

Adaptation now!

# It's time to shift gears towards a balanced and equitable climate policy

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Albeit overshadowed by war unfolding in Ukraine, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) last week released the latest instalment of its Sixth Assessment Report ("AR6"). The landmark report comes at a time when stakes are particularly high. Notwithstanding substantive decisions on key issues, the latest UN Climate Change conference COP26 in Glasgow was criticised for lack of progress on adaptation-related issues and heated contention over how to address climate-induced losses and damages in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS). All eyes are on COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, later this year to respond to this shortcoming. The Global Goal on Adaptation, adaptation finance and Loss and Damage will be high on the agenda. Indeed, the Glasgow-to-Sharm El-Sheikh work programme was established precisely to accelerate operationalising the Global Goal on Adaptation.

### Adaptation is urgent, feasible and equitable

The contribution of "Working Group II" on Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability comprehensively assesses the effects of climate change, adaptation options and vulnerability with regard to natural and socio-economic systems, with attention to global and regional impacts, as well as urban centres, coastal cities and communities. It builds on the findings of Working Group I, and reaffirms that climate impacts are being experienced in all regions of the world and will affect social and natural systems faster and more severely than previously thought. Thus, the report challenges tacit assumptions about impacts as concerning primarily climate-vulnerable developing countries. It also zooms in on some key issues that warrant particular attention. Notably, the relevance of nature and ecosystems is reflected more strongly than in previous reports. Not least, the report is explicit in its emphasis on equity and justice as essential prerequisites for climate-resilient development. In short, the analysis is timely not only for its aggregation of the scientific state of the art, but also for outlining compelling options for urgent, feasible and equitable adaptation action.

**"Adaptation, as well as losses and damages from climate change, must no longer be pushed back relative to mitigation action. Adaptation solutions must be acknowledged as strategic priorities."**

Three takeaways are particularly noteworthy:

First, the report puts strong focus on systems and systemic transitions. A systemic lens is applied to human-nature-relations in cities, agriculture, land use, marine ecosystems and other social-ecological systems "from ocean to mountaintop"

as Inger Andersen, head of the UN Environment Programme, underscored during the report's release. As such the analysis identifies options for systemic responses to multiple and cascading crises, such as mutually compounding health risks from local heating, water scarcity and infectious diseases.

Second, the findings bring to the fore the justice dimension of climate impacts. Accordingly, mitigation and adaptation must be pursued simultaneously with equal urgency. Both are essential for 'just transitions' to climate-resilient development. While every tenth of a degree of avoided global warming will soften impacts, preventive adaptation is more effective, feasible, equitable, and cheaper than addressing losses and damages later. Moreover, to be effective and sustainable adaptation solutions must be inclusive of indigenous and local knowledge, and empower women.

Third, the report warns against maladaptation, unintended consequences of climate policy measures with harmful results for people and ecosystems. With growing empirical evidence for maladaptation, its adverse effects can be compounded by "a false sense of security" as Working Group II Co-Chair Debra Roberts stated during the presentation of the report. For instance, health and social risks linked to urban heat islands, can be amplified by poorly designed adaptive infrastructure. To recognize maladaptation is also to understand the limits of adaptation. Ineffective measures can push the limits of adaptation and ultimately lead to losses and damages. By some estimates, developing countries and least developed countries face \$300 billion loss annually to adaptation costs by 2030. Small islands and densely populated coastal cities are among the worst impacted.

Climate finance and adaptation must top COP27 agenda

While this is the starkest report yet, avoiding the worst is still possible. It requires urgent action. Accordingly, commensurate climate finance and growing investments into adaptation solutions must be on top of the agenda at COP27 in November.

Adaptation, as well as losses and damages from climate change, must no longer be pushed back relative to mitigation action. Adaptation solutions must be acknowledged as strategic priorities. Indeed, immediate and effective adaptation action is necessary to keep the process of multilateral climate governance on track: developing countries' legitimate priorities getting short shrift will undermine their ownership of the Paris Agreement and can hence weaken international climate cooperation both on mitigation and on adaptation. Yet, the objectives of the Paris Agreement will not be reached without such cooperation. Geopolitical turmoil notwithstanding, COP27 presents an outstanding opportunity to shift gears towards a more balanced and equitable global climate policy. It must not be wasted.