GREEN
EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

What Adaptation Reveals About Global Climate Governance

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November 19, 2024

Over the past decades, adaptation has gone from a stigmatised concept to a central pillar of debates on fighting global warming. This journey shines a light on the broader political and socioeconomic challenges that often paralyse climate action, and reveals the need for stronger and more effective global discussion forums.

Forty years; that is how long we have been discussing the climate crisis. Four decades filled with undeniable scientific evidence, intense political debates, comprehensive policymaking, and passionate protests. As we have pondered and probed the best ways to tackle this global threat, our vocabulary around climate has expanded, introducing a multitude of ideas, words, and concepts. Among them, one word has gained significant prominence: *adaptation*. As the impacts of climate change have shifted from distant forecasts to present realities and the gaps in our responses have become more glaring, adaptation has moved from the margins of climate strategies to the forefront of mainstream global discourse.

This transition, however, did not happen overnight. While it is now celebrated as one of the latest trends in the climate policy arena, adaptation was not always recognised as a viable tool to address climate change. Initially sidelined and viewed as a secondary response, adaptation has undergone an existential transformation – one that has reshaped not only how it is defined but also its purpose and how it is implemented.

Key entities such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the successive Conferences of the Parties (COP) have been pivotal in this evolution. The journey of adaptation through these platforms reveals much about the broader process of global climate negotiations.

The misunderstood sibling?

Historically, adaptation to the natural environment has been as fundamental and as ancient as humanity itself, and a principle continually employed by indigenous communities. Yet today, adaptation has taken on a new meaning: “altering our behaviour, systems, and – in some cases – ways of life to protect our families, our economies, and the environment in which we live from the impacts of climate change.”

Adaptation made its official entry into international climate policy with the adoption of the UNFCCC at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Although this key document acknowledged both mitigation and adaptation as necessary strategies, mitigation quickly became the favoured child. This preference was driven by a broad scientific consensus emphasising the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as the primary way to curb climate change.

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fail.

As a result, global efforts concentrated on energy-related mitigation policies, as reflected in the early reports of the IPCC, which largely neglected adaptation and equity concerns.

During this period, adaptation was seen as less urgent and merely a contingency plan for managing the inevitable fallout of climate change. This outlook was underpinned by a belief that strong mitigation efforts could significantly reduce, or even reverse, the impacts of climate change, rendering adaptation less necessary.

Moreover, adaptation was often stigmatised as a defeatist approach, an implicit admission that mitigation might fail. This stigma pushed adaptation to the edges of the climate policy discourse, painting it as a strategy for quitters. The prevailing assumption, particularly in developed countries, was that societies and ecosystems could naturally adjust to climate change. This belief, rooted in ecological optimism, oversimplified the complex needs and challenges of adaptation.

Additionally, the uncertainty surrounding the exact effects of climate change made it evenharder to include adaptation in policy discussions. Focusing on adaptation seemed to amount to admitting that climate change was not only happening but unavoidable, which was controversial as debates between climate change “believers” and “sceptics” were still fierce. At a time when scientific data was still evolving and climate models were being refined, adopting adaptation strategies reliant on specific climate impact predictions was met with strong resistance.

Proposing adaptation policies also carried political risks, with governments fearing they could be labelled as “closet polluters”, seemingly less committed to reducing emissions. However, as the impacts of climate change became increasingly tangible in the late 1990s, perceptions of adaptation began to shift. It became clear that mitigation alone was insufficient to address emerging climate challenges. Policymakers and scholars began to advocate for a stronger role for adaptation, recognising that mitigation tackles the root causes of climate change while adaptation addresses its consequences. Among the earliest advocates were small island developing states, acutely exposed to rising sea levels and more frequent extreme weather events.

Turning the policy tide

This paradigm shift was solidified by the 2001 Marrakesh Accords, which explicitly recognised adaptation as a crucial element of climate response under the UNFCCC framework. The IPCC’s Third Assessment Report that same year further highlighted the limits of mitigation and underscored the need for comprehensive adaptation strategies. This marked a significant turning point, sparking a surge in adaptation projects and encouraging the development of operational strategies to fund them.

Between 2001 and 2004, the establishment of the Adaptation Fund under the Kyoto Protocol and the development of an adaptation work program reinforced adaptation’s role as a core component of climate strategy. The momentum carried through COP11 in 2005, where the frameworks and funding mechanisms laid out in the Marrakesh Accords were further expanded.

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tensions persisted, particularly between developing and developed countries.

Despite this progress, the comprehensive integration of adaptation into policy frameworks remained fraught with challenges. The diverse nature of adaptation needs across different regions added layers of complexity, and tensions persisted, particularly between developing and developed countries. Developing nations feared that a focus on adaptation could weaken the commitment of developed countries to mitigation, while wealthier states worried that prioritising adaptation would increase their financial responsibilities.

Equity in adaptation

A critical barrier to fully embracing adaptation has been the persistent issue of funding. Since the concept of adaptation inherently addresses the disproportionate impacts of climate change on those least responsible for emissions, at the heart of it lies a web of climate justice, historic responsibility, and accountability.

