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Lesnikowski, A, Ford, J orcid.org/0000-0002-2066-3456, Biesbroek, R et al. (4 more authors) (2017) What does the Paris Agreement mean for adaptation? Climate Policy, 17 (7). pp. 825-831. ISSN 1469-3062

https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2016.1248889

What does the Paris Agreement mean for adaptation?

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Cite as: Alexandra Lesnikowski, James Ford, Robbert Biesbroek, Lea Berrang-Ford, Michelle Maillet, Malcolm Araos & Stephanie E. Austin (2016). What does the Paris Agreement mean for adaptation? Climate Policy, 17: 825-831. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2016.1248889.

Abstract

The Paris Agreement takes a significant step forward in strengthening the adaptation pillar of global climate policy. By widening the normative framing around adaptation, calling for stronger adaptation commitments from states, being explicit about the multilevel nature of adaptation governance, and outlining stronger transparency mechanisms for assessing adaptation progress, the Agreement is a milestone in ongoing efforts to make adaptation an equal priority with mitigation. Significant work remains to be done, however, to clarify how the long-term goal for adaptation set out in Article 7 will be meaningfully realized. The challenge for Parties in implementing the Paris Agreement will be to establish credible commitments from state and non-state actors with regard to adaptation planning, implementation, and financing.

Policy Relevance

This article provides a critical view on what the Paris Agreement means for the trajectory of adaptation policy at the international and state levels in light of the stated aim of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to make adaptation an equal priority with mitigation.

Main Text

On 12 December 2015 at the 21st meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 21), the Paris Agreement to combat climate change was adopted by the member states of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, or 'the Convention'). The Agreement will succeed the Kyoto Protocol in 2020 and constitute a cornerstone of global climate governance for the coming decades. Adaptation emerged as a focus area under the Convention in 2001, but is still not equal to mitigation with regard to target-setting, financing, and institutional frameworks. The outcomes from COP 21 build on previous decisions and work streams to establish a stronger roadmap for deepening the emphasis on adaptation planning and implementation under the Convention. The Paris Agreement strengthens adaptation in four ways: (i) it broadens the normative framing around adaptation, (ii) it integrates stronger adaptation commitments from state actors, (iii) it is explicit about the multi- level nature of adaptation governance, and (iv) it strengthens mechanisms for enhanced transparency on asses- sing adaptation progress (UNFCCC, 2015).

Paris broadens the normative framing around adaptation

International agreements such as Paris are important barometers of the underlying norms that shape inter- national discourses on issues such as climate change (Haas, 2002; Simmons, 2010), and the COP meetings con- tribute to this process as sites of discursive struggles over issue framings and appropriate policy-making approaches. The Paris Agreement is reflective of the processes by which climate change discourses and agendas emerge, persist, and change. Under previous decisions, adaptation was largely approached as an issue of biophysical exposure affecting regions with low levels of economic development (Schipper, 2006). The Pre- amble of the Agreement, however, reflects a widening discourse within the UNFCCC beyond the framing

of climate change as a challenge of exposure and impacts to one that acknowledges intersections between climate change impacts, human rights, and culture. Such framing within the Convention first emerged in the Preamble to the Cancun Agreement (2010), which indicated an opening to the human rights discourse by making reference to resolution 10/4 of the Human Rights Council concerning the implications of climate change for human rights and in particular those most vulnerable to climate change impacts. The preamble to the Agreement builds on this by acknowledging a universal concern for justice and human rights, including

> "respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity."

Furthermore, in noting the importance of climate justice and the cultural significance of the environment ('Mother Earth'), the tone of the preamble expands the problematizing of environmental impacts of climate change beyond just a scientific focus on ecosystem health to one that recognizes the diversity of existential significances attached to the environment across cultures. This mirrors the evolution of adaptation in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports since the Second Assessment Report, which framed adaptation more narrowly with respect to climate change impacts, to subsequent reports that link adaptation more broadly to vulnerability processes (Bassett & Fogelman, 2013). This discourse is important in driving conversa- tions about the significance of climate change for development and human security, and is suggestive of a shift in international climate change negotiations towards a greater inclusiveness of non-state voices and the broader contexts of social change (Fook, 2015; Ford, Maillet, Pouliot, Cavanaugh, & IHACC Research Team, 2016).

