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Universities and Climate Change Research Initiatives in the Horn of Africa

Tirsit Yetbarek

Abstract

This brief essay examines the several university-level climate change research projects in the Horn of Africa, with a particular emphasis on Ethiopia, Somaliland, and Kenya. The essay finds that, institutions in the area are incorporating modular programs mostly in departments like Environmental Studies, Disaster Risk Management, Agricultural Science and Technology, and the Faculty of Ecology and Wildlife Conservation in order to fulfill their required function. It makes the case that a concerted effort led by academic institutions and research centers in the Global South is required in light of the devastating loss of natural and human resources that the globe is currently suffering, which has a major influence on emerging nations.

Keywords: Climate change, research, academic, Horn of Africa.

Introduction

Climate variability and change highly impact economies and livelihoods in the Horn, as most of the population depends on the total seasonal rainfall and its distribution in both temporal and spatial domains. The primary source of livelihood for the population in the arid and semi-arid regions includes pastoralism and rainfed agriculture, with approximately 70% of the population in the area depending on rainfed agriculture¹. According to the State of Climate, Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa report by IGAD (2022), climate change impacts will challenge the prominence of indigenous, local, and traditional knowledge and call for such knowledge to be addressed in policy and research with mutual recognition and integration with

¹<https://www.icpac.net/publications/report-on-state-of-climate-peace-and-security-in-the-horn-of-africa>

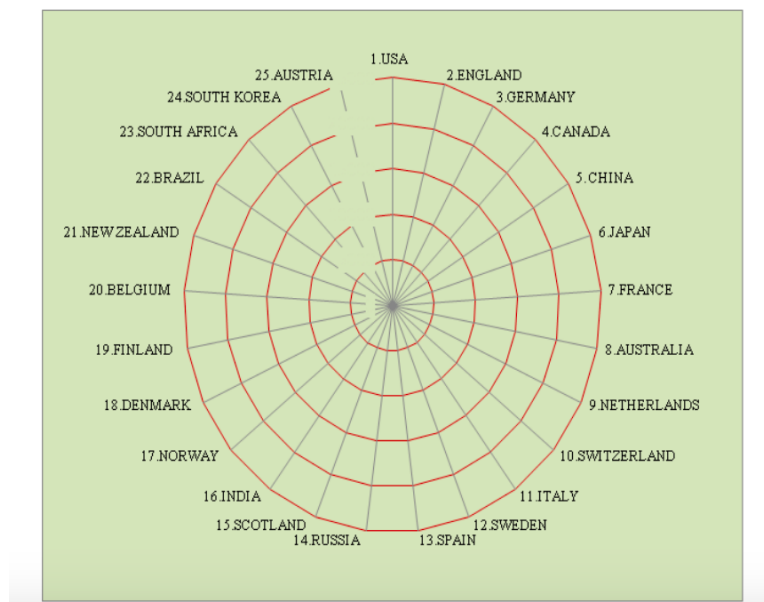
scientific knowledge to increase the effectiveness of adaptation.

For this integration, institutions of higher education, mainly universities, are expected to contribute immensely by feeding the global and regional agendas to achieve sustainable development goals in line with climate change patterns. To do this, Universities are uniquely placed to bridge links between different sectors by fostering cross-cutting approaches, especially the university-industrial links. In Africa, South Africa and Egypt are leading initiatives through their universities that are studying environmental and climate change issues. As for the Horn of Africa, Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia is considered leading, even though it stands in the 800s in the global ranking². Even if it is not as its department, Climate Change has become part of the academic portfolio of leading universities and research institutions through research, community engagement, and teaching. The status of these regional universities to truly live up to this expectation is a topic for another day. Yet, still, it is essential to acknowledge that they are at a point where the environment and climate change's unpredictability and its impact, causing human suffering, is forcing them to pay attention, not disregarding some who engage in it just following the global wave rather than an inherent understanding of its contextual relevance.

