

Time to Adapt

Article by Philippa Nuttall

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Climate-related extremes are causing countries billions of euros in damage each year, and the more temperatures rise, the greater the costs will be. The EU has prompted its member states to prioritise climate adaptation, but progress has been slow, and European approaches still lack consistency. Community-led but coordinated adaptation strategies are imperative not just for the economy, but also for the health and security of EU citizens.

Until recently, in Europe at least, adaptation was almost considered a dirty word by climate campaigners and scientists, focused as they were on mitigation and the importance of cutting greenhouse gas emissions to halt a rise in temperatures. Any mention of needing to adapt to more extreme weather events was largely reserved for countries in Africa or Asia.

But emissions aren't falling as they must if the world is to avoid the worst impacts of global warming. As a result, adaptation is becoming front and centre in climate discussions across the globe, including in the EU. In March, the European Environment Agency (EEA) published the first-ever [European Climate Risk Assessment](#) to help EU member states identify policy priorities for climate change adaptation, warning of the myriad threats to "energy and food security, ecosystems, infrastructure" and more in "the fastest warming continent in the world".

Although the agency praises EU member states for their increasing use of national climate risk assessments to inform adaptation policy development, action on adaptation is moving too slowly. "Societal preparedness is still low, as policy implementation is lagging substantially behind quickly-increasing risk levels," says the assessment. "Most of the climate risks are co-owned by the EU and its member states; therefore, coordinated and urgent additional action is required at all governance levels."

The EEA assessment coincided with the Copernicus Climate Change Service [confirming](#) that 2023 had been the hottest year on record, "with global temperatures reaching an alarming 1.48 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels". It should be remembered that leaders pledged in the 2015 Paris Agreement to keep warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius. While natural phenomena – notably the transition from La Niña to El Niño conditions – influenced the global temperature rise in 2023, Copernicus also highlights the continuing upward trajectory of greenhouse gases and their "significant role in driving global warming".

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we know it.*

This year is likely to be just as hot, if not even hotter, Copernicus warns. The month of March was warmer globally than any previous March on record; not only that, but this was the 10th warmest month in a row compared with the same month in previous years. The average European temperature for March 2024 was 2.12 degrees Celsius above the 1991-2020 average for the month. It was also a wetter

month than average in most of western Europe, while paradoxically, the rest of Europe was drier. Climate change attribution increasingly shows the link between such abnormal weather patterns and climate change.

Greater financing, greater urgency

Adaptation becomes vital if life is to continue largely as we know it. Carlo Buontempo, director of Copernicus, insists on a dual strategy of cutting emissions and preparing for the impacts of a climate-changed world “using climate change data and knowledge to prepare for the future”. Adaptation is also an economic imperative. Between 1980 and 2022, climate-related extremes caused an estimated 650 billion euros in economic losses in the EU according to a report published in March 2024 by the Covenant of Mayors. Of that figure, 59.4 billion euros was lost in 2021 and 52.3 billion euros in 2022 alone.

Meanwhile, a March 2023 report from the EEA on the costs and benefits of climate change adaptation warns that failure to adapt will become increasingly expensive. In a scenario where the global temperature increase is limited to 1.5 degrees Celsius, the estimated adaptation investments are around 40 billion euros a year (for the EU-27 and the UK). But if temperatures rise to 2 degrees Celsius, total investment will need to grow to between 80 billion euros and 120 billion euros a year, and 175 billion euros to 200 billion euros at a 3- to 4-degree rise.

Evidence that worsening heatwaves, droughts, floods, and wildfires are not only the fate of far-flung countries has driven acceptance of the need for both mitigation and adaptation measures in the EU. Yet as the EEA report says, the EU and member states will have to act with much greater urgency, and with much greater financing, if infrastructure and people are to be better able to live in a warmer world.

Legal obligation

In 2021, as part of the European Green Deal, the EU adopted a new strategy on adaptation. The strategy sets out how, through “faster” and “more systemic” adaptation, the bloc can “become climate resilient by 2050”.

