

Adaptation to the adverse effects of climate change – A UNFCCC perspective

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**The views expressed in this presentation are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the opinion of the United Nations.*

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The **evolution** of the concept of adaptation and resilience to climate change under the process spurred by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) can be considered to have evolved through a phased approach. The first phase concentrated on assessments of vulnerability and impacts in order to enhance understanding of the potential adverse effects that could beset a country under a wide range of possible global warming scenarios. The second stage was characterized by higher precision in these assessments based on improved modeling and observations as well as actually observed impacts. This eventually led to our current phase which introduces the potential for a more holistic consideration of adaptation within the context of the internationally-agreed global warming limit and associated adaptive capacity that corresponds to this warming limit.

The abovementioned **holism** in treating adaptation is anchored in an **international** conceptual structure that is underlied by an

overarching adaptation goal: enhancing adaptive capacity, strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerability to climate change. This goal aims at contributing to sustainable development and ensuring an adequate adaptation response in the context of the temperature (or mitigation) goal of “holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels, recognizing that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change” (UNFCCC COP Decision 1/CP/21). Injecting a coherent oversight into the international adaptation process is an Adaptation Committee which serves as the overall advisory body on adaptation under the UNFCCC process, and provides associated recommendations to the supreme decision-making global body on climate change – the Conference of the Parties.

This holism is aided by a **complementarity** of processes and visions at the **national** level. Armed with over a decade of experience in

vulnerability and adaptation assessment as well as pilot adaptation projects, countries can now consider their future resilience within the guiding perspectives of three main facilitative pillars:

- The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, which provide a blueprint for eliminating poverty by 2030 including through synergy attained across 17 goals aimed at enhancing human wellbeing in a variety of areas. Most of these goals double as proxies for the tenets of adaptive capacity. Countries are starting to integrate the SDGs into their planning frameworks which, themselves, serve as virtual depositories of proposed adaptation responses as these get mainstreamed into development planning;
- The abovementioned agreed warming limit of *way below 2 degrees and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels* provides a reasonable boundary condition for the first wave of holistic adaptation planning efforts currently under way at the national level. This implies that the vulnerability assessments of countries can now be framed using the projected impacts of an average global warming scenario of 2 degrees. This which would make their assessments more pointed and policy-relevant than previous assessments that included a far wider range of warming scenarios, typically up to 4 degrees.

- Complementarity between planned adaptation on the one hand, and residual risk and its associated contingency arrangements on the other, paves the way for a synergistic link and feedback across these two families of adaptive response. This synergy promises further optimization of cost effectiveness and efficiency, and spurring new and innovative financial instruments that could cater to the types of eventualities envisaged by such adaptive responses. A number of bilateral and multilateral entities are supporting the process to formulate and implement national adaptation plans (NAPs) and other adaptation planning efforts in developing countries. At the same time, the discourse on the use of innovative financial instruments to address climate risk, including residual impacts, is ongoing within the context of the Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage, established by the COP at its nineteenth session.

Additional impetus is provided by the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 as it sets out global goals for reducing existing disaster risk and preventing new disaster risk, both of which are central to adaptation efforts.

Many envision a dramatic **transformation** in the world's techno-economic paradigm within the next two decades, not least due to the impending quantum evolution in our energy systems, and its associated implications on transportation, energy utilities, and geopolitical relations, to name but

a few. Less evident is the expected parallel transformation in human wellbeing, catalyzed by the collaborative forces of increasing adaptive capacity and achieving the SDGs by 2030. The agreed 2030 timeline for eliminating poverty is one which will have already passed two milestones: having convened the first two global stocktake sessions under the UNFCCC in 2023 and 2028, which would have assessed the aggregate progress of the world's countries in achieving the mitigation and adaptation goals adopted under the Paris Agreement of the UNFCCC. The stocktake sessions would have provided recommendations for course corrections where relevant. At the same time, countries would have made significant progress in the process of formulating and implementing their NAPs as well as have annually reported their progress against the targets of the SDGs. In the longer term, it is hoped that countries would have therefore had in place socioeconomic systems that both use the insights from building adaptive capacity in ways that protect countries from a variety of external shocks, as well as ensure that gains under the SDGs are not reversed.