Ecological and livelihood diversity and climate change nexus in the broader context of Africa, including the Horn of Africa, demands an intentional look into its background to shape climate change mitigation, adaptation, and management. Identifying and assessing communities' vulnerability to the effects of climate change through appropriate locally driven methodology and tools is critical for developing effective adaptation and mitigation strategies. Understanding the unique circumstances of different communities, including their social, economic, and environmental conditions, can help target resources and efforts more effectively. In addition, identifying biodiversity vulnerability can enable prioritization of further

²<https://edurank.org/environmental-science/af/>

action to prevent species that regulate and balance the ecosystem from becoming extinct. As some communities are more vulnerable than others, vulnerability identification and assessment need to be localized, especially for those living in hazard-prone areas such as the Horn of Africa.



(Source: Zulhaimi et al. (2023))

The global research ecosystem has seen an increase in publications on Climate Change, even though the dominant coverage and knowledge production is in the Global North. Research by Zulhaimi et al. (2023) stated that the earliest available publication on vulnerability to climate change was produced in 1985. It also indicated that the most productive year was 2021, with 181 articles produced.³ Since 1985, a total of 77,898 publications have been published. While the overall result includes all six types of literature sources, the contribution

³ Zulhaimi, N.A.; Pereira, J.J.; Muhamad, N. Global Research Landscape of Climate Change, Vulnerability, and Islands. *Sustainability* 2023, 15(17), 13064;

of journals was the most frequently used source type, comprising 84% of the total published sources, followed by conference proceedings and others. South Africa is the leading country on the continent in climate change research, standing 24th on the global scale.⁴

To play their role, universities in the region are incorporating modular programs mainly in the departments such as Agricultural Sciences and Technology, School of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, Disasters Risk Management, Pastoralism and Environmental Studies. Apart from teaching degree programs, some academics collaborate internally and with external stakeholders towards research activities and community programs, contributing to climate change science, adaptation, mitigation, and resilience in Africa. Among these growing collaborative initiatives are small-scale grants for fellowship, fieldwork grant support, and partner research project development. Programs such as the Open Society University Network fellowship, the British Institute in Eastern Africa Research workshops, grant and publication schema, Rift Valley Institute Community of Practice fellowship program, The Redsea Cultural Foundation Academic writing and oral history research methods for climate change workshops, the Local Histories of Climate Change in the Horn of Africa project of Pennsylvania University, the Hargeysa University Biodiversity Institute, the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies at Hargeysa University and The University College London Fellowship project with the Hargeysa Cultural Centre are among the few that are prominent in the regional context which is creating opportunity for research and capacity building collaboration regarding climate change.

At the heart of these universities and research institutions'

⁴ Samuel-Soma M. Ajibade, Abdelhamid Zaidi, Festus Victor Bekun, Anthonia Oluwatosin Adediran, Mbiatke Anthony Bassey, A research landscape bibliometric analysis on climate change for last decades: Evidence from applications of machine learning, *Heliyon*, Volume 9, Issue 10, 2023, e20297, ISSN 2405-8440, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e20297>

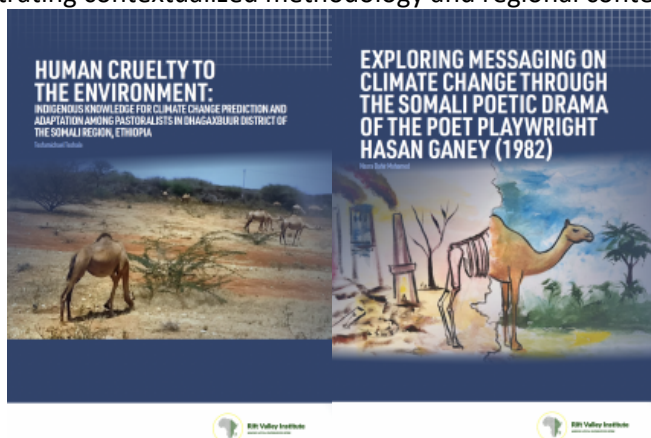
collaboration is the essence of context-based methodology and content development by local, especially young emerging scholars, targeted programs. For instance, the Research Communities of Practice Project (RCoP)⁵, run by the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) aims to bridge the gap between scholarly research and tangible impact in the real world. The RCoP is a value-driven project built around a community of practitioners and academics interested in enhancing the region's capacity and voices of early career researchers. Through a partnership with the Open Society University Network- Hub for connected Learning initiatives, the project has expanded to include refugees in the Kakuma refugee camp. The program focused on Climate Change for its second cohort and had nine researchers who covered issues that were given less focus in the context of climate change. This includes the research titled *"Cyclone Sagar and Its Impact On Livelihoods In North-Western Somaliland"* by Moustafa Ahmed⁶, which is a clear impact of climate change in a place mainly known for drought. Another interesting one looks at the orality of Somali Society and brings the role of poetic theatre for message construction, which is instrumental in methods and tools central to the community. It is titled *"Exploring Messaging on Climate Change Through the Somali Poetic Drama of the Poet Playwright Hasan Ganey (1982)"* by Nasra Dahir (2024)⁷; the research titled *"Indigenous Knowledge For Climate Change Prediction And Adaptation Among Pastoralists In Dhagaxbuur District Of The Somali Region, Ethiopia."* by Tesfamichael Teshale a Lecturer at Jigjiga University, Ethiopia, also spoke to the needed nexus between indigenous and 'scientific knowledge'. The other researchers also bring a very local approach, voiced by emerging researchers. These studies brought crucial research aspects,