Adaptation is now a legal obligation. The European Climate Law, which entered into force in July 2021, includes a requirement for the EU and member states to continuously enhance their adaptive capacity, strengthen their resilience, and reduce their vulnerability to climate change in accordance with the Paris Agreement. The law contains provisions for national adaptation strategies and plans and equires the European Commission to regularly assess such measures and issue recommendations where it finds they are inconsistent with the law’s aims.

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the climate adaptation challenge.*

The pressure for more action on climate adaptation is also coming from campaigners. In February 2024, a host of non-profits signed the so-called Liège Declaration at the Climate Change Summit in Belgium. The Declaration calls on policymakers “to make adaptation a key priority” and “to integrate a culture of prevention and resilience at all levels of governance”, as well as to “produce climate and environmental risk assessments to inform and strengthen future adaptation plans”. It also urges the mobilisation of local governments, the private sector – including insurers and investors – trade unions, and civil society to

create “bottom-up, gender-responsive local and regional adaptation plans and policies”. Finally, it commits them to taking a “community-led and community-based local and regional approach to adaptation issues”.

In March 2023, EU member states reported on their national climate adaptation plans. Since 2019, all countries have had adaptation policies in place, but as the EEA report shows, these vary in design and quality. Positively, the agency reported that national climate risk assessments are increasingly being used to inform adaptation policy development. Between the first reporting cycle in 2021 and 2023, roughly half of EU countries – namely Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and Sweden – reported substantial achievements in updating or conducting new assessments of climate-related hazards, vulnerabilities, and risks. On the other hand, it noted, countries with legal obligations for repeated climate risk assessments remain an exception in the EU. A minority of countries is yet to even produce their first national overarching assessment.

“Governance-related challenges are a persistent barrier to the implementation of adaptation actions in many countries, even where well-developed governance frameworks are in place,” adds the report. “These challenges include difficulties in coordination due to limitations in financial, technical, and human capacities.”

EU funding for adaptation measures comes from a multitude of programmes, including Interreg, the LIFE Programme, and Horizon Europe, the EU research and innovation funding programme. Most prominent is the EU Mission: Adaptation to Climate Change initiative, launched under Horizon Europe in 2021. The initiative is aimed at helping at least 150 European regions and communities increase their climate resilience by 2030.

Europe-wide change

As the EEA report suggests, different countries are responding in their own way to the climate adaptation challenge. Germany, for example, has set up a climate adaptation centre to help municipalities build knowledge, select and use funding, train staff, and exchange and network around the implementation of projects.

In France, the Cour des comptes, the country’s supreme body for auditing the use of public funds, said in its annual report released in February that the French government should be much clearer on its plans to manage and finance the country’s adaptation. The report suggests the government’s “evaluation of current and future costs for adaptation is lacking in detail, if not nonexistent”. Pierre Moscovici, first president of the Cour des comptes, said the government should “fix clear objectives” and “define a trajectory to reach them”, recommending “massive public and private investments” and making clear that adapting to climate change means that “political choices will have to be made in all areas of public action”.

Denmark is often cited as a leading actor on the energy transition. A February 2023 report by the International Energy Agency cites higher temperatures, increased rainfall, and rising sea levels as the main climate-related issues the country will face. Since the 1870s, Denmark’s annual precipitation has increased by roughly 20 per cent, and climate projections indicate a further increase over the century, particularly in winter, warns the IEA. “More intense precipitation events could raise the risk of floods and aggravate the impacts on the energy system,” it says.

Focused on these threats, 96 out of the 98 Danish municipalities have developed local adaptation action

plans based on guidance from the Danish Nature Agency, and the government is drawing up a new national climate adaptation plan. (In 2020, the Danish Coastal Authority published a nationwide risk assessment for the Danish coastline, which included mapping of flood and coastal erosion risks and proposals for risk reduction strategies and coastal protection initiatives.)

Adaptation plans across Europe will largely have to be implemented on the ground at a local level.

Drought and floods are two of the main climate threats Hungary faces, with potential impacts on agriculture, food security, and soil degradation. In 2014, the country agreed its Second National Climate Change Strategy, which will run until 2025. It sets out ways to increase the resilience of livelihoods to disasters caused by climate change and to make agriculture more productive and sustainable.

