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NIRAS

LEARNING BRIEF:

Institutionalising Participatory Climate Justice through Community Management Committees in Zambia

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SUMMARY

This brief distils findings from a 2025 MSc dissertation by Alexandra Krautil, supported through the NIRAS MSc dissertation placement programme, examining how Community Management Committees (CMCs) under the Scottish Government Climate Just Communities (CJC) project in Zambia have contributed to the sustainability of community-led climate justice outcomes.

The study found that CMCs have effectively embedded themselves as locally trusted governance mechanisms in CJC communities through processes of institutional bricolage and participatory decision-making. These structures have enhanced community ownership, accountability, and climate literacy – factors central to the long-term sustainability of externally funded interventions. Key findings include the importance of designing committee-based governance that is contextually grounded, inclusive of local institutional realities, and capable of evolving beyond the funding cycle. For NIRAS, these findings offer practical pathways to deepen institutional sustainability, strengthen cross-scalar integration, and consolidate community empowerment during a follow-on Climate Justice Grant being delivered in the CJC target communities through March 2027.



Westone Jani, a CMC member and Satellite Committee Chairperson rides his bike to a compound in Mabinga Ward to conduct door-to-door sensitisation on early warning systems and disaster preparedness

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Climate Just Communities (CJC) programme was a flagship initiative under the Scottish Government's Climate Justice Fund, which promoted a people-centred, human-rights based approach to climate action. Running from 2023 to 2026, this £24 million programme supported communities in Scotland's partner countries, Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia, to achieve climate justice. CJC's approach to climate justice empowered marginalised communities to lead their own climate responses based on their local needs and priorities, in line with the three pillars of climate justice: procedural, distributive, and transformative justice. The programme supported community-led planning and action, inclusive participation, especially of women, youth, and people with disabilities, with the goal of achieving systemic change supporting the communities to thrive despite the changing climate.

In Zambia, CJC was delivered by NIRAS in partnership with the Council of Churches in Zambia, Green Living Movement in Zambia, Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia, Civil Society for Poverty Reduction, Centre for Environment Justice, Disability Rights Watch and CBM UK. The project was being implemented in four of Zambia's most climate-vulnerable districts: Sinazongwe, Luangwa, Sioma, and Shangombo. This research focuses on findings from Sinazongwe District, where the project was delivered by the Green Living Movement in Zambia.

Though the CJC project in Zambia ended in March 2026, the Scottish Government is providing additional support to CJC communities for an additional year, through March 2027, through a £2.5 million Climate Justice Grant, also led by NIRAS, providing an opportunity to put the learnings of this research into practice.

Community members meet to review their Climate Justice Plan in Sinazongwe District



COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES: PUTTING COMMUNITIES AT THE HEART OF CLIMATE JUSTICE DECISION MAKING

CJC Zambia formed Community Management Committees (CMCs) to foster strong community participation and ownership of the project. These ward-level committees, composed of traditional leaders, men, women, youth, people with disabilities and representatives of key local institutions, have led the project's climate justice planning from the start, turning community priorities into tangible interventions, and overseeing the delivery of project activities. By ensuring all segments of the community are represented, the CMCs have promoted inclusivity and equitable decision-making. They have acted as local champions for climate change issues,

selected participants for interventions, and engaged with local governments to coordinate delivery. The CMCs also have oversight of intervention-focused committees (for example, on disaster risk reduction and natural resource management), ensuring that activities align with the community's climate justice plans and that monitoring feedback is provided to the project implementers. The CMCs and local government have agreed that the CMCs will continue to operate at ward level after the project ends, maintaining their focus on climate justice, and reporting to the Ward Development Committees (WDCs), a government mandated body.



CMC member and Satellite Committee Chairperson, Westone Jani, engages a household in Mabinga Ward during door-to-door sensitisation on disaster risk reduction (DRR).

METHODS

The dissertation study employed a qualitative research approach, centered around 13 semi-structured field interviews completed in June 2025 across two wards in Sinazongwe District, supported by contextual immersion and document analysis. Conversations were held with CMC members, other committee members involved in the project, local government members and District governance. Through this approach, the study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions and lived experiences regarding the CJC project's efforts to foster sustainable climate resilience and systems change in Sinazongwe.

The study focused on the below overarching research question:

How do committees shape the institutionalisation and contribute to the sustained delivery of externally funded climate justice projects within local communities in Sub-Saharan Africa?

To address this question, the dissertation explored three key CJC project-focused research questions:

1. What interventions, focused on long-term infrastructure resilience, have the CJC project and its CMCs prioritised?
2. How, and across what timescales, has the CMC structure enabled a sense of climate justice to emerge within local communities?
3. How have the project CMCs integrated with and influenced existing local government structures, and how are these combined structures positioned to drive the ongoing delivery of climate resilience and justice outcomes?

KEY FINDINGS

1. Community Management Committees as Durable Local Institutions

CMC structures have become embedded within Sinazongwe's governance fabric. Their legitimacy stems from:

- Representation from across the local community, including traditionally marginalised groups (women, youth, and people with disabilities).
- Prioritising relationship building with customary authority and Ward Development Committees (WDCs).
- Filling gaps in local leadership and governance on climate justice – including capacity-building with communities on climate literacy and supporting the use of participatory planning to generate and deliver Climate Justice Plans genuinely reflective of community priorities.
- Successfully delivering locally led implementation, with increasing community ownership and reduced project support over time (e.g. CMCs developing their own financing mechanisms).

