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Why Climate Resilience in the Eastern Cape Depends on Putting Communities First

In the Eastern Cape, climate change does not announce itself through headlines or conferences. It arrives through dry taps in rural villages, roads washed away by floods, crops that fail without warning, and hours spent collecting water instead of earning a living. It arrives quietly—and then all at once.

This is one of South Africa's most climate-exposed provinces, shaped by deep historical inequality and chronic underinvestment. Former homeland areas still carry the burden of neglect. Municipalities struggle to maintain basic infrastructure. Climate shocks do not create these conditions—they magnify them.

And yet, while the Eastern Cape absorbs some of the harshest climate impacts, climate finance continues to flow elsewhere—centralised at national level, designed for large infrastructure projects, and channelled through complex intermediaries that communities and municipalities cannot easily access.

South Africa is receiving billions in climate finance from international funds, development banks, and the Just Energy Transition Partnership. On paper, these resources are meant to support adaptation, resilience, and a just transition. In practice, their local impact in the Eastern Cape is limited.

Despite this, communities are already adapting. Small-scale farmers practise agroecology to cope with drought. Women-led cooperatives manage seed banks and food systems. Villages experiment with rainwater harvesting, communal gardens, and informal renewable energy solutions.

These initiatives succeed because they are rooted in place. They understand local risk, local trade-offs, and local priorities. What they lack is not knowledge or commitment—it is sustained, flexible funding.

Eastern Cape municipalities sit closest to communities, yet furthest from climate finance. With the right support, they could become bridges—channeling funds to

community-led projects and aligning infrastructure spending with long-term resilience. Instead, they are often left to implement externally designed programmes.

The province is central to South Africa's renewable energy future, yet many projects remain extractive in nature. A just transition in the Eastern Cape would prioritise community ownership, local skills, and affordable access.

If climate finance continues to bypass communities, resilience will remain fragile and uneven. But if money is allowed to meet communities where resilience is already taking root, the Eastern Cape could chart a different path.

Here, following the money is not just a financial exercise. It is a political choice—about trust, power, and whose futures matter.