A notion of “**forward resilience**” can be hereby introduced. The traditional understanding of adaptation and resilience evokes the objective of “bouncing back” to a previously existing desired state, i.e. to where we were before the climatic stimulus (or another external shock) imparted its impact. In the new thinking in which we are transitioning into a world that has developed internal momentum geared towards eliminating poverty and inequality for the first

time in history, adaptation and resilience would not seek to hark back to an earlier state, but rather to the future aspired state defined by an SDG-achieved world. Adaptation measures become the catalyst to achieve *forward resilience* – resilience that enables and empowers a society to leapfrog towards a future world of wellbeing that is defined by the SDGs and their targets, and yet one that has never been experienced before. The global and national systems that will be put in place in the next few years will help transition the world into this climate resilient and SDG-achieved context, and should be mindful of attaining this new state in ways that avoid the creation of a new reality of *haves* and *have-nots*.

Back to the **operational level**, the UNFCCC process has established a system of support within the negotiating process and the UNFCCC secretariat, and has also catalyzed the creation of other support processes that operate more autonomously.

The abovementioned Adaptation Committee is one of three **constituted bodies** on adaptation. The others that are of relevance include the Least Developed Countries Expert Group, which provides technical support to the NAP process, and the Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage, which is engaged in enhancing knowledge and understanding of comprehensive risk management approaches as well as action and support to address loss and damage. These constituted bodies serve as a bridge between the global consensus established by the world's negotiators

under the UNFCCC on the one hand and the various support entities and stakeholders that help further the methodological underpinnings of adaptation as well as in-country support to vulnerable developing countries. Their convening power and catalytic capacity enable them to achieve far-reaching progress on incubating new areas of discourse in adaptation, promoting synergy and coherence, and reaching informed proposals for moving the process forward through recommending these proposals for adoption by the UNFCCC negotiating process.

Underlying this work is the **knowledge** hub of the UNFCCC, which is named the Nairobi Work Programme on Impacts, Vulnerability and Adaptation. This serves not only as an online knowledge hub for adaptation, but also as a partnership programme that engages over 300 entities of different types – e.g. NGOs, research institutions, international and regional entities, etc. – that align their work with the adaptation objectives of the UNFCCC. Many of them have contributed action pledges in support of adaptation action relevant to the furthering of adaptation knowledge.

In support of national adaptation action, the UNFCCC process has mandated the establishment of a number of entities for the provision of **finance, technology and capacity-building**. The Green Climate Fund (GCF), which is starting to operate actively, has already approved support for adaptation projects and programmes in excess of 320 million dollars. Adaptation support under the GCF builds on the experience of the already

existing Adaptation Fund, Least Developed Countries Fund and Special Climate Change Fund, all of which were established by the UNFCCC process and have provided significant support for adaptation over more than a decade. Complementing the provision of funding is the Technology Mechanism, the main pillar of which is the Climate Technology Centre and Network which provides “technology solutions, capacity building and advice on policy, legal and regulatory frameworks tailored to the needs of individual countries” (<https://www.ctc-n.org>).

The UNFCCC machinery of multiple processes and entities that work together in an interconnected and synergistic way to support adaptation does not operate in isolation. It links out to the system of **non-State actors** including “civil society, the private sector, financial institutions, cities and other subnational authorities, local communities and indigenous peoples” (UNFCCC COP Decision 1/CP.21). Together, the UNFCCC system and non-State actors operate within the **long term context** of achieving resilience at the subnational, national and aggregate global levels, with a view to forging a new global reality where adaptive measures and systems galvanize *forward resilience* towards a world with no poverty nor inequality of opportunity for sustainable development.