Countries historically responsible for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions have consistently been reluctant to allocate substantial financial resources to adaptation efforts in the most affected regions. This hesitation stems from a mix of denial, liability concerns, and a preference for mitigation over compensation. What is more, countries like the United States have failed to clearly define "climate finance", enabling wealthier states to evade their financial responsibilities and leaving the most affected societies trapped in debt.

While support mechanisms like the Adaptation Fund exist, financial aid for adaptation remains inconsistent and mired in bureaucratic delays. For instance, the 2023 Adaptation Gap Report by the United Nations Environment Programme highlighted an investment shortfall of 280-500 billion dollars per year by 2030 and also underscored the urgent need for substantial funds to protect impacted communities.

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The funding deadlock that exists to this day reflects deeper tensions in international climate negotiations, where disputes over responsibility and historical emissions continue to shape policy decisions – demonstrating that adaptation extends beyond technical challenges and is also an issue of global equity and justice.

Complementing mitigation

Despite these complexities, adaptation has gained significant recognition since the mid-2000s due to an increasingly clear realisation that mitigation alone was no longer sufficient to protect humanity against the serious threats posed by climate change.

Key reports from the IPCC have played a crucial role in this transformation. The Working Group II report of 2001 pointed out that "adaptation is a necessary strategy at all scales to complement climate change mitigation efforts." Later in 2007, the Fourth Assessment Report played a pivotal role in elevating adaptation within both scientific and policy circles. These reports asserted that an effective climate strategy must address not only the causes but also the consequences of climate change. The recognition that mitigation should be paired with adaptation laid the groundwork for key initiatives such as the Copenhagen Green Climate Fund at COP15, which marked a major commitment to supporting adaptation projects, particularly in developing nations.

But the momentum did not stop there. The Cancun Adaptation Framework, launched in 2010 at COP16, introduced a range of comprehensive measures aimed at increasing resilience and reducing vulnerability to climate impacts. This framework helped bring about a more structured and globally coordinated approach to adaptation.

The Paris Agreement in 2015 marked another critical milestone, further cementing adaptation's role by establishing global goals for enhancing adaptive capacity, strengthening resilience, and reducing vulnerability to climate change. What was once seen primarily as a reactive measure had become firmly recognised as an essential part of proactive climate governance.

No more patches

Despite this growing recognition, the initial reluctance of developed countries to fully embrace adaptation's potential left the concept under-researched and widely misunderstood for a long time. It also created a view of adaptation as overly technical and minimalistic, focused primarily on incremental changes. This perspective not only downplayed the severity of climate change but also suggested that modest tweaks to existing systems would be sufficient to manage its impacts.

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Rather than addressing the deeper, systemic changes required for meaningful and impactful climate action, early adaptation strategies leaned heavily on technological quick fixes like adjusting agricultural or land management practices – such as building irrigation systems and reducing livestock numbers or cultivated areas. These superficial approaches were criticised for failing to confront the deeper structural challenges posed by a changing climate. For instance, the IPCC's Third Assessment Report of 2001 labelled these efforts as short-term patches rather than durable, long-lasting solutions.

However, as the increasingly undeniable impacts of climate change began to mount, the inadequacies of these incremental measures became starkly apparent. While these solutions were somewhat effective in staving off immediate threats, they fell far short in addressing the long-term, systemic challenges posed by a warming world.

Over time, the narrative around adaptation began to shift. *Transformational adaptation* – an approach calling for profound, comprehensive changes to address the evolving consequences of climate change – started gaining traction. The early 2000s marked the beginning of this shift, as transformational

adaptation began to receive greater attention and funding at major international conferences, including COP11 in 2005.

This push continued to grow stronger in the following years, as evidenced by more recent major climate assessments like the IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report in 2015 and the Sixth Assessment Report in 2022, which stressed the need for transformational strategies. These reports suggest that the most daunting aspects of climate change will require us to weave adaptation deeply into our decision-making processes. Recent discussions, like those at COP28, have reiterated the need for increased investment and support for developing countries to embrace these transformational strategies.

Unfulfilled promises

The rise of adaptation did not occur in isolation. It was driven in part by continued delays in mitigation policy as well as repeated failures to curb emissions, which highlighted the urgent need for adaptation as a more immediate and realistic response to the climate threat. In spite of more than three decades of international climate negotiations, including the high-profile COP meetings, substantial progress on mitigation has remained frustratingly elusive. While these global gatherings have been crucial for maintaining dialogue and spurring international cooperation, they have too often followed a familiar cycle: ambitious promises followed by inadequate execution.

The Paris Agreement, which sought to limit global warming to 1.5°C, perfectly exemplifies this pattern. Although the accord was heralded as a landmark achievement, subsequent assessments have revealed that current national pledges may only limit temperature rises to between 2.4°C and 2.8°C. This gap between ambition and action reveals a persistent shortfall in global efforts.

Additionally, COP meetings have often been hampered by a consensus-based decision-making process, which allows any single nation to stall progress. This procedural hurdle has repeatedly undermined substantial agreements on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, resulting in diluted targets. The reluctance of major emitters to accept binding commitments – evidenced by the US's withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol and delays in actualising financial support for climate initiatives in developing nations – continues to slow momentum.

