

International organizations and adaptation governance: Lessons for policymaking



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“International organizations play a crucial role in strengthening adaptation. They contribute to developing adaptation approaches and providing technical assistance for countries to adapt to climate impacts.”

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Photo (above): Climate change,
drought and hope.
Credit: Alohaflaminggo / Shutterstock.

Summary

The past decade has seen increased political debate about how and how well international organizations have promoted human adaptation to climate change. Non-climate organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations and the World Bank have played an important role in enhancing adaptation action both at domestic and global levels. In a recent study, we map adaptation governance in 30 international organizations from 1990 to 2017 and identify concrete barriers and opportunities for international stakeholders in global adaptation governance.

Key messages

- Adaptation has been increasingly mainstreamed into different policy areas related to global governance, such as health, migration and security.
- International organizations play an important role in reducing the knowledge gaps regarding complex adaptation problems and in bridging fragmented policy communities.
- To mainstream adaptation, international organizations require adequate funding and the ability to anticipate climate risks, geopolitical shifts and state interests.

Long viewed as a technical issue to be dealt with locally, adaptation to the adverse effects of climate change on humans, communities and states, has recently been catapulted to the top of the international political agenda. International organizations (IOs) are developing adaptation approaches, spreading knowledge and providing technical assistance for countries to adapt to the impacts of climate change. A central area of IOs' activities is to promote new collaborations and platforms, such as the Global Commission on Adaptation, and sector-specific initiatives, such as the Environment and Security Initiative.

Defining and measuring climate change adaptation has been a challenge and is seen as controversial in much of the existing literature (Biagini et al. 2014). For the purposes of this brief, we rely on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) definition of adaptation as a process of change, “adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities” (IPCC 2014, p. 5).

In this policy brief, we summarize key insights from our Mistra Geopolitics research on adaptation governance. First, we sketch out how, and the extent to which, 30 IOs mainstreamed adaptation from 1990 to 2017. Second, we focus on the role of the following three UN agencies' adaptation governance in the climate-conflict, climate-health and climate-migration nexuses: UN Environment, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the World Health Organization (WHO). Studying these IOs has enabled us to draw conclusions about the barriers and opportunities for Swedish and international stakeholders in global adaptation governance.

1. International organizations and new adaptation nexuses

Despite the increasing engagement of IOs in global adaptation governance, there is intriguing variation in the extent to which IOs do so over time (Figure 1). The evidence clearly shows that since 2007, the 30 IOs that were part of our study, and that have a mandate in a policy domain other than environmental affairs, have increasingly mainstreamed adaptation.

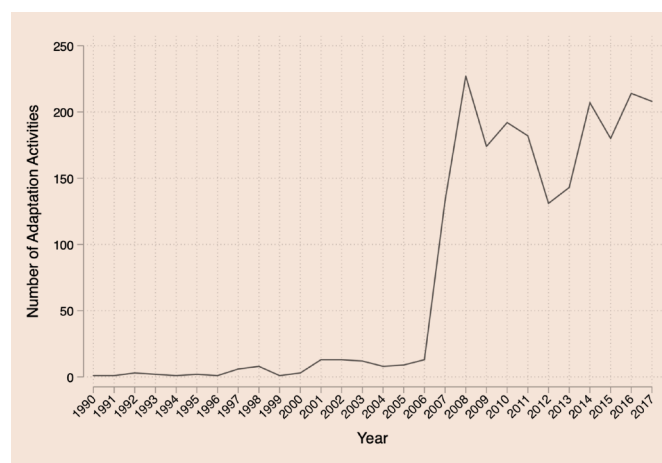


Figure 1: Total number of responses to climate adaptation activities across 30 IOs from 1990 to 2017.

Source: Dellmuth, Gustafsson and Kural (2020); Kural (2020).

The evidence suggests that IOs who never addressed adaptation before 2007 have started to do so since then. What is more, IOs who already engaged with adaptation before 2007 started to increase their climate adaptation activities after 2007.

The year 2007 was a critical juncture as the fourth IPCC report was released and the Bali Action Plan, was adopted. In this plan, an adaptation fund was created, and adaptation was framed as one of the four pillars of climate action, along with mitigation, technology and financing. In its 2014 Synthesis Report, the IPCC confirmed that addressing adaptation challenges effectively depends on policies and cooperation

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across all levels of governance, including global governance (IPCC 2014). In 2015, the Paris Agreement finally recognized climate adaptation as a global challenge (Article 7.2).

Non-climate IOs, focusing on a wide array of issues, are currently mainstreaming adaptation in their policies and projects. Based on careful desk-research, we decided to include the following policy areas that have all been identified as critical to adaptation (see also Person 2019):

- finance and development banking
- economic affairs
- disaster risk management
- health
- development
- peace and security
- migration
- food and agriculture
- regional cooperation spanning multiple issue areas.

Most adaptation activities are observed in IOs in disaster risk management. Out of all the IOs in this field, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) has on average mainstreamed adaptation the most into its activities during the period 1990-2017. In the middle field of mainstreaming taking place is the WHO which has made significant efforts to strengthen the coordination between the climate and health policy communities.

Comparatively lower levels of mainstreaming are found among global development banks (the Asian Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank and the African Development Bank) and the regional organizations (e.g., the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the African Union). Low levels of adaptation mainstreaming are found in peace and security IOs (the UN Security Council, The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), as well as trade IOs (the World Trade Organization) (Dellmuth et al. 2020; Kural 2020).

