

Getting Real

Article by Alessio Giussani

June 12, 2024

From workers' rights to questions of wellbeing, redistribution, global resource justice, and energy and food security, adjusting to the impacts of climate change is fraught with difficult political choices. Any credible attempt to "stay with the trouble" must entail a visionary political project of radical transformation.

Adaptation is today's buzzword in climate discussions. It is on everyone's lips in Brussels, front and centre in scientific reports on climate change, at the top of cities' concerns, and fought for by civil society, workers, advocacy groups, and climate activists. In March this year, the European Environment Agency published its first Climate Risk Assessment, urging EU member states to better prepare for climate impacts. At last year's COP28 in Dubai, countries in the Global South pushed for the approval of a Loss and Damage Fund to help developing countries cope with the effects of climate change. According to the UN-sponsored Global Commission on Adaptation, no matter the ultimate mitigation path, adaptation strategies are worth pursuing.

Within the green movement, however, the idea of adjusting to the present and future impacts of climate change has long been associated with defeatism. This is not without reason: the political seeds of climate chaos, planted in twentieth-century inaction, found fertile ground in adaptation discourses centred on technological innovation. Still today, the human capacity for adaptation features prominently in techno-optimistic arguments for climate delay and the space colonisation dreams of billionaire tech CEOs. There is also a more fundamental reason to be suspicious of adaptation: Why adapt to a reality of destruction and inequality? Shouldn't we strive to change it instead?

Yet the need to adapt is inescapable. Average temperatures are rising; heatwaves, floods, droughts, and other climate impacts are the new normal in Europe and around the world; and war and geopolitical tensions have made questions of energy and food security a priority, also in wealthy nations. In this context, adaptation is fraught with difficult political choices "in all areas of public action", as the president of France's Court of Audit put it.

As several contributions to this edition note, many of these choices need to be made on the ground and tailored to the local level. Compared to global emissions reduction targets, adaptation is more context specific and therefore suited to meaningful democratic participation. With global leaders failing to deliver on climate change mitigation with the necessary resolve and vested interests fuelling a backlash against climate policies, participatory adaptation can drive up social acceptance for the green transition, addressing questions of social and climate justice.

Direct participation in adaptation efforts can take different forms. Workers fighting for protection against weather hazards and asserting their rights in green industries are demanding that the costs of the transition not be displaced onto the masses. A months-long strike at a Tesla plant in Sweden has gathered broad solidarity in Scandinavia, while in Germany, public transport workers have allied with climate activists to advocate for public investment in the transition.

When seeking to prevent risks such as floods, local authorities can act in concert with communities to ensure that policies take into account the concerns and aspirations of those whose lives they affect. In other cases, mutual solidarity takes place on the fringes of, or in conflict with, institutional action, for instance in the case of initiatives to green cities through urban and guerrilla gardening or self-organised responses to natural disasters.

This opportunity for democratic involvement should not reduce the need for adaptation to a call for individual behaviour change, nor can it replace action by policymakers at all levels. Forums for global leaders, for instance, should play a role in mobilising and redirecting financial and technological resources towards developing countries, while the European Union is uniquely placed to better protect its citizens in times of eco-social crisis, move away from growth and consumerism towards sufficiency, and set up spaces for long-term thinking beyond electoral cycles. Political recipes that granted prosperity in the 19th and 20th centuries need to be rethought and adapted to the reality of a climate-damaged planet.

Macro-level responses need to be part of the equation, but they can also compound the violence of climate change. For instance, technocratic control of climate risk mitigation often fails to deliver democratically acceptable solutions. Similarly, national and EU-level adaptation strategies can amplify discrimination and vulnerabilities if they increase securitisation and border policing in response to perceived threats of “climate migration” and “climate conflicts”.

Recognising the political nature of adaptation prompts us to look beyond the artificial (and ultimately harmful) compartmentalisation of climate action. Adaptation is about equity, justice, and wellbeing within planetary boundaries, which is not possible without swift mitigation measures. In this sense, as political ecology has always recognised, prosperity for all amidst environmental change entails far-reaching social and economic transformation.

Both social and climate scientists acknowledge that adapting and changing are linked. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines “transformational adaptation” as a process that goes “beyond adjusting existing practices” and implies “deep and long-term societal changes”, which include “values and worldviews”.

As the climate emergency gets real, responses to it need to move away from grand declarations, aspirational goals, and invariably watered-down action and embrace more visionary politics that includes perspectives from the margins. But the urgency of adaptation also imposes the primacy of practice over vision – or rather the realisation that political imagination is not disembodied and only expands through collective action, both within and outside institutions.

By critiquing examples of maladaptation and showcasing stories of transformative change, this edition sets out to come to terms with climate adaptation from a green perspective – that is, to sketch out the political project that must underlie any credible attempt to “stay with the trouble”.

This is the editorial of the Green European Journal’s summer 2024 edition At the Edge: Frontiers of Climate Adaptation. You can read the full edition [online](#), or [order your print copy](#).



Alessio Giussani is interim editor-in-chief of the *Green European Journal*. He was formerly contributing editor of *Eurozine* (Vienna) and a freelance journalist based in Athens, Greece.

Published June 12, 2024

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/getting-real/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.