



Importance of justice, fairness, and equity in effective adaptation

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Overview

With many countries and communities already feeling the impacts of climate change on lives and livelihoods on the back of the global increase in average temperatures to now 1.2°C above pre-industrial temperatures as per the [IPCC 6th Assessment Report](#), there is an increasing focus globally on the need to adapt, as a part of a wider resilience agenda. The impacts of climate change are likely to be felt most in countries and communities with the least resources to adapt, in particular in the developing world. There is also an increasing focus on the need to consider equity and fairness in adaptation efforts, as current evidence shows that justice is often not considered.^{1,2} Further, there is growing evidence that considering justice in adaptation can help avoid maladaptation.³

The purpose of this note is to develop guiding principles on how to include justice in adaptation efforts, and to explore whether this leads to more sustainable adaptation efforts. Further, the note provides practical examples and case studies that show how to implement these principles across international, national, regional, and local planning. Climate Councils cut across the scientific and policy space, and it is important to note that the idea of a just adaptation is in its early phases in both of these spaces.

As a relatively new concept, there are many different aspects that could be included in a definition of a 'Just Adaptation'. Below is one possible definition, based on conversations with Climate Councils and existing policy documents:^{4,5,6}

Just Adaptation can be considered as the concept of ensuring equitable distribution of resources, capacities, and capabilities across society to help communities effectively adapt to climate change, and equitably share the benefits and costs of adaptation. In a way that considers the specific contexts of different communities and seeks to alleviate existing inequalities

and restore damages, and those who are most vulnerable and exposed should receive the most help.

To effectively assess climate risks and advise on how to respond to such risks, Climate Councils should include considerations of justice in climate change adaptation policy and planning. The risks of not doing so include wasted time and resources on ineffective adaptation, or worse, maladaptation, which puts lives, communities, economic growth, and stability at greater risk.

Guiding Principles

The ICCN Adaptation Working Group has collated some common guiding principles for including considerations of justice in adaptation efforts. The four principles are drawn from discussions with members of the ICCN adaptation working group, and advice by Climate Councils in South Africa, Sweden, The Philippines, Guatemala, Mexico, Ireland, Finland and the UK.^{4,5,6}

1) Consider past and current disadvantages in society, as well as the needs of future generations

Consider how historical damages and existing social structures might affect climate mitigation and adaptation efforts and ensure cross-cutting integration of issues such as indigenous people, disabilities, gender equality and human rights, with climate adaptation.

It is also key to understand who bears the costs and who benefits from an adaptation response, both with regards to different groups in society as well as between past and future generations. The cost or benefit of an adaptation action, or the cost of inaction, can end up with future generations.



Examples

In **Guatemala**, there is a legal requirement to take into account capacity/capabilities of communities when planning adaptation, and produced a framework that specifically examines the rights and needs of Indigenous communities by producing a 'Indigenous Strategic Climate Agenda' and a gender agenda.

In **Sweden**, the Swedish Expert Council on Climate Adaptation, in its first [report](#)⁷ to the Government, recommend that aspects of just adaptation needs to be considered and integrated in all steps of the climate adaptation process. The Expert Council also recommends four prioritised actions for just adaptation, including ensuring cross-cutting integration of issues such as indigenous people; gender equality; human rights; and climate adaptation. The recommendations aim to ensure that these considerations will be considered whenever there are discussions of adaptation policy.

In the **Philippines**, the Climate Change Commission instituted the Peoples Survival Fund, which gets an annual appropriation of 1 billion pesos from the government to support climate adaptation initiatives of local government units (LGUs), in partnership with civil society organizations (CSOs), community-based organizations and the private sector.

2) Account for the potentially unequal distribution of climate impacts and adaptation resources, as well as the transnational impacts of adaptation efforts

Consider how the burdens and impacts of climate change and adaptation actions are distributed across society and respond accordingly. For example, understanding the impacts of climate change on different communities and social groups (including immigrants) alongside their respective vulnerabilities and their capacity to adapt, can help design adaptation interventions that give those who are most in need the right assistance, making adaptation efforts more efficient and effective. For example, considering the impacts of climate change on informal settlements.