Barriers to global adaptation governance

Based on ample evidence from standardized and semi-structured interviews with member state representatives, non-state actors and IO representatives, our research identifies problem complexity, institutional fragmentation and limited adaptation funding as the main barriers to improving global adaptation action. In this section, we describe how our in-depth case studies of the UNHCR, the WHO and UN Environment have sought to overcome these challenges (Dellmuth et al. 2020).

To begin with, problem complexity refers to the difficulty in finding causal links between climate change and its impacts on an issue, such as the relationship between climate change and health. Problem complexity and resulting knowledge uncertainty of climate impacts on other issue areas, such as health, migration and conflict, often make it difficult to establish new nexuses in adaptation governance. Uncertainty, in turn, can reduce IOs' motivation for further action.

Institutional fragmentation occurs when institutional linkages between climate adaptation and new issue areas are weak and undermined by conflicting ideas and framings of how and in which organization (e.g., multilateral organizations,



Village on South Tarawa atoll, Kiribati in Oceania. Low-lying islands is threatened by sea level rise due to climate change. Credit: Maloff / Shutterstock.

partnerships, or national legislative assemblies) climate impacts on the issue area should be debated. Institutional fragmentation poses a challenge for IOs as they have to overcome potentially conflicting goals and norms prior to addressing new nexuses in adaptation governance.

Availability of resources – such as knowledge, information, time, money and staff – is a crucial determinant of assessing adaptation challenges and responding adequately. IO funding is increasingly earmarked, which makes it difficult for IOs to address issues outside their core mandates if powerful donors object. For instance, 70% of the WHO's funding is earmarked (UNCSD 2017), making it one of the organizations most dependent on external funding to address adaptation. In a context where adaptation is still heavily underfunded, it is important to step up the global commitment to fund the growing needs of adaptation action.

From these three barriers, we derive practical implications for how IOs might better address adaptation governance.

2. How IOs can enhance adaptation governance

Knowledge generation

Uncertainty can be overcome through active creation and dissemination of scientific knowledge. Our case study material shows that IOs have been able to overcome problem complexity in relation to adaptation-related policy challenges in the past, mainly due to the varying nature of the problem. For example, the WHO has played an important role in generating knowledge about the climate-health nexus. Since the early 1990s, the WHO has conducted research on different types of climate impacts and developed guidelines for how health facilities can engage in adaptation activities.

In contrast, UN Environment experienced difficulties in defining the complex linkages between climate and conflict risks, which in turn made it difficult to generate political support and develop appropriate interventions to effectively address climate-conflict risks. On the action level, to alleviate the adverse effects of climate change on violent conflicts, UN Environment has collaborated with non-state actors and other IOs and set up projects dedicated to the climate-conflict nexus. A key purpose of these efforts was to generate knowledge on how to address the complex climate-conflict risks.

Given the complexity of the climate-migration nexus, implying uncertain effects of climate change on migration, the UNHCR has followed a similar path to UN Environment in trying to improve knowledge. Importantly, UNHCR has collaborated with non-state actors and academics to generate empirical evidence on the multifaceted impacts of climate change on migration and human security and how such risks could be effectively mitigated.

Bridging fragmented policy communities

In the context of the shift from a state-centered to an increasingly fragmented global environmental governance architecture, numerous institutions tackle the same problems in the same issue area (see also Zelli and van Asselt 2013). Our research highlights that in such an environment, IOs play an important role in promoting cooperation across organizations and bridging fragmented policy communities. Again, our three focal IOs have been varyingly able to do so due to varying challenges in the three nexuses.

For example, in the case of the climate-conflict nexus, the institutional linkages between climate adaptation and security institutions have historically been weak. Conflicting ideas and framings have hampered consensus about how and which organizations should address climate and conflict issues. To overcome such fragmentation, UN Environment has since 2009 sought to bridge the environmental and security communities but has faced significant political opposition in both policy communities. In response, UN Environment has, since 2016, increasingly sought to develop conflict-sensitive approaches to adaptation.

Likewise, the WHO has, since 2009, engaged in raising awareness about the necessity of integrating health into international climate negotiations and national adaptation planning. To bridge the gap between the health and climate policy communities, the WHO tried to ensure that its guidelines speak to both communities and that health components and representatives are integrated into adaptation decision-making and resource allocation processes.

In the area of climate-migration, top-level bureaucrats in the UNHCR were pivotal in linking the relatively separate climate adaptation and migration communities. António Guterres, in his role as the High Commissioner, has continually advocated for extending the UNHCR's mandate to also include issues pertaining to climate-induced migration (see also Hall 2016).



Syrian refugees escaping from conflict. Photo: Ajdin Kamber / Adobe Stock.

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Taken together, knowledge uncertainty and fragmented policy communities emerge as the two key challenges to global adaptation governance in our research. To improve global responses to climate risks in times of an accelerating climate crisis, it is ever more important that IOs seek to improve the evidence base and integration of adaptation responses across sectors.

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Navigating towards a secure and sustainable future

Mistra Geopolitics examines the dynamics of geopolitics, human security and environmental change. Mistra Geopolitics brings together an interdisciplinary research team of six Swedish consortium partners: Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Linköping University, Uppsala University, Stockholm University and Lund University, with two high-profile international research institutes, E3G and adelphi.

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