

The Climate Movement's Fight for Adaptation

Stella Levantesi

The climate movement has traditionally seen adaptation as the fig leaf of climate inaction. But local communities, civil society, and activist groups around the world are now pressuring governments to include adaptation alongside mitigation measures. Is this shift a positive step in the fight for climate justice?

Legal efforts to ensure states adopt environmental and climate adaptation measures are increasing globally. Victims of recurring landslides in Uganda, for instance, have challenged the government's lack of climate adaptation strategies, while the Supreme Court of Pakistan has upheld a decision barring the construction of cement plants in environmentally vulnerable areas. It's part of what Fizza Zaidi, Research Associate for the Climate Change Programme at the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) in New Delhi, calls a growing "push for adaptation within climate litigation".

In another case in Pakistan, in which a farmer sued the government for failing to abide by its own climate change policies, the Court highlighted the country's vulnerability to extreme weather events in particular. "Recognising the limited capacity of developing countries to adapt, the court saw climate justice as a means through which courts can help build adaptive capacity and climate resilience," explains Zaidi.

Calls for adaptation aren't only happening within courts. Recent COP climate conferences have been crucial forums in which civil society organisations, communities, and activists have voiced urgent demands for adaptation implementation and loss and damage funds.



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More locally specific efforts are also emerging. “There are many grassroots initiatives all over the world working on adaptation all the time,” underlines Laura Kuhl, Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Urban Affairs and International Affairs at Northeastern University in the United States. “These integrate indigenous voices and movements and integrate climate with other activist movements.” Such initiatives contain “a greater understanding of how climate justice is not just about mitigation, but is also about adaptation”, she adds. Generally, while mitigation is about reducing planet-heating emissions, adaptation relates to the response to the climate crisis and its impacts.

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Adaptation is climate justice

Be it through litigation, activism, or civil society efforts, most experts agree that adaptation fits under the broad umbrella of climate justice. “The climate movement went from a very mitigation-focused understanding of the problem to a much more intersectional understanding,” Kuhl highlights. But, she adds, adaptation efforts “don’t necessarily always get the international attention that other climate actions do”.

Compared with global campaigns for climate mitigation, for example, adaptation initiatives are mostly local and have had less international support. If there’s one thing that makes adaptation efforts different from mitigation action, it’s that it is “heavily context specific”, says Tamanna Sengupta, Climate Change Programme Officer for CSE. All around the world, climate activists and advocates have been protesting locally to fight the worsening effects of climate change and the construction of infrastructure that depletes the environment and causes social harm.

“We work on adaptation at a local level. Our fights are mostly focused on soil erosion, concreting of the territory, drought, and other climate issues, which are widespread throughout the country,” says Emanuele Genovese, a Rome-based climate activist with Fridays for Future Italy. As weather events become more extreme and visible, the movement’s actions focus more on adaptation. Examples include supporting local communities in the aftermath of extreme flooding in the regions of Emilia Romagna and Tuscany in 2023 and pushing for legislation focusing on soil erosion issues.

Sometimes socio-environmental fights can turn into violent clashes with the police. In Sainte-Soline, a town in a rural area of western France, protesters demonstrated against a large water reservoir for farm irrigation in March 2023. They alleged that this “mega-basin” benefits larger industries while harming small farmers and the environment. The riots left 200 protestors injured, two in a coma, and more than 25 police officers hurt. Les Soulèvements de la Terre, a group of environmental activist associations in France who took part in the protests, was dissolved in June, with “the government denouncing the ‘use of violence’ by its members”, according to Le Monde. In August, a French court temporarily suspended the dissolution of the group. A decision is still pending.

Because adaptation depends on social, environmental, and political contexts, experts also agree that no one solution fits all. Some measures, however, have been working better than others. According to Sengupta, early warning systems, which help communities prepare for and react to climate-related events, are a specific but effective adaptation strategy. The UN has introduced these systems in vulnerable areas in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific to allow a rapid response to extreme weather events.

“Many civil society groups and other non-profit organisations have been advocating for early warning systems especially in developing nations,” Sengupta explains. “More than a hundred countries right now have these systems in place. In

Mozambique, when Cyclone Freddy hit [in February 2023], the World Bank reported that having an early warning system ensured villagers had time to rehabilitate, and it avoided a lot of deaths compared to earlier floods that occurred in that region.”

Adaptation strategies like this one can be tailored to specific climate vulnerabilities, but they should also encompass wider objectives and address urgent socio-economic issues. According to Kuhl, the most effective strategy for managing climate impacts is broader resilience. “The ability to have that underlying capacity to cope with shocks and stresses is really important, and that’s not necessarily climate specific,” she says “Addressing poverty is probably one of the most effective adaptation strategies. That’s a completely different kind of adaptation strategy than something like building a sea wall, for example.”

Dual approach

Neither mitigation nor adaptation alone will be sufficient to combat the challenges posed by climate chaos and the destruction of ecosystems. “There are going to be impacts from climate change that we can’t mitigate and we can’t adapt to, and there will be losses and damages. This really raises the questions of where is that money going to come from, and who should it come from, and how do we get it where it needs to go,” Kuhl says.

Climate advocates and experts are convinced climate action must include both adaptation and mitigation measures. This means recognising the challenges of both and promoting action to address them. In particular, most countries rely on external funding and resources for adaptation needs. “Adaptation needs for the Global South are synonymous with financial and technological aid,” states Sengupta. “Without that, it’s very difficult to really implement effective strategies. There’s a need for scaled-up public finance and development assistance but then there needs to be a political will to mobilise that.”