Paris sets the groundwork for stronger adaptation commitments from state actors

By establishing an explicit long-term adaptation goal in Article 7, the Paris Agreement formalizes the international consensus on the urgency of vulnerability reduction and reinforces that adaptation is a key pillar of the Convention. Beginning from the Marrakesh COP 7 in 2001, the UNFCCC had framed adaptation as almost exclusively a chal- lenge for low-income countries. Adaptation provisions in COP decisions thus focused on establishing modes for providing technical assistance and financing from developed countries through the Adaptation Fund and the Least Developed Countries (LDC) work programme (e.g. the LDC expert group and the National Adaptation Pro- grammes of Action), and later through the Nairobi Work Programme (COP 11, 2005). The shift from focusing on short-term adaptation needs and priorities to medium- and long-term goals began at COP 13 in 2007, where the Bali Road Map first expressed the need for a 'shared vision for long-term cooperative action', a sentiment that appeared again in the Cancun Agreement and the Durban Outcomes (2011). This shift reflected the growing scientific consensus that the climate was already changing and associated impacts would be felt across all countries, thus necessitating some level of adaptation to address growing vulnerabilities. Finally in 2010, the Cancun Adaptation Framework made the central importance of adaptation under the Convention explicit by stating that 'adaptation must be addressed with the same priority as mitigation' and providing the initial organ- izational and financial structures to support enhanced work on adaptation across all Parties (UNFCCC, 2011).

A fundamental challenge for achieving this equal prioritization with mitigation is the relative fuzziness of adaptation as a policy area. Mitigation policy constitutes a response to a clear problem source (GHG emissions) and can be measured and tracked using standardized and accepted indicators (e.g. tonnes of carbon). In con- trast, adaptation is difficult to define and track, especially in relation to policy issues like development or disaster risk management (Ford & Berrang-Ford, 2016; Magnan & Ribera, 2016). This ambiguity underlies the challenge of operationalizing the Cancun Agreement's call to address adaptation and mitigation as equal priorities and build on existing modes for capacity-building and financing to progress adaptation implementation at different scales and across countries.

The Paris Agreement provides a key opportunity to translate capacity-building and financial assistance into tan- gible policies by linking the global long-term goal for adaptation (Article 7, para 1) with the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs). Nearly 90% (142) of the 169 UNFCCC Parties that submitted INDCs in the lead up to COP 21 included discussions about impacts and vulnerability, their national institutional context for adap- tation, and planned or implemented adaptation actions. The INDCs thus provide a foundation for the Agreement by giving context and substance to the adaptation goal and setting out what adaptation activities countries are willing to undertake. By pursuing a decentralized, country-driven process to determining adaptation needs and priorities, the INDCs encourage adaptation commitments that are contextually sensitive and politically realistic. These commitments are formalized in Article 7, which calls on all Parties to engage in assessments of impacts and vulnerability, the adoption of national adaptation plans, the determination of nationally prioritized actions, and the implementation of monitoring and evaluation of these actions. For developed country Parties, Article 9 further specifies responsibilities for mobilizing scaled-up climate financing to support adaptation and mitigation needs, accompanied by a mandatory biennial reporting requirement to monitor progress on resource commit- ments (Article 9). The formalization of adaptation commitments through the INDCs and Agreement is thus a sig- nificant step forward in realizing the likelihood of credible commitments from Parties to 'engage in adaptation planning processes and the implementation of actions' (Article 7, para 9).

Paris reflects a multilevel view on climate change politics

The language in the Paris Agreement marks a notable departure from a state-centric view of global climate poli- tics and emphasizes the multilevel, non-hierarchical nature of climate change governance. For example, while the Cancun Agreement 'Agrees that adaptation is a challenge faced by all Parties' (para 11), in the Paris Agree- ment 'Parties recognize that adaptation is a global challenge faced by all with local, subnational, national, regional, and international dimensions' (Article 7, para 2). This framing is more in line with the politics of climate change scholarship that characterizes the global climate change regime as fundamentally polycentric and shaped by diverse actor networks rather than state-centric and top-down (Jordan et al., 2015).

Furthermore, decision 1/CP.21 explicitly recognizes the need to mobilize and cooperate with non-state actors such as cities, local communities, Indigenous peoples, businesses, and civil society. Networks of non-state actors such as the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on Climate Change and the C40 have played substantial roles as interest groups advocating for larger state commitments to mitigation politics and resilience initiatives. This pressure may help

hold states accountable to adaptation priorities and climate financing commitments stated in the INDCs and so help achieve the adaptation goal set out in the Paris Agreement (Keohane & Victor, 2016). Discussions about how to integrate the private sector into climate financing mobilization remain a priority for further deliberation, including how states can incentivize private sector engagement with adaptation, and how governments and the private sector can find common ground with regard to objec- tives and outcomes for adaptation (Pauw, Klein, Vellinga, & Biermann, 2015).