The transition from the binding emissions targets of the Kyoto Protocol to the less prescriptive, nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement marked a significant shift in climate governance. The new framework was designed to promote transparency and accountability, encouraging nations to set and meet their own mitigation goals through public scrutiny. Yet the system has struggled to deliver meaningful reductions in emissions. As global greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise every year, the gap between declared intentions and real action becomes even wider.

The influence of the fossil fuel industry has further complicated mitigation efforts. At COP28, for instance, a record number of fossil fuel lobbyists were granted access to the UN talks. According to Corporate Europe Observatory, at least 2456 lobbyists attended the summit – nearly four times the number seen at the previous year's meeting. This drew harsh criticism from civil society groups and activists. Alexia Leclercq of Start:Empowerment remarked: "Do you really think Shell, Chevron, or ExxonMobil are sending lobbyists just to passively observe these talks?"

COP28 concluded with a declaration that included language on phasing out fossil fuels. Some hailed this declaration as the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era. However, critics pointed out loopholes that allowed for "false solutions," which many environmental organisations and civil society groups

condemned as a “backdoor” for fossil fuel interests to continue obstructing a full transition away from carbon-based energy. Indigenous communities and environmental organisations also expressed disappointment, warning that the outcomes of the summit remained too aligned with business interests and failed to adequately address the urgent need for systemic change.

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Furthermore, recent UN reports have indicated that, a year after world leaders made a landmark promise at COP28 to move away from fossil fuels, little progress has been made in reducing emissions and combating global warming.

Behind the science

Adaptation, as it has evolved, transcends mere climate policy; it engages with broaderissues such as power dynamics, conflicting policy preferences, resource allocation, and bureaucratic tensions. This journey of adaptation through international climate negotiations has revealed its inherently political nature.

Despite the IPCC’s advocacy for significant societal changes to reduce climate risks, the organisation’s scientific framing often overlooks critical political dimensions – such as the politics of redistribution and power realignment – which are indispensable for achieving genuine transformation.

For example, in her analysis of adaptation in Nepal, Andrea J. Nightingale illustrates how access to and control over assets and resources are more constrained by political and economic factors than by biophysical or environmental ones. A transformational approach to adaptation also aims to reduce risks and vulnerability at their source. This involves altering the very systems, structures, and social relations – as well as the economic frameworks and belief systems – that contribute to both climate change and vulnerability. Rather than merely responding to the impacts of climate change, such transformations seek to modify the underlying risks that it poses to global development and human security.

As academics like Mark Pelling argue, true transformation concerns the broader, less visible roots of injustices which reside in social, cultural, economic, and political spheres. These factors often overlap and interact, becoming so ingrained that they appear natural or inevitable. Such transformations, far from being politically neutral, inevitably promote or challenge various interests and agendas.

This political dimension raises a critical question: Can adaptation truly be transformative if it does not fully confront these fundamental political and economic issues? And how can institutions like the IPCC, with their primary focus on scientific assessments, adequately address the intricate socio-political and economic underpinnings that are essential for real systemic change?

These questions have sparked ongoing debates about the nature and role of the IPCC in climate negotiations. Some, like Drieu Godefridi, – a philosopher and climate change denier – have argued that the IPCC is not fundamentally a scientific organisation but rather a political one operating under a scientific guise, designed to suppress sceptical opinions. In contrast, others, like environmental researcher François Gemenne, argue that the IPCC is indeed a scientific body but one that serves a political purpose. Meanwhile, chemistry professor Istvan Markó from the Catholic University of Leuven has expressed scepticism about the scientific integrity of the IPCC’s publications, while professor Kari

De Pryck from the University of Geneva has urged the IPCC to acknowledge and embrace its political role more openly. The differences between these perspectives might seem academic or abstract, but they carry significant political implications.

The conflicting perspectives on the IPCC's advocacy role highlight the need for a broader, more inclusive approach to transformational adaptation; one that not only addresses the biophysical aspects of climate change but also challenges and transforms the socio-political and economic conditions that exacerbate injustices.

What's next?

As adaptation moves from the margins to the mainstream, it influences – and is influenced by – the complex interplay between environmental realities and socio-political factors. For adaptation to be genuinely transformative, it must be equitable, well-supported, and integrated into broader social and economic frameworks. This shift goes beyond a mere policy change; it requires a fundamental rethinking of how we approach climate governance at a global level.

As we look ahead, it is essential to reflect on whether scientific entities like the IPCC and international forums such as the COPs are equipped to lead the necessary transformations. Given the historical challenges in implementing effective mitigation strategies, there are legitimate concerns about whether these bureaucratically complex and politically influenced institutions can effectively advocate for adaptation measures that align with the principles of climate justice. Addressing these concerns is crucial to avoid repeating past mistakes and delays in integrating effective adaptation strategies into policy frameworks.

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Published November 19, 2024
Article in English
Published in the *Green European Journal*
Downloaded from https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/what-adaptation-reveals-about-global-climate-governance/