

Dealing with climate change and local beliefs in Africa

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Experts should take note of local knowledge and beliefs when making plans about how to help people in vulnerable regions cope with the impacts of climate change. This will ensure that such interventions are money well spent, and are not culturally insensitive, advises Conor Murphy of Ireland's Maynooth University. Together with an interdisciplinary research team from universities in Malawi, Zambia and Ireland he interviewed community members in rural Malawi and Zambia to assess how well they are able to adapt to the way they produce food within the context of shifting belief systems and climate change. The findings are published in Springer's journal *Climatic Change*.

On a global scale, vulnerability to climate change tends to be greatest in parts of the world where religion is most important in daily life. In a vulnerable area such as sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, Christians have increased 70-fold and Muslims 20-fold over the past century. Traditional beliefs and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) rooted within an ancestral spirit-world however continue to influence the day-to-day lives especially of [rural communities](#). Religious beliefs are an important element of culture, but are not always static.

Such shifting belief systems influence how people respond and adapt to important issues such as the challenges relating to [climate change](#). The research team interviewed members of two rural communities in Africa: Bolero in Malawi and Monze in Zambia. Christianity and traditional beliefs co-exist within these communities. The researchers assessed how holding multiple belief systems influences the ability of these

communities to produce food and adapt to the impact of changing climates.

In Bolero, a smooth co-existence and integration was observed between traditional and Christian beliefs and practices. Faith-based organizations have helped [community members](#) to better understand what causes climate variability in their area. Previously, this was associated with punishment from ancestral spirits.

In Monze, by contrast, tensions were experienced when livelihood decisions were made based on the practice of rain rituals. Traditional practices and worshipping of ancestral spirits were seen as evil by Christian religions. Elders blamed recent failures of rainfall on a lack of adherence to traditional beliefs by younger generations. In both communities, elders were concerned that changing [beliefs](#) are affecting the way people use traditional ecological knowledge management practices.

"Culture, when approached through the lens of [religious beliefs](#) and practices, plays an important role in adaptive capacity, but is not static," reminds Prof. Olusegun Yerokun of Mulungushi University, co-author of the paper. "The manner by which communities holding multiple belief systems are able to adapt is largely determined by the manner in which belief systems co-exist, and how different knowledge forms are valued, accepted and integrated."

"As climate services become the focus of research and government interventions in vulnerable regions, avoiding culturally and economically expensive mal-adaptation will require giving attention to the complexity and dynamism of such changing religious landscapes," Murphy advises.

More information: Murphy, C. et al (2015). Adapting to climate change in shifting landscapes of belief, *Climatic Change*. [DOI:](#)

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