pilot initiative young people who participated in the dialogues were comfortable using both the national language and English. Older people, however, spoke in their first languages: in Nepal, Bhojpuri and in rural Uganda, Ngakarimojong.

In both contexts, dialogue participants highlighted the need for government support to address many of the climate challenges they are facing. For example, legislation to prevent further deforestation or to preserve wetlands, and infrastructure to improve equitable access to water. Local partners are well-placed to engage their local government representatives, who have some power to raise issues up the formal political and bureaucratic structures (and are also residents of the same area). In Uganda officials from various departments were invited to the intergenerational dialogues. Hearing for themselves the issues raised and ideas proposed will increase the likelihood of their future support.

“Youth would be in a better position to support each other and older persons to respond to climate change if government made a policy around that.”

Younger participant, Uganda

Strengthen solidarity between generations

Bringing older and younger people together serves to strengthen social capital – the connections between people that enable the sharing of knowledge, resources and labour, and therefore enhance capacities to adapt. The results of this pilot show that this is particularly important when the overlapping burdens of poverty, food insecurity and migration (all accelerated by climate change) place a strain on intergenerational relationships. We consider intergenerational solidarity as a form of social capital which can be developed to support community development and sustainability, as well as strengthen social cohesion.

Harness complementary knowledge, ideas and agency

“All the trees that store water around here have been cut which is why we have a scarcity of water.”

Older participant, Nepal

An intergenerational approach can combine the complementary knowledge, ideas, agency and motivations of younger and older people to develop locally-driven solutions. During the dialogues younger people enjoyed listening to the older participants describe their past environment and share their knowledge of different farming practices, crops and wild plants that were more abundant in the past. Older people have invaluable knowledge of environmental shifts they have witnessed over many years, coupled with a lifetime of experience in responding to crises and societal changes. Older people appreciated the younger participants’ desire to work with them to find solutions to shared problems. They also recognised that young people can bring information and ideas through their connection to the online world.

In all contexts, both generations identified practical ways to address climate change impacts. The dialogues provided a space to explore a wealth of place-based knowledge and exchange of ideas, bringing a sense of hope for a more sustainable future for all ages.

For example, an older participant in the semi-urban area close to Kampala explained:

“In the past, people were less affected by floods because they employed good practices like afforestation and swamp preservation.”

Older participant, Uganda

A younger person in Karamoja, Uganda explained:

“During land clearing, we no longer burn, we gather the grass, and put in the middle of the garden and make it a mulch.”

Younger participant, Uganda

Support social cohesion

Carefully facilitated intergenerational dialogues are more than a means to an end; they have a value in their own right. These dialogues provided a valuable space for listening and reflection, nurturing respect and empathy between the generations and strengthening social cohesion. For communities living with the threat of climate change, social cohesion is more important than ever.

In northeastern Uganda, climate change has exacerbated intergenerational tensions. Some older people say young people are to blame for the climate challenges they are facing by not following traditions. Others believe the extreme pressures their communities face, as a result of food and water insecurity brought about by climate change, is leading to a breakdown in intergenerational relations.

“In the past, in the case of calamities like drought or animal and human diseases, elders performed specific rituals in designated places. But these rituals have since declined due to lack of trust and respect in the elders. ... This could explain why climate related havoc is on the rise.”

Older participant, Uganda

“Climate change has brought disunity, hunger and migrations to different places. People have become selfish and the youth have abandoned the elders.”

Older participant, Uganda

The intergenerational dialogue led to mutual understanding and appreciation between the generations. Lopeyok Francis Mosky, dialogue facilitator explains:

“It gave them a chance to reflect on their actions and not push the blame. Instead, they were able to listen to each other... and realise they could work together to solve those challenges.”

Dialogue facilitator, Uganda



What's next? Building intergenerational solidarity for climate action

From dialogue to action

Following the dialogues in Nepal and Uganda, all partner organisations were each provided with a small grant to support local climate actions.

In Nepal, the local partner will arrange a series of public intergenerational dialogues on climate change. These will promote the need for inclusive, locally-led climate action to be supported by local government and civil society.

In Uganda, local partners will provide fruit trees and organic manure to all younger and older people who participated in the dialogues. This is in response to participants' concerns relating to food security and the loss of tree cover.

Following the success and lessons of this pilot we are developing a multi-country programme to bring generations together for inclusive locally-led climate action and to promote an intergenerational approach from local action to national policy and international advocacy.

The new programme will encourage collaboration between young people and older generations to generate greater insights, innovation and impact in climate-affected communities. Stakeholder engagement, learning and communications will be core elements of the programme design aiming to generate support for the approach among state and non-state actors at local, national and international levels.

We are currently identifying donors who are interested in joining us to build intergenerational solidarity for climate action with communities on the frontline of the crisis.



Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the 101 younger and older people from Uganda and Nepal who shared their time, energy, knowledge and ideas in the series of dialogues. We also appreciate the contributions from all colleagues who participated in the Learning Event which informed this document.

The success of this pilot activity reflects the engagement and skills of three facilitators who were all local to the areas where the dialogues took place: Phillip Tandeka Mutebi (Kampala, Uganda), Lopeyok Francis Mosky (Karamoja, Uganda) and Ujjwal Upadhyay (Nepal). HelpAge and Restless Development colleagues in Uganda and Nepal worked with local partners and supported those facilitators. They are: Sangita Maharjan; Doreen Kihembo; Fred Wandera; and Lucy Nimusiima.

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In Uganda: Arthur Agaba Orikirza; Jocelyn Nakasujja; Regina Akankwasa; Elizabeth Nagawa; Grace Kalule; Derrick Sebadduka; Obin Gordon; Thomas Achilla; Lokoru John Robert; Muya James Jemo.

In Nepal: Gatha Shree Dahal; Trishna Bhandari; Anupama Angbo; Rupak Pandey; Ibrahim Dewan; Pawan Das.

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All photographs in this document are from the dialogue sessions in Nepal and Uganda (2023–2024). Photographs were taken by various staff members from Restless Development and HelpAge country offices, and staff from the partner organisations.

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Further reading

Bringing generations together for change → HelpAge International (2022)

Connecting generations: planning and implementing interventions for intergenerational contact → World Health Organization (2023)

A rising force for change: Older people and climate action → HelpAge International (2021)

Intergenerational solidarity and the climate emergency – an ongoing conversation → Living Delta Hub (2023)

Climate justice in an ageing world → HelpAge International (2023)

Living in the climate crisis: young people in Uganda → Restless Development (2021)

Listening to Experiences of Environmental Change in Rural Vietnam: An Intergenerational Approach → Progress in Development Studies (2023)

Endnotes

1. www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/youth/ → and *World Population Ageing: 2017 Highlights* →. These sources refer to 'developing countries' and 'least developed regions' – we have chosen to use 'low- and middle-income countries' in line with our editorial policy.

2. People with disabilities experience a similar level of risk, see: www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/07/leave-no-one-behind →

3. *We Want to Fight Climate Change With You, Not Against You* →, Unruh, C. Intergenerational Foundation (2019)

HelpAge International is a global network of more than 170 civil society and community organisations working with older people across 93 countries. We are united in listening to older people's voices and recognising their actions.

HelpAge International is committed to standing side-by-side with older people affected by and adapting to the reality of climate change, as well as those campaigning for climate action to create a safer future for all ages.

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