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The financial costs of adaptation are very high, and global spending on climate investments is mostly going towards mitigation. There’s also an increasing acknowledgment that climate change is a threat multiplier – that it layers and overlaps with pre-existing socio-economic, gender, or health vulnerabilities. “The most vulnerable, who are impacted the most by climate change, also have the fewest resources to adapt,” Kuhl says. “There’s a moral and ethical responsibility that there be a channelling of resources to the local level, to the people who are most vulnerable, ideally to meet their priorities.”

This is why many climate activists are pushing governments to uphold the responsibility of addressing these needs, with particular emphasis on redirecting climate funds to the Global South, which is especially vulnerable to the harmful effects of climate change. During COP28 in November 2023, the first Loss and Damage Fund to provide monetary aid to developing countries was set up. Countries including Germany, the UK, and Japan, as well as the EU, made funding pledges for 700 million dollars. However, critics argued that this amount fell short of the 400 billion dollars in losses developing countries face each year. Developing countries also expressed doubts regarding the long-term financing of the fund as well as the World Bank’s role as interim trustee.

Similar issues have emerged in other cases of adaptation funding. In 2022, Pakistan experienced heavy flooding that killed thousands of people and left many more homeless. Today, there is increasing evidence that events like the Pakistan floods are directly tied to the climate crisis. In fact, climate change could have increased intense rainfall in Pakistan by

about 50 per cent according to a study by scientists working in the emerging field of attribution science, which helps researchers identify links between extreme weather events and global warming.

“About 10 billion US dollars was pledged to help Pakistan rebuild,” says Sengupta. “But looking into the fine print of that, more than 90 per cent of this was provided as loans and not as real assistance. When we speak about adaptation finance, we need to acknowledge [that] there is a huge disparity in the way that adaptation fund[ing] comes in.”

Weaponising or obstructing adaptation?

More challenges come with adaptation narratives in public debate. Climate deniers have used adaptation as a smokescreen to avoid, and to shift, responsibility for the climate crisis, arguing that although climate change is an issue, humans’ capacity to adapt means it need not be considered a critical problem. According to a recent study on strategies to delay climate action, this argument implies that working to mitigate and avoid climate change is futile, and that adaptation is “the only possible response” to the crisis.

In May 2022, at a Financial Times conference, Stuart Kirk, then head of responsible investing for HSBC’s asset management division, said, “Who cares if Miami is six metres underwater in 100 years? Amsterdam has been six meters underwater for ages, and that’s a really nice place. We will cope with it.” Kirk was later suspended for his comments. In an article about Alex Epstein’s book *Fossil Future*, which advocates for fossil fuels, Nitish Pahwa writes: “The new style of climate denial is here: It’s not that carbon emissions aren’t increasing, or aren’t warming the world, but look, you’re doing fine right now, right? So, we’ll be just fine!”

According to Kuhl, however, this instrumentalisation of adaptation discourse by climate change deniers and delayers was also possible because for a long time, adaptation was “viewed as a taboo topic”. “Even in the literature it’s often described as ‘the ugly stepchild of mitigation’, and one of the reasons for that was always this fear that if we talk about adaptation, it implies that we’re giving up on mitigation and that it would distract from action. This rhetoric was also embedded within the IPCC process for a long time.”

Beyond the risk of pushing adaptation as a way to shift attention away from both mitigation efforts and corporate responsibility for the climate crisis, and what Kuhl defines as the “adaptation-mitigation tension”, it’s interesting to note how adaptation itself is, in some cases, being obstructed by vested interests.

“There’s a lot more obstruction of adaptation happening than has been acknowledged,” says Kuhl. “Addressing climate impacts is going to change vulnerabilities. It’s going to shift who’s most vulnerable, and that has direct impacts on power dynamics. So just logically, there are vested interests in maintaining those power dynamics.” Wealthy real estate groups in California, for example, are resisting coastal flood protections, such as planned relocation and managed retreat, out of fears that they will decrease property value and, in turn, threaten business, development opportunities, and tourism.

In other cases, resistance to adaptation measures stems from decades-long fights against business developments that disrupt the environment. Indigenous populations have been fighting the Arizona Snowbowl ski resort in the United States since the 1930s because its presence has disrupted their spiritual connection to the land and the mountain’s environment. In 2022, a proposed expansion of the ski resort’s facilities and snowmaking operations, aimed at adapting to climate change-induced snowfall alterations, has caused new tensions. The resort manufactures its artificial snow with

reclaimed water from the local sewage system, but a coalition of tribes has said that sacred ground is being contaminated.

Kuhl says that it's important to distinguish between "obstruction" and "resistance", and explains that obstruction happens when powerful interests aim to maintain the status quo by blocking adaptation. Resistance, on the other hand, happens when marginalised groups see certain adaptation strategies as posing greater harm. While adaptation still presents many challenges, there is an increasing recognition that climate action today means pushing for adaptation in an integrated approach with mitigation objectives, with the final goal being climate accountability and climate justice.

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❖ **About the author: Stella Levantesi** is an Italian climate journalist, photographer, and author. Her main areas of expertise are climate disinformation, climate litigation, and corporate responsibility on the climate crisis. Her book *I bugiardi del clima* (Climate Liars), published in Italy with Laterza, investigates the history of climate science denial and obstruction tactics to climate action. Her work has been published in *The Guardian*, *Nature Italy*, *DeSmog*, and others.



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