

Who Pays for Climate Change Adaptation? Climate Justice in the Mediterranean

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The impacts of climate change in the Mediterranean, on land and in the sea, are not merely visible through abstract scientific data but already impinge upon human and non-human life in the region. The steady increase of dry conditions, with a current annual mean temperature of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, precipitation, atmospheric circulation, extreme events, sea-level rise, sea water temperature, salinity and acidification in recent decades, highlights the ongoing necessity to step up mitigation efforts, but also the need to adapt to a changing climate in the Mediterranean region (MedECC, 2020). However, the list of specific challenges and risks created by climate change contrasts with the much more complex realities of implementing adequate adaptation measures. Both the already complex question “*what should be done?*,” and the equally important question “*how should it be done?*” create fundamental challenges for the region. On the one hand, adaptive capacities are shaped by how risks will develop in the future, which includes uncertainty over how intensity and frequency will not only constrain adaptation measures, but also shape other societal conflicts and resources. On the other hand, the implementation of adaptation measures is substantially impacted by the existing capacities of affected communities, their support on different scales of climate governance and the question of whose vision of adaptation will define its implementation. This highlights two fundamental points about adaptation: First, the question of climate justice permeates the debate about adaptation in multiple ways. Second,

adequate adaptation is a politically, socially and economically demanding process and does not happen out of necessity. Third, while implementing adaptation requires various resources, including climate finance, *not* addressing adaptation already means affected communities have to pay and will further drive up their costs. Currently, people most affected by climate change pay a double rate: societal actors and communities who have historically and currently contributed the least to climate change are now among those who are affected the most. At the same time, they are not mere victims of climate change, for they are also key in advancing successful adaptation measures, such as water-sensitive urban design, nature-based solutions or flood forecasting systems, which are already being implemented as part of specific initiatives in the Mediterranean region. However, with climate change and its associated risks further developing, a lack of engagement with adaptation risks further injustices not merely *between* the northern, southern and eastern Mediterranean countries but also *within* these countries. The Mediterranean region further highlights why discussions about rights for nature need to gain more ground considering the current pace of destruction of non-human life, from impacts on marine ecosystems to land biodiversity changes. These changes cannot be grasped in purely socioeconomic terms, given the meaning of nature for traditional lifestyles and diverse identities in the region.

Climate Justice and Climate Change Adaptation

Although climate activists and affected communities have struggled for climate justice for decades, its integration into climate policies by national govern-

ments and international organizations often remains as ambiguous as the reference in the Paris Agreement that notes “the importance for some of the concept of ‘climate justice,’ when taking action to address climate change, [...]”¹ Although there is no universally accepted definition of climate justice, several aspects stand out and need to be considered when discussing climate change adaptation. Despite the rich and diverse field of climate justice scholarship, I can only highlight a few key aspects here. Important indicators include: a) procedural climate justice, addressing processes of decision-making on climate policies; b) distributional climate justice, focusing on the allocation of costs and benefits of climate policies; c) recognition justice, underlining the importance of integrating diverse understandings, in particular marginalized communities and voices; and d) intergenerational climate justice, which highlights questions of past, present and future responsibilities and rights (Newell et al., 2021). On a general level, however, the principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR) formally guides many climate policies, with equity and responsibility mostly absent in a setting where Mediterranean communities are limited in their capacity to adapt, given that tense socioeconomic and political conditions are already shaping their possibilities. These already-established understandings of climate justice underline the access to finance, meaningful inclusion and acknowledgment of diverse local perspectives as some of the central features that should define adaptation policies in the region. In addition, equity also means a critical engagement with the responsibility of historically higher-emitting countries of the Global North and other actors who continue to benefit from producing and investing in fossil fuels, such as oil and gas companies, which continue to explore and exploit resources, including in the Mediterranean region.²

In contrast to climate justice principles, adequate financial resources are mostly lacking for implementing comprehensive adaptation measures. Many countries in the region face economic difficulties that limit their ability to allocate funds for adaptation. The costs of

necessary adaptation infrastructure, technologies and sustained capacity-building measures are high, especially in politically and economically disadvantaged regions in the Mediterranean South. Given the mostly ineffective mitigation efforts, adaptation costs will have substantially grown by 2050. While there is some support, such as the EU’s European Regional Development Fund, which is investing some €1.6 million in supporting its Member States’ marine protected areas in the Mediterranean,³ further financial support, especially in the southern and eastern regions remains opaque. Yet, the global adaptation finance gap, the difference between the estimated needs (US\$215 to US\$387 billion per year) and the actual flows of funding (US\$21.3 billion per year),⁴ which has grown significantly in recent years, points to challenges that the Mediterranean region is also facing. In addition to the lack of funding, important economic sectors in the region, such as agriculture, tourism and fisheries, are climate-sensitive. Hence, adaptation is a question of what resources are available to manage the growing risks, but also poses a challenge concerning just and equitable changes in economic practices.