Similarly, adaptation interventions should consider the impact on the whole system, including the ecological and biological systems that might help communities adapt naturally, and whether climate impacts are being displaced to other places

or communities (maladaptation).

In an interconnected world it is also key to consider transnational effects of both climate change effects as well as of adaptation actions. For example, adaptation actions in one country can lead to systemic and cascading cross-border effects of social dimensions in other countries.

Further, it is key to include considerations of intersectionality, and the rights of marginalised groups in risk assessments, selection of adaptation actions and in the design of financing models for climate adaptation measures.

Examples

In **Scotland**, a toolkit has been developed jointly with the Scottish Trade Union movement to help identify climate change hazards which could affect a range of different workplaces and to develop adaptation solutions. The resources aim to support workers in building resilience to climate risks and championing climate change adaptation interventions which also address inequality and social justice.

3) Work collaboratively with local communities and wider stakeholders to co-design adaptation interventions

Include different actors and recipients (e.g. those with disabilities immigrant communities, indigenous groups, women) and stakeholders in climate adaptation efforts, to ensure all voices are included when deciding policy or action ("nothing about us without us")⁸. For example, this means involving local communities and through appropriate governance structures to develop adaptation plans and interventions. Joint construction or co-design with relevant and representative stakeholders empowers the communities directly at risk and enables better understanding of climate risks and adaptation capacities. This makes adaptive interventions more democratic and appropriate for varying local contexts. Further, ensuring adaptation efforts are effectively targeted at the most pressing issues facing communities, giving them agency, reduces the risk of causing negative unintended consequences.

Examples

In **Guatemala**, 164 local [climate adaptation plans](#) have been developed with local actors and approved by municipalities.



Considering procedural justice when creating these adaptation plans benefitted around two million people vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Guatemala has also presented the adaptation plans at a higher geographical level than the local plans and at the local level the Vulnerability Atlas.

In **Mexico**, traditional and indigenous knowledge is used to **prevent crops** from being lost to frost. This demonstrates that gathering the expertise and knowledge of specific groups has benefits for delivering low-cost, low-carbon adaptation.

South Africa has just completed the development of District level Adaptation Plans for all District municipalities across the country. This, together with the City Adaptation Plans (CAPs), offer a complete coverage of all local authorities in the country. These plans are in turn strongly advised by the national Risk and Vulnerability Atlas that has been granularized for local relevance and information.

The **Philippine** Government requires each local government unit (LGU) to prepare a Local Climate Change Adaptation Plan (LCCAP) before updating their City Land Use Plan (CLUP), Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP), Annual Investment Plan (AIP) and Policies, Programs and Activities (PPA).

4) Seek to improve lives and livelihoods through adaptation

Consider how adaptation can be used to enhance the lives of citizens and reduce existing inequality. Policies and practices should help resolve existing inequalities, and not further entrench them. By doing so, it is possible to simultaneously tackle the climate crisis and tackle other social issues. Understanding the long-term effects of adaptation actions requires rigorous monitoring and evaluation and flexible implementation to respond and correct for unanticipated effects.

Examples

In **Sweden**, the government issued a decree in 2021, on financial support for projects aiming to enhance urban greenery and ecosystem services in socially and economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods⁹. Urban greenery and strengthening ecosystem services, for example through rainwater beds to deal with surface runoff, or trees to reduce urban

temperatures, are some climate adaptation actions that can reduce risk and improve well-being in urban areas.

Ways forward

Further work on Just Adaptation is needed to:

- Increase awareness, understanding and political attention to the importance of justice in adaptation efforts, and its role in making adaptation efforts more sustainable and impactful.
- Increase awareness of how to incorporate justice concerns into adaptation planning, and how to account for it in monitoring and evaluation of policy interventions.
- Develop the evidence base for the distributional effects of climate impacts (which groups are most vulnerable to which impacts) and for adaptation actions (who benefits the most from which adaptation actions, who pays for adaptation efforts, and how maladaptation is distributed).