A common thread through climate adaptation plans across Europe is that they will largely have to be implemented on the ground at a local level. With this in mind, a Policy Support Facility (PSF), under the Covenant of Mayors, was launched by the Commission to help local and regional authorities develop and implement climate adaptation measures. The PSF, a two-year pilot programme, ran from 2022 to 2023, and led to a series of national workshops that brought together local authorities from 12 member states. The work was focused on four areas, namely financing, nature regeneration, just resilience, and disaster risk reduction.

The projects supported under the programme were varied. Many were based on improving nature as a way to help jointly manage the biodiversity and climate crises. One such project was support for the greening of a park in Ampelokipoi–Menemeni, a municipality of Thessaloniki in Greece, as a way to address threats from extreme heat, droughts, and water scarcity, as well as heavy precipitation and flooding. It included introducing more areas of shade to the park in order to reduce the effect of heatwaves. Elsewhere, projects included help to establish a climate adaptation coordination group in Apulia, Italy, and support to clean up and revitalise natural ponds in Hluk, Czech Republic, to better deal with flood waters.

Costs and benefits

The EEA also makes clear the importance of analysing the cost-benefit ratio of various adaptation measures, citing heatwave warning systems as one of the most cost-efficient ways to help cities adapt to climate change. At the scale of European capital cities, it estimates the cost-benefit ratio of such systems at between 11 and a mightily impressive 3700. The report lists various projects and their relative cost-benefit ratio. One example is an analysis of the green (natural) and grey (human-made) measures – from the restoration of wetlands to the expansion, reconstruction, and modernisation of river embankments – to reduce the risk of river flooding in Sandomierz, Poland. The measures cost around 217 million euros, says the EEA – far below the estimated 445 million euros that would need to be paid out to repair flood damage to buildings.

In April 2024, the European Investment Bank held the first of its Adaptation Days conferences, which brought together numerous stakeholders – banks, insurers, scientists, local councils, and more – to explore adaptation solutions. Roman Röhrli, a European Investment Bank adaptation expert, told the conference: “So far, adaptation is often a small component of bigger projects. We would like to see more bespoke investment programmes where adaptation comes first. We see projects where, for example, a

section of a motorway is upgraded and adapted. What we want to see is the adaptation of the whole network.”

Bouke de Vries, an advisor to the board of Rabobank, said during the event that banks and the financial sector can help change the system, but that they need more clarity from governments before they act. “We don’t often ask for regulation, but here we do,” he said. In the Netherlands, Rabobank is working with business parks and homeowners to offer programmes tailored to adapting to climate change. “We asked the government to pinpoint where we should not build anymore, and where we can, with modifications,” he said. “Climate mitigation and adaptation need to be seen as an opportunity, not just a risk.”

Questionable policies

Responding to the EEA’s climate risk assessment, Maroš Šefčovič, the EU vice-president for the European Green Deal, told journalists that changing the way Europe does business is “a matter of economic survival”. The Commission’s response to the EEA report was to pledge to include “climate consistency checks” in better regulation requirements and to help ensure the availability of “high quality” and “accessible” climate data. It also promised to improve understanding around the risks of climate change to critical infrastructure, as well as how energy supplies, transport links, and buildings can be better protected from extreme weather events.

On the non-profit side, the WWF is calling for a new EU climate adaptation framework that guides, coordinates, and drives member states’ actions better than it believes the EU’s current adaptation strategy does. This includes prioritising nature-based solutions and a water and climate resilience law.

However, the recent direction of some EU policies – not least the decision to rush through legislation to reduce environmental measures aimed at making farming more sustainable and resilient under the Common Agricultural Policy, and the continuing failure to agree on the EU Nature Restoration Law after lastminute opposition from Hungary – has left many campaigners questioning the direction of climate policy travel.

“Protecting EU citizens isn’t just about the climate, it is about our energy independence, economy, health, ecosystems, and food security. It encompasses our whole society, and any time for complacency is long past,” says Alex Mason, head of Climate and Energy at WWF’s European Policy Office.

He insists on the need for adaptation and mitigation policies. “It won’t be easy, but the alternative – trying to adapt to runaway climate change – will be nearly impossible.”



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