Societal actors and communities who have historically and currently contributed the least to climate change are now among those who are affected the most

The Backdrop for Climate Change Adaptation in the Mediterranean

Although these climate justice principles help to identify the inequalities between those already disadvantaged by climate change, i.e. those who are currently already paying vis-à-vis those who ought to be paying for the risks that emerge with climate change, it is important to broaden the view on responsibilities by examining other dynamics that are shaping adap-

¹ Preamble, Paris Agreement, 2015 https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf.

² <https://mondediplo.com/2024/06/09mediterranean>.

³ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/projects/Croatia/mpa-adapt-preparing-the-mediterranean-region-for-the-impacts-of-climate-change.

⁴ Adaptation Gap Report 2023 www.unep.org/resources/adaptation-gap-report-2023.

tation and climate justice in the region. First, the region highlights the fact that adaptation and mitigation is inadequately subject to the binary view of either being local, in the case of adaptation, or global, in the case of mitigation. Although different scales of governance shape mitigation and adaptation practices, with local dynamics as key for implementing adaptation, all scales of governance are shaping decision-making processes and visions on adaptation – and, currently much more important, its lack of implementation. These range from the decisions and power of international organizations or states over climate finance to technology transfers across states supporting adaptation. The assumption of adaptation as a local process is further challenged in a region witnessing different kinds of human mobility, such as forced migration in the context of conflicts or labour migration. At the same time, many climate risks cannot be addressed within a national framework alone. For a long time, experts have underlined that water and sustainable water management, a key problem for the region, is in many ways a transboundary issue; yet there is little cooperation. All these dynamics highlight that adaptation cannot merely be seen as a place-based practice of homogenous actors and communities. Rather, adaptation in the Mediterranean region has to happen in a highly dynamic setting, which is imbued with different conflicts, mobilities and power relations across and within countries.

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Second, the above underlines the necessity to unpack and fill further knowledge gaps on the often intricate relationships between climate change and social dynamics. Some examples, such as the rising mean temperatures and longer periods of droughts, which create substantial challenges for the agricultural sector and human health, are often solely linked to changes in physical conditions. Similarly, the issue of migra-

tion becomes a “climate issue” in public discourse, in which often unsubstantiated claims are made about the relation between climate change and rising migrant arrivals. The Mediterranean region, especially the southern and eastern parts where ongoing conflicts are rife, is now increasingly seen as a good testbed for proving direct links between climate change and migration. However, existing research at the nexus of climate and environmental change, conflict and migration provides little evidence for such a direct link. In contrast, it underlines that it may impinge on already existing conflicts in some contexts and shapes societal dynamics in diverse and often indirect ways. The implications of climate change are mitigated by different societal actors, such as international organizations, the state, governments, bureaucracies or local authorities. Responsibilities and the agency of different relevant actors in shaping climate change adaptation are often obscured by the claim that climate change in itself causes conflicts or migration. Third, the current discrepancy between the Mediterranean region being identified as a “climate hot spot” and the lack of engagement with adaptation, not only underlines that the implementation gap is itself fundamentally inequitable for those already affected, but also that the support of fair visions of adaptation are, by and large, missing. Affected communities are reliant on scarce resources and individual projects organized by governments and international NGOs. These gaps contribute to widening already existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, for example among migrants, women and youth, for whom adaptive capacities are already limited, which can only be countered through actively supporting adaptation.

What Kind of Adaptation and Climate Justice?

The current dynamics in the Mediterranean region highlight the fact that the road is long to climate justice in the context of climate change adaptation. Yet, its length does not merely consist in fundamentally changing the dire situation of vulnerable communities already paying most dearly for the inaction of international and national actors, who should be translating their responsibility into action and effectively channeling financial support to those in need (Barrett, 2013). Climate change action is increasingly discussed under the theme of potential investment opportunities,

especially when it comes to renewable energies and other emerging technologies, instead of addressing the impact of climate change. Adaptation suffers in many ways in this regard, as it is often not seen as producing returns on investments.

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Thus, the road towards climate justice also consists of defining and implementing adaptations that are just, inclusive and sustainable. Against this backdrop, the different challenges described above highlight the fact that adaptation needs to be understood as a highly demanding process. Ideal types of adaptation differentiate between coping, incremental and transformational (Gresse et al., 2023). Coping is usually borne out of necessity and limited resources and may even lead to maladaptation when certain practices lead to more, instead of less, vulnerability. In the Mediterranean region, the agricultural sector might be an example of unsustainable farming practices resulting from a lack of alternatives. Transformational adaptation opposes the idea of mere risk management and addresses structural and systemic challenges and inequalities. This includes challenging questions: who should be included in defining adaptation goals and practices? What information and knowledge should inform these goals? What are appropriate timeframes for adaptation practices? There are no one-size-fits-all answers to these questions. Yet, climate justice requires the meaningful inclusion of affected communities on all scales of governance, as well as addressing historical and current responsibilities in the context of climate change (Wilkens and Datchoua-Tirvaudey, 2022).

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