⁵<https://riftvalley.net/projects/all-regions/research-communities-of-practice/>

⁶ see pages 117-142 of this issue.

⁷ see pages 61-86 of this issue.

illustrating contextualized methodology and regional content.



To most of the research realities in the region, the instruments for data collection, the frameworks for the analysis, and the research area focus have been driven by the funding institutions, depriving the ownership and leadership of priority decisions. As I stated before, seeing initiatives led by a partnership highlighting the Global South-case scenario and research leadership is encouraging. Capitalizing on oral history research methods as a tool for documenting and collecting accurate accounts of the community inherent to those in Eastern Africa is a move in the right direction. Starting in 2021, when the first Osun Research HUB in Eastern Africa Fellowship for Oral History Research Methods program was launched by the Open Society University Network, where I was part of the fellowship, the method was given prominence. It assists in telling realities in a nuanced manner by bringing forgotten and side-lined voices. Afterward, it is appropriated for the climate change research new perspective. RCF organized a research methods workshop in 2023 for 28 emerging researchers from the Horn of Africa titled *“Documenting the Everyday: Oral History Research Methods for Climate Change”*. The workshop was organized in collaboration with RVI and featured scholarly contributions from the Local Histories of Climate Change in The Horn of Africa

project, led by Prof. Lee Cassanelli. The plan is to capitalize on such locally appropriate methods of development and utilization to ascertain the universities and research institutions are trustworthy platforms to maintain and develop indigenous knowledge, integrating it with the globally relevant initiatives.



Participants and facilitators of the Oral History Research Method for Climate Change after receiving their certificate of completion at Hargeysa Cultural Centre, (2023).

Another research initiative in Somaliland is a collaborative work called *Pastoralist Climate Change Resilience in Somaliland* (PACCS) (2022-2027), funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, which is believed to generate cutting-edge theoretical and policy knowledge on local climate change resilience in Somaliland. It will focus on pastoralism's critical but overlooked livelihood system. The project takes a cross-sectoral approach and accounts for pastoralist climate resilience strategies across markets, land management, and governance. The program is based at the University of Southern Denmark. It involves the Social Research and Development Institute (SORADI), the University of Hargeisa, the University of Nairobi, and the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS). The first work from the research is expected to be made public soon. Universities organize workshops, seminars, and conferences on

climate change to collect data, validate strategies, and disseminate research works.

While these are encouraging initiatives and attempts by universities and research institutes to own their social responsibility and mandate, the need for research-based data is still critical, as it is at an infant level for coverage. The crucial issue of research funding plays a significant role in the limited outputs the regional universities are producing; nevertheless, strategically set resource development and allocation by the government and setting social responsibility development mechanisms for the private sector engagement should be given prominence. While global funding and collaboration are needed with the issue's unprecedented impact on the local community, the burden shall be more on the local initiative. That is why appreciating the initiatives on the regional scale that have made their mission geared towards the local researchers, capacity building, and resource support is essential and one that responsible and interested parties should adopt for genuine community service. This also includes working on quality university development rather than an oriented approach that is happening now across the region. The answer to the catastrophic human and natural resources loss we are experiencing globally, which has a high impact on developing nations, needs a coordinated effort through the leadership of universities and research institutions.

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