"We want the CMC to continue. It helps with communication of inclusivity and outcomes, and it helps spread accountability with the limited resources we have."
Chiyabi Ward WDC member

2. Climate Literacy and Agency Drive Behaviour Change

Through committee-led dialogues, communities developed practical climate literacy – connecting local impacts (e.g., drought) with adaptive responses. This translated into improved water and agricultural management, reinforcing a shared sense of climate justice and self-determination.



CMC members meet in Sinazongwe to review project progress, share lessons learned, and plan next steps.

“The government can’t touch everything. CJC’s advocacy work has taught people how to approach issues. They can fight for their own rights, as they know which office to go to, and the procedure to raise issues and solve problems,”

Mweezya Ward WDC member

3. Locally Owned Infrastructure Management Enhances Sustainability

The CMCs have supported effective delivery of project interventions and community governance of local infrastructure, such as water points. In coordination with the CMCs, rehabilitated boreholes and community-managed pay-to-use water systems, managed by dedicated Water Point Committees, have demonstrated strong maintenance capacity and reduced donor

dependency. Water Point Committee training in financial and technical management (e.g. pump repair) proved critical to asset longevity.

Through a case-study of boreholes rehabilitated by the project, the study found six key delivery principles, facilitated through CMC structures, which have contributed to mitigating common financial, technical and institutional barriers to sustainable rural water delivery within Sub-Saharan Africa.

“The community is ready to take care of things. We have had many years of past struggling. To be given a facility like a borehole or irrigation system, people understand the importance and see this as a chance.”

Chiyabi Ward Advocacy Champion



Figure 1 - Six key principles identified within the CJC project contributing to embedding sustainable practices directly within the community and local governance structures (Researcher-produced)

4. Institutional Integration is Achievable but Requires Deliberate Facilitation

While initial friction existed between CMCs and WDCs, joint training and communication channels fostered cooperative governance. CMCs now serve as coordination bridges linking local government, customary leadership, and thematic community committees (e.g., WASH, DRR).

Participants across community members, local government and various committees described themselves as working together “under the CMC umbrella” with CMCs “complement” the department and enable[ing] stronger service provision” (Mweezya Ward WDC).

5. Risks to Committee Sustainability

Despite their success, challenges to the long-term sustainability of the CMCs remain, including their reliance on voluntary commitment, persistent logistical limitations and alignment with specific local government figures increasing structure vulnerability if leadership transitions, as well as the uncertainty of their financial sustainability. Consideration of these areas, including developing ongoing sources of financing for CMC operations, in recognition of the value and efficacy of CMC structures, could deliver a more just and sustainable approach and stronger outcomes should they become further formalised.

6. The CMC Model is Scalable with Safeguards

The model shows strong potential for replication across rural Zambia and similar contexts, provided issues of role clarity and long-term financing are systematically addressed, and safeguards are put in place to avoid common pitfalls of such models in the long-term such as elite capture.

A CMC Secretary inspects a CJC-supported borehole in Watembo Ward as part of routine community monitoring and maintenance.



POLICY INSIGHTS FOR CJC

1. Committeeification as a Strategic Governance Tool

The CMC approach exemplifies how formalised community structures can serve as durable vehicles for participatory governance. However, the form of committees matters as much as their *function*; sustained legitimacy depends on local adaptation rather than blueprint replication.

2. Invest in Institutional Bricolage

Projects should intentionally leverage existing networks and informal norms, rather than replacing them. Embedding committees in pre-existing governance ecosystems increases resilience once donor engagement ends.

3. Centre Climate Literacy as a Transformative Outcome

Capacity-building should extend beyond technical skills to include social learning – linking environmental awareness with civic empowerment. This fosters long-term adaptive capacity beyond project timelines.

4. Plan for Post-Project Institutional Life

Sustainability planning should prioritise transition mechanisms, including local funding streams, clear committee mandates, and integration into district development plans.

Recommendations for the Climate Justice Grant project:

- 1. Consider formalising CMC roles within district governance** (i.e. the WDCs) through Memoranda of Understanding or similar, to ensure continuity beyond donor cycles in line with community expectations.
- 2. Develop a CMC sustainability toolkit** to guide local partners on institutional integration, financial planning, and inclusive representation, including supporting income-generating activities managed by CMCs or the development of local funds with matched contributions from government and/or donors to drive sustainability. This could include approaches to reduce voluntary reliance and instead compensate members, acknowledging the value and effectiveness of their work.
- 3. Embed reflexive learning loops** to ensure regular participatory reviews that assess committee performance, social equity, and institutional partnerships if they are to continue.
- 4. Strengthen horizontal linkages** between committees across wards to enable peer learning and cross-community advocacy.
- 5. Document and disseminate best practices** to influence broader climate justice programming in Sub-Saharan Africa.



CONCLUSION

The CMC model has demonstrated strong potential for locally rooted, just, and sustainable climate action. For NIRAS, the next step is to consolidate these learnings into institutional practice – taking on board feedback from community that the CMC structures have a core role and will continue beyond the project, they should be supported to effectively position committees not as temporary project mechanisms, but as lasting pillars of adaptive, community-led governance.

Mr. Siwelwa presents a bicycle to a CMC member in Chiyabi Ward to support community outreach and project implementation.