Paris sets out a more robust institutional framework to enhance transparency around adaptation commitments and progress

The fundamental challenge for a successful climate agreement is establishing rules and procedures that bind actors to that agreement in the long term (Biermann et al., 2012; Levin, Cashore, Bernstein, & Auld, 2012). Rather than adopting a top-down implementation style that relies on coercive policy instruments, the UNFCCC relies on soft instruments and mechanisms, such as learning and mimicry, and so seeks a gradual diffu- sion of adaptation across space and time (Bernstein & Cashore, 2012). The greatest potential contributions of the Paris Agreement to adaptation are thus procedural in nature, particularly the introduction of adaptation com- munications (Article 7, para 10), a regular global stocktake of progress under the Convention (Article 7, para 14; Article 14), and a transparency framework to track progress on the implementation of INDCs and adaptation actions under Article 7 (Article 13). The integration of these more standardized and regularly implemented moni- toring, reporting, and evaluation mechanisms has the potential to fill the current reporting gaps for adaptation, make INDC pledges more focused with successive submissions, and render enforcement of the Paris Agreement more feasible over time (Ford et al., 2015; Lesnikowski, Ford, Biesbroek, Ford, & Heymann, 2016). More detailed reporting guidelines from the UNFCCC are necessary for improving consistency in how countries report progress towards meeting adaptation policy goals and treaty obligations, and will help policy makers identify policy and financing gaps within and across countries (Lesnikowski, Ford, Berrang-Ford, Barrera, & Heymann, 2015). The road ahead for adaptation after the Paris Agreement

The effectiveness of an international agreement ultimately depends on the ability of institutions to be self-enforcing due to some combination of reputational concern and normative buy-in from state actors (Simmons, 2010). In the case of the Paris Agreement, the procedural gains made through the establishment of a regular stocktake and adaptation communications provide enhanced transparency around national adaptation planning and may increase the accountability of state Parties to the adaptation goals set out in the INDCs. The expanded language around human rights and the cultural dimensions of climate change impacts also indicates that climate change vulnerability is increasingly being framed as a global challenge for ensuring human well-being along multiple dimensions, rather than as just an economic development issue. These areas of progress may be key mechan- isms by which the Agreement can achieve a level of self-enforcement among Parties in the long term.

Nonetheless, a number of key questions remain that will impact the extent to which this goal can be mean- ingfully realized across Parties. The first concerns the identification of appropriate reference points within countries from which to assess whether we are successfully ‘enhancing

adaptive capacity, strengthening resili- ence and reducing vulnerability to climate change' (Article 7, para 2). The Kyoto Protocol set reference dates to aid in emissions reduction target-setting, but determining such a reference point (or points) for adaptation requires a more complicated data collection process to understand where we are now with regard to adaptive capacity and adaptation actions within and across sectors, organizations, and institutions. This task is rendered more complex owing to the deeply context-specific nature of adaptation, not only with regard to the nature of vulnerable people, places, and ecosystems, but also in terms of how adaptation is integrated into existing con- stellations of policies, laws, rules, programmes, and mandates within countries and at different levels of govern- ment (Amaru & Chhetri, 2013).

Second, review processes for assessing progress on adaptation commitments will need to balance robust- ness and comparability of units or indicators that capture key aspects of vulnerability and adaptive capacity with being contextually appropriate (Ford & Berrang-Ford, 2016). Transparent and consistent decision-making on climate financing will require clarity on how adaptation intersects with broader development and risk reduction efforts, and thus what constitutes a 'progression beyond previous efforts' (Article 9, para 3). The diver- sity of perspectives on this question was evident during the Adaptation Committee's consultation forum at the 2016 Adaptation Futures gathering in Rotterdam, and will have significant implications for goal-setting, climate financing, and progress reviews.

Third, procuring adequate financing to support adaptation efforts is a critical outstanding challenge for achieving the ambitions of the Agreement. Article 9 of the Agreement states that 'developed countries shall provide financial resources to assist developing country Parties' and 'should aim to achieve a balance between adaptation and mitigation'; however, the Agreement is silent on quantifying exactly how much finan- cing should be produced by the public and private sectors, and where the spending of funds should be focused. Whether and how developed countries will follow through in mobilizing and sustaining commitments of $100 billion by 2020 remains to be seen. Ensuring that funds are equally distributed between mitigation and adap-tation projects may also prove challenging, given the soft language in the Agreement around the need to balance funds and the tendency for private sector investment to be directed at mitigation projects rather than adaptation.

Adaptation still lags behind mitigation at the country level in terms of political leadership and resource allo- cation. Our knowledge on current and projected climate change impacts makes clear, however, that rising global average temperature poses serious risks to human and natural systems and will affect society in complex ways. Immediate and rapid reduction in global GHG emissions remains the only hope for limiting climate change to a level that society can cope with and adapt to, but the reality of already emerging impacts necessitates the establishment of a stronger international framework for initiating, financing, and imple- menting adaptation. The provisions of the Paris Agreement begin to establish the processes and structures necessary to catalyse societal momentum around adaptation through a broader discourse about climate

change and human well-being, cooperation between state and non-state actors, national agenda-setting, and the creation of stronger reporting and evaluation mechanisms. The roadmap set out in the Agreement, there- fore, constitutes an important milestone for adaptation.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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