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Children on one of southern Africa's mightiest rivers are playing the Limpopo board game, literally for their lives. Piloted in places like Zimbabwe's Matabeleland and Mozambique's Gaza Province, it uses the power of play to teach ways of reducing vulnerability to flooding.

If a counter lands on a space showing a well designed flood-proof village – or one advising children to move themselves and livestock to higher ground – it moves forward several spaces. But if it alights on one depicting a decimated forest, land degradation, or other factors increasing vulnerability, it must go back six.

The game – part of a larger project, funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), launched after the devastating Limpopo floods six years ago – underlines in a simple but poignant way the challenges developing countries face as they try to adapt to the extreme weather events linked to climate change.

Clean development

In industrialized countries, progress is starting to be made in reducing emissions of greenhouse gases as a result of the Kyoto Protocol and through its flexible mechanisms. The Protocol links to the developing world; for example through the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) which allows developed countries to offset



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emissions (for example through forestry and renewable energy projects in developing countries) and has burst into life.

By 2012, certified emission reductions achieved through the CDM are expected to reach at least 1.2 billion tonnes, more than the combined emissions of Spain and the United Kingdom.

The industrialized countries as a group are still on track to meet their Kyoto commitments, provided they make a more extensive effort domestically, and make active use of the market mechanisms of the Kyoto Protocol. It is clear, however, that in the long run deeper emission cuts will be required.

But past pollution from industrialised countries has already guaranteed us some climate change: carbon dioxide, after all, can persist in the atmosphere for up to 200 years. So the global community must help developing countries adapt.

Climate proofing

Least Developed Countries have – or are preparing – National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Take Malawi, where almost every facet of life will need some measure of 'climate proofing'. Droughts and floods have increased in intensity, frequency and magnitude over the past few decades.

Floods destroyed fish ponds

six years ago, while a drought in the mid 1990s triggered a total loss of fish stocks in Lake Chilwa. Malawi's NAPA calls for restocking, assistance in fish breeding, and better understanding of how temperatures disrupt the reproduction of key species.

It also calls for reforestation of the catchment of the Shire River which produces most of the country's electricity. Deforestation and unsustainable agricultural practices has led to the siltation of dams.

Samoa's NAPA calls for assistance to move infrastructure and communities to higher ground, for measures to strengthen buildings against increased cyclones, and for restoring community springs. It says that boosting the health of habitats and ecosystems will provide vital buffers against climate change.

Funding for adaptation is starting to accumulate as a result of investments in the CDM and voluntary pledges to a special fund established to finance the implementation of NAPA activities. However, these resources must be augmented if they are to have measurable results in the poorest countries of the world.

Emission reductions

It is becoming clear that all investments in developing countries, both public and private, must factor in climate change if they are to be viable. But this cannot be an alibi for inaction on emission reductions.

Scientists estimate that a 60 to 80 per cent cut in greenhouse gases will be needed to stabilize the atmosphere. We must keep our sights set firmly on this target. Otherwise everyone, rich and poor alike, will have more and more pressure to adapt and fewer places to adapt to and from. They will end up playing their own versions of the Limpopo River game – and, like the children on its banks, playing for their very lives ■