

Policy pointers

The UNFCCC and Parties must work to define a clear conceptual framework to underpin the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA), and provide more accessible guidance to enable operationalisation.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning systems for reporting on the GGA are essential, and international agencies and donors must ensure they are grounded in national priorities rather than top-down requirements.

Coordination efforts on the GGA by the international community need to emphasise promoting equitable progress rather than overzealous technical rigour.

Progress on adaptation requires that climate finance donors must streamline processes and eligibility to ensure all countries can access climate finance.

Progressing the Global Goal on Adaptation – key issues

The Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) established under the Paris Agreement aims to drive collective action on climate adaptation. But to effectively measure progress, the international community must address conceptual, methodological and capacity issues. The framework of the GGA will strongly influence what type of adaptation action will be prioritised — in other words, what will count in the eyes of the international community. There has been little progress on establishing guidelines for operationalising the GGA, despite the first progress review being due in 2023 as part of the Global Stocktake. The international community and UNFCCC bodies must ensure that the processes designed under the GGA balance robustness with supporting the needs and capacities of developing countries, where adaptation efforts are most required.

The 2015 Paris Agreement (PA) was a definitive step towards achieving political parity between mitigation and adaptation. The PA establishes a Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) to provide a target for work on adaptation; it aims to enhance adaptive capacity, strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability to climate change. Article 14 of the PA states that the collective progress by individual countries will be assessed through the Global Stocktake. This periodic review will take place every five years — with information gathering starting this year and the stocktake concluding in 2023.

There are currently processes through which individual countries can plan, communicate and report their mitigation and adaptation targets, progress and contributions. These include Nationally Determined Contributions, National Adaptation Plans, and Adaptation Communications.¹ However, Parties have yet to determine how to measure what countries have

already achieved and their future progress on adaptation for the GGA.

The Adaptation Committee (AC) is the lead body working on adaptation under the Convention and is expected to provide significant advice on the GGA and the stocktake. Despite the ongoing work of the AC (drafting technical papers that review and propose approaches to review the overall progress made in achieving the GGA) countries have limited information with which to kick-start national discussions and preparations for assessing progress on the GGA.

In fact, there is currently no clear roadmap for operationalising the GGA — despite the fact that the stocktake is starting this year. There are ongoing discussions on identifying the concepts for a collective vision for the GGA, on methodologies to assess adaptation, and on the support needed to deliver on the GGA.

Due to the contextual and qualitative nature of adaptation, its progress can hardly be adequately measured by numbers alone

There is currently a wide difference in the levels of preparation for the GGA between countries, potentially undermining and excluding countries with fewer capacities and resources from the discussions. This information gap can drastically limit country and international progress on adaptation actions.

This briefing aims to provide an overview of the conceptual and technical challenges around the current discussions on the GGA. We highlight the practical implications of these challenges in the current debate, especially for developing countries, along with three key considerations for its operationalisation.

Three key priorities to operationalise the GGA

The GGA must be easily operational for all signatory countries in the PA, but it should also be a driver for accelerated adaptation actions. To move forward, three key dimensions must be addressed:

Conceptually defining what ‘collective adaptation’ means. Climate adaptation broadly refers to “the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects. In human systems, adaptation seeks to moderate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities. In natural systems, human intervention may facilitate adjustment to expected climate and its effects”.² This means what is considered as adaptation is wide-ranging, but also highly contextual: its meaning will vary for different people, environments and cultures. While mitigation efforts can be measured by quantifying greenhouse gas emissions, there is no single — nor any specific set of — metric or indicator that can appropriately represent the breadth and variety of adaptation efforts across the world.

This complexity is reflected by the several frameworks and concepts already used to define and refer to adaptation, such as vulnerability, resilience and adaptive capacities. These concepts are intertwined and often used interchangeably, but there is no consensus on a single framework that can universally accommodate all conceptualisations of adaptation. The text of the PA refers to several of these concepts but lumping together related but different concepts may cloud the next steps on identifying frameworks and methodologies to achieve the GGA.³

What does this mean then when we start thinking about measuring “collective adaptation progress” for a “global” goal, as mentioned in the Paris Agreement? There is currently no clear definition on what must be measured, and at which scale progress will be assessed — for example based on national goals or sectoral plans. The conceptual framework supporting the GGA and its vision must be established sooner rather than later to move to the next steps: identifying methodologies.

Focussing on fair processes and systems rather than metrics. The collective assessment of adaptation progress is intrinsically linked with methodological dilemmas. These include aggregation, comparison and collation through metrics and indicators, as well as the inevitable comparison with mitigation methods. Due to the contextual and qualitative nature of adaptation, its progress can hardly be adequately measured by numbers alone — and the PA recognises the need for differentiated, mixed approaches for the GGA.

A relevant framework must not only consist of multiple possible indicators, but ones that can allow for contextualisation while maintaining a suitable level of commonality in the definitions. Yet with a high level of complexity in operationalising adaptation measurements, there are concerns around the level of resources and capacities needed to collect so much data.

Robust methodological frameworks are difficult to implement for most developing countries, for whom resources are limited. This in turn can lead to differences in data quality, and a negative bias in the data. In other words, it can look like developing countries are not progressing on adaptation — but the problem lies in data collection not implementing appropriate interventions. Frameworks and methodologies must not only be flexible, contextual and comparable, but must also be just and fair towards different countries’ data production constraints.

Strong monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems are needed to support adaptation actions, making adaptation traceable at different scales, including local, national, regional and transnational.⁴ But recent trends in the climate political debate have been influenced by academic work focusing on metrics and indicators as a way to achieve effective adaptation and measurable progress, both at national and collective scales. This unhealthy focus on indicators has overshadowed the need to design nationally appropriate systems, in which contextualised

indicators can be used to support planning, actions and reporting with limited bureaucratic burden.⁵ The compulsion to adopt massive indicator-based systems is unproductive and should be avoided, in favour of supporting the needs and capacities of developing countries where adaptation efforts are most required.