Methods to address the above could include:

- The ICCN continuing to facilitate the sharing of information, case studies, and tools among councils, with the aim of building the global evidence base for just and fair adaptation.
- Working at national and international levels, the ICCN will continue to explore how best to embed fair and equitable adaptation into climate policies. Including through consulting with the Network when developing adaptation advice, and explicitly considering justice when developing adaptation advice.

Looking ahead, we will:

- Formally establish an Adaptation Working Group to facilitate exchange of information and tools, explore joint research or policy recommendations on adaptation, including on just adaptation, and seek to create a body of evidence and case studies to support the development of adaptation policies.
- Begin work scoping other topics to focus on. Including: practical ways of avoiding adaptation efforts doing more harm than good; best practice in bringing together the mitigation and adaptation agendas, indicators to monitor and evaluate the work on adaptation.



Annex A – Further Case Studies

In **Finland**, they have developed a **framework** that aims to measure the ‘justice’ aspects of adaptation and provide a series of 16 indicators to ensure adaptation is done in a just way. This has had the benefit of introducing an operational framework around the four dimensions of just adaptation for the first time. The analysis also shows to what extent current adaptation planning at the national and city level accounts for justice.

In **South Africa**, they have developed a **Just Transition Framework** that provides the guidance and boundary conditions for the country’s mitigation and adaptation policies and strategies. It focuses on positively managing the social and economic impacts of those policies to not only ensure a net benefit of adopting and operationalising a low-carbon economy, but also ensuring that justice prevails in the transition toward the goal of an equitable and climate resilience society.

In **Scotland**, Adaptation Scotland conducted **research** into climate hazards and how people might be affected in a range of different workplaces, developed in collaboration with the Scottish Trade Union movement. An aim of this work is to ensure the risks to workers are better understood, and can be mitigated.

In **Mexico**, participatory adaptation plans with a gender approach are being developed in indigenous communities, which allows for a differentiated diagnosis of both genders, since women are generally in a much more vulnerable state than men. Adaptation from an equity approach allows for actions focused on each gender, age and sector.

Annex B – Further Reading

CarbonBrief – **What is ‘Climate Justice’?**

European Topic Centre on Climate Change – ‘Leaving No One Behind’: in Climate Resilience Policy.

UKCCC – **The Just Transition and Climate Change Adaptation**

IPCC Working Group III – **Annex of Definitions and Further Reading**

ScienceDirect – **Maladaptation: When Adaptation to Climate Change Goes Very Wrong**

References

1. Araos, M., Jagannathan, K., Shukla, R., Ajibade, I., de Perez, E. C., Davis, K., ... & GAMI Team. (2021). Equity in human adaptation-related responses: A systematic global review. *One earth*, 4(10), 1454-1467. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S259033222100484X>.
2. Juhola, S., Heikkinen, M., Pietilä, T., Groundstroem, F., & Käyhkö, J. (2022). Connecting climate justice and adaptation planning: An adaptation justice index. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 136, 609-619. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1462901122002325>.
3. Maladaptation refers to actions that may lead to increased risk of adverse climate-related outcomes, including via increased greenhouse gas emissions, increased or shifted vulnerability to climate change, more inequitable outcomes, or diminished welfare, now or in the future. Most often, maladaptation is an unintended consequence – definition from IPCC Working Group II Report
4. The Finnish Climate Change Panel, Just Adaptation
5. South Africa Presidential Climate Commission, Just Transition Framework
6. UK Climate Change Committee, The Just Transition and Climate Change Adaptation
7. First report of the Swedish Expert Council on Climate Adaptation to the Government, February 2022.
8. Chair’s Summary from the First Multistakeholder Conference on a Just Transition in South Africa. Johannesburg, 2022
9. The Swedish Government (2021) https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/forordning-20201202-om-stod-for-grona-och_sfs-2020-1202.

About ICCN

The International Climate Councils Network (ICCN) was launched in 2021 as a forum for climate councils from around the world to share experiences, discuss common challenges and support one another in their work.

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