SOCIAL CHANGE ASSISTANCE TRUST

RURAL ACTION FOR CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Rural Action for Climate Resilience (RACR): Strengthening Local Capacity for Climate Action

Across South Africa's rural areas, the effects of climate change are increasingly visible, with longer droughts, erratic rainfall, flooding, and deteriorating infrastructure. These environmental shifts intersect with existing weaknesses in service delivery, leaving rural communities facing recurring water shortages, waste accumulation, power cuts, and food insecurity.

The Rural Action for Climate Resilience (RACR) project supports community-based organisations (CBOs) that are working directly with rural communities to understand and address these challenges. Coordinated by the Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT) in partnership with the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI), RACR currently supports more than 35 CBOs across the Eastern Cape, Western Cape, Northern Cape, Free State and Limpopo.

The project emerged in recognition that rural communities are already facing the brunt of climate impacts despite contributing least to the crisis. By supporting organisations rooted in these communities, RACR strengthens local agency and ensures that adaptation efforts are context-driven rather than externally imposed. The project's overall aim is to help local organisations link community-level adaptation with advocacy for climate-responsive governance and equitable access to resources.

Project Strategy

RACR combines grant support, training, and advocacy to enable CBOs to lead community-centred climate change interventions.

Grant Support

Project grants and micro grants enable CBOs to implement locally relevant climate initiatives such as food gardens, tree planting, waste management, and water harvesting. The grants are designed to be manageable and responsive to community priorities.

Training and Mentorship

Through technical partners such as Ukuvuna Urban Farming, organisations receive hands-on training in permaculture, soil conservation, and water management. Follow-up mentoring ensures that CBOs can apply this knowledge and share it within their communities.

Learning and Exchange

The RACR Learning Festivals, held annually, bring together representatives from all participating CBOs to exchange learning, discuss challenges, and strengthen advocacy skills.

The sessions integrate practical adaptation learning with discussions on gender, governance, and service delivery.

Connecting Local Practice and Policy

RACR's model links the micro-level of practical adaptation, such as food production and water harvesting, with the macro-level of policy advocacy and budget engagement. In doing so, it builds a bridge between lived community experience and formal climate governance.

Advocacy and Policy Engagement

RACR provides training and coordination support for CBOs to participate in local government and national policy processes, including Integrated Development Plan (IDP) consultations, public hearings, and formal submissions, ensuring that rural experiences inform broader decision-making.

Linking Climate Action to Governance

For many rural organisations, climate change is experienced through the breakdown of essential services. Failing water systems, irregular waste collection, and unstable electricity supply all exacerbate vulnerability to extreme weather events. Through RACR, CBOs are learning to connect these issues, understanding how local governance and climate adaptation are inseparable.

In 2025, RACR supported two collective advocacy processes that elevated rural voices in national policy.

Review of the White Paper on Local Government

Developed with input from 33 CBOs, the submission emphasised that climate adaptation must be built into everyday municipal planning and budgeting. It also called for improved civic participation and collaboration between local government and rural communities to strengthen resilience.

South Africa's Draft 2nd Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC)

Involving 36 CBOs and faith leaders, this submission called for stronger adaptation measures, transparent climate financing, and recognition of rural communities already working to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

These processes gave rural organisations the opportunity to apply their local experience to national climate policy and to better understand how decisions at higher levels affect resilience at the ground level.

Examples from the Field

Blood River Advice Office, Limpopo
In the Capricorn District, the Blood River Advice Office expanded its work to address worsening drought and water shortages. When the local reservoir collapsed and boreholes were left incomplete, the organisation used RACR support to establish a climate-resilient garden on land once used for dumping. The site includes a ferro-cement reservoir, a borehole and a rainwater harvesting system that sustains vegetable production during dry seasons. Over 100 women have been trained in permaculture, strengthening food security and income in households severely affected by climate extremes.

Mount Frere Paralegal Advice Centre, Eastern Cape
In Mount Frere, fieldworker Yamkela Rasmeni and his organisation integrated climate awareness into their social justice work. Through RACR funding, the centre promoted climate-resilient gardening, recycling, and composting while linking climate change to health and livelihoods. “We are now more climate-conscious,” Yamkela said. “We realise that recycling and gardening help preserve the soil and reduce emissions.” The organisation also advocates for improved waste and water services, recognising that poor municipal systems increase the community’s exposure to climate risks.

Kgatelopele Social Development Forum (KSDF), Northern Cape
After participating in a RACR Learning Festival earlier this year, KSDF in Danielskuil identified illegal dumping as a climate and health risk. Using advocacy tools learned through the project, they engaged the Ward Councillor and Mayor. Within days, the municipality cleared waste sites and introduced designated trenches for monthly collection. The initiative demonstrated how local advocacy can help reduce hazards that contribute to environmental degradation and urban heat in small towns.

Sandveld Local Development Agency (SALDA), Western Cape
In Graafwater, the Sandveld Local Development Agency raised concerns about frequent power outages during an IDP consultation. The problem was soon addressed through municipal infrastructure upgrades, stabilising supply and protecting local livelihoods. This experience highlighted how participation in governance processes can help rural communities adapt to the secondary impacts of climate change, such as energy disruptions that affect small-scale farming and refrigeration of food.

Building Confidence and Collective Learning

Climate change and poor service delivery are interlinked in many rural contexts. Droughts expose weak water systems, floods overwhelm neglected drainage, and rising temperatures worsen waste and sanitation problems. Through RACR’s training and peer exchange, CBOs

have begun to connect these realities, recognising that strengthening resilience requires both local adaptation and improved governance.

Since the May 2025 Learning Festival, several organisations have acted on this learning by engaging their municipalities.

- Six CBOs have submitted formal letters on water, waste, or energy access
- Nine have prepared letters or petitions awaiting response.
- Six have held direct meetings with officials to raise climate-related service concerns.

While outcomes differ, these efforts mark a significant shift. CBOs now approach climate change not only as an environmental issue but as a development challenge that affects every aspect of rural life, including food, health, income, and participation. The Learning Festivals have also fostered peer-to-peer mentoring, where organisations share practical ways to adapt to erratic weather and advocate for better municipal support.

Conclusion

The RACR project strengthens the capacity of local organisations that support rural communities most affected by climate change. By combining practical adaptation measures with advocacy and learning, RACR enables CBOs to connect the realities of drought, water insecurity, and energy instability to broader systems of governance and policy.

The experiences of Blood River, Mount Frere, KSDF, and SALDA show that even modest, community-led initiatives can improve food security, protect natural resources, and promote constructive engagement between citizens and local government. Through its partnerships across five provinces, RACR has also fostered a growing network of rural organisations that continue to share knowledge, coordinate advocacy, and demonstrate the potential of community-led adaptation at scale.

While progress varies between communities, each organisation's experience contributes to a collective understanding of what effective, locally driven climate resilience looks like in practice. Intergenerational learning is also emerging as a strength of the project, with youth bringing energy, creativity, and innovation to local adaptation efforts.

As climate impacts deepen across South Africa, the persistence and initiative of these organisations show that rural resilience depends not only on technology or funding, but on people who understand their environment and are determined to adapt within it.