Adaptation MEL, action and policies are more likely to be successful when they are based on national needs, contexts, social perceptions and development policies. Developing adaptation systems that can evolve gradually and are iterative will further allow actors to adapt to emerging climate shocks and changes as they occur.

In addition, country-based systems will support stronger synergies with national priorities under other international frameworks, such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the Sustainable Development Goals, for more aligned and effective policies. Climate adaptation MEL systems should prioritise and complement already existing systems and data sources rather than designing entirely new ones, to harness current MEL efforts and better reflect what countries have already been doing on adaptation (Box 1).

Fund capacities — instead of creating burdens. As well as conceptual and methodological dimensions, effective operationalisation of the GGA will also need to address capacity issues. Current efforts in international coordination and negotiations tend to reinforce the trade-offs between local, national and international actions and systems, rather than promoting collective action and global solutions to progress adaptation. Current discussions on how to best advance coordination should focus on building capacities at scale along the natural boundaries at which adaptation dynamics play out, building capacities at community, landscape, regional and transboundary levels.⁶

We need systems and assessment methodologies that are suitable for all national capacities and that allocate appropriate international support in applying them. Only this way will the work towards the GGA truly engender progress while avoiding new climate injustices and inequities in the treatment of information. As Parties work towards defining and assessing progress towards the GGA, there is now an opportunity to develop a fairer system. This includes, for example, turning from an indicator-oriented focus to a needs-oriented one and responding to contexts according to the best available science.

Box 1. National and transboundary cases in South America

In South America, Uruguay is one of the most advanced developing countries in its preparation for the GGA and in designing appropriate adaptation action. Uruguay was the second country to submit an Adaptation Communication in its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) plan in 2017. The NDC is the instrument for the implementation of the national climate change goals, including prioritised actions for five years for both mitigation and adaptation. On adaptation, it included quantitative goals for each measure, and designed three adaptation plans: agriculture; cities, infrastructures and coasts; energy and health. Uruguay accompanied its NDC with a domestic monitoring mechanism for each goal, building an adaptation roadmap to 2025. In addition, the approach integrated adaptation, sustainable development and disaster risk reduction agendas.

While reporting on the GGA is an individual exercise, adaptation actions often span transboundary landscapes. This is often challenging due to political boundaries but is critical to deliver adaptation at scale. Argentina and Uruguay had a long history of conflicts related to the management of the Uruguay River as a common resource, which led them to the International Court of Justice in 2006. However, currently, both countries are developing adaptation actions on the banks of the Uruguay River, within the framework of a project funded by the Adaptation Fund, which includes the development of methodologies to collect, analyse and systematise data and information concerning impacts, damages and losses associated with climate change.

Achieving the central promise of the Sustainable Development Goals — leaving no one behind — means that for the world to truly work collectively on the GGA, there is a responsibility to make the necessary funds and allocation available. Developing countries need funding and support for elaborating their National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and for developing MEL systems for adaptation — as well as funding for adaptation actions. However, international climate finance has largely fallen short of targets and pledges.

The financial architecture for climate action is not only falling short of pledges, but to date has favoured mitigation policies and interventions. Current processes for accessing funding are unnecessarily long and the access criteria disadvantage developing countries that do not have the human and financial resources to navigate complex systems. This means less finance is available for adaptation — and even less for developing countries. For example, as of 17 November 2020, only 55 developing countries out of 125 are being supported by the Green Climate Fund in the process of formulating their NAPs, while bilateral partners and other agencies are supporting others in various activities.⁷ While the GGA is not directly addressing climate finance, progress on adaptation will require streamlining processes

and eligibility for access to climate finance, along with increasing the overall sums available.

Next steps for progressing adaptation under the GGA

After decades of negotiations, the PA has embedded that the world must collectively work on adaptation, recognising that each local adaptation action is linked and counts towards supporting international efforts. But current discussions and processes for adaptation do not reflect the country-driven approach emphasised in the PA, and adaptation effort is not being effectively increased. The climate political debate is now far from the end goal of promoting adaptation actions and balancing adaptation and mitigation collectively. Creating a roadmap that focuses on what countries need, and providing appropriate financing to meet these needs is the only fair and sustainable path to a resilient future.

To start moving towards global progress on adaptation, countries — but also other actors including communities, local authorities, and transboundary regional initiatives — must start by answering a key question: what does it mean to reduce vulnerability, increase resilience and strengthen adaptive capacity for your community/country/region? Participatory and iterative adaptation planning exercises can help drive responses that are contextualised, but also reflective of respective circumstances and capacities. Adaptation responses must then be captured and integrated in existing development planning cycles and evaluation systems. This will

ensure that cross-sectoral policies and interventions at all scales include a climate adaptation perspective, along with mitigation.

While countries will remain the main unit for communicating and reporting on adaptation, adaptation processes should be driven across multiple scales. Additional mechanisms may be needed to coordinate adaptation efforts — although care must be taken for international processes not to be intrusive or burdensome. Parties and the international community must avoid inadvertently obstructing progress because of focusing too much on overly complex methodological and technical aspects of the GGA.

This year marks the start of the first Global Stocktake process, which includes an assessment of collective progress on the GGA. This is an opportunity to raise awareness of the vast and complex nature of adaptation to climate change, rather than seeking reductionism. The challenge is to broaden perspectives to better progress adaptation through fair and equitable processes, taking all different voices into account.

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Notes

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