



Wilton Park

The Wilton Park agenda on adapting to transboundary climate risk

Introduction

On 13–15 March 2019, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI), in association with Wilton Park and the Global Center on Adaptation, convened 40 stakeholders from 19 countries to discuss the emerging topic of transboundary climate risk.

Climate risks cross national borders and affect all countries, irrespective of their location or level of development. Transboundary climate risk comprises two aspects: the transboundary effects of climate change impacts, which are increasingly recognised in current evidence and discourse, and the transboundary effects of climate change adaptation, which are rarely discussed and therefore almost always ignored. The transboundary effects of climate change impacts and adaptation flow between places along climate risk pathways, for example via shared ecosystems, global supply chains, transnational finance flows and the migration and displacement of people. Risk pathways operate over multiple scales: regional (across shared national borders); teleconnected (between countries that do not share borders); and systemic (where a complex system, such as a commodity market, is at risk from a combination of climate-related stresses).

Climate risks at the regional scale are often easier to comprehend and receive more attention from scientists, policy makers and adaptation practitioners. For example, existing institutions have begun to assess, monitor and in some cases jointly manage climate risks in regional river basins. However, there is less evidence of cooperative adaptation across regional forests, drylands, fisheries and oceans, while teleconnected and systemic risks are even less well understood: they are abstract, difficult to assess and imply a need for coordinated management by multiple countries in order to build climate resilience.

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Discussions at Wilton Park revealed the following hard truths:

- Every effort to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions will help to reduce transboundary climate risks; the further the world strays from limiting global warming to the +1.5°C target, the higher the risk that climate change impacts will lead to harmful and potentially cascading transboundary effects.
- Transboundary climate risks are already detectable but are likely to become much more prevalent and extreme with gradual increases in temperature. Even if the +1.5°C target is met, some level of transboundary climate risk is unavoidable and needs to be jointly managed by all countries.
- Managing transboundary climate risk is currently “no-one’s job”. Incentives are not aligned to stimulate action on transboundary risk management and adaptation planners are already overburdened in many sectors and countries.
- Adaptation is not necessarily a benign process: “effective” adaptation for one group may increase the vulnerability of another, or redistribute vulnerabilities between countries. It is essential that the transition towards a climate resilient future is a just transition. Dialogues to address this issue may be difficult and politically sensitive, but they are necessary. They must be facilitated sensitively, in appropriate forums, in the spirit of solidarity and mutual trust.
- Current levels of investment in adaptation globally are insufficient. Transboundary climate risks will propagate from places that fail to adapt, so there is a clear and globally shared interest in increasing the effectiveness of adaptation investments across all sectors and regions.

In recognition of this, the organising partners issue the following call to action:

1. Significantly improved data and evidence is needed to better describe and analyse the magnitude, nature and distribution of transboundary climate risk at global, regional and sectoral levels and across geographic scales.
2. Guidance and evaluation methods should be developed to support the inclusion of transboundary climate risk in adaptation plans, particularly at the national level. Greater transparency is also needed in adaptation processes; sharing information on climate vulnerabilities, exposures and intended adaptations will help others to assess the potential transboundary implications of climate change impacts and of adaptation itself.
3. Beyond the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), regional, sectoral and financial institutions should explore their role in exchanging knowledge and managing transboundary climate risk, not only to increase investment in adaptation but also to explore the implications for markets, trade and financial flows, as well as the governance of transboundary ecosystems and the migration and displacement of people.
4. Transboundary institutions can offer a diplomatic bridge to coordinate adaptation in regions with existing political tensions, but the geopolitical dynamics of transboundary adaptation impacts need to be better explored, discussed and accounted for in adaptation processes. The potential for existing international law to be applied in the context of adaptation to transboundary climate impacts should be explored as a matter of priority.
5. Adaptation should be redefined as a process that delivers global public goods. New coalitions of Parties and non-state actors should be formed to advance this agenda within the UNFCCC and other forums, based on the common interests that are revealed by recognising transboundary climate risks; transboundary climate risk provides a powerful incentive and opportunity to re-embrace multilateralism.
6. In order to inform and advance these actions, a new multi-partner initiative should be created to bridge science and policy on transboundary climate risk, convene dialogues between relevant actors and induce change in adaptation processes so that a cross-border lens can be better applied and accounted for in practice.

A new vision for global adaptation

We contend that the principles of interdependence and common interest are important for the successful implementation of adaptation under the Paris Agreement. We believe that such a vision can help to inject new purpose and engender increased trust in global negotiations relating to adaptation. It might also help to increase ambition and more urgently motivate sorely-needed financial and political investments in adaptation worldwide.

We wish to highlight the pitfalls of an adaptation regime in which countries frame and implement adaptation within their borders - and support adaptation elsewhere - solely to protect their own, narrow self interest, without knowledge of, or accountability for, the wider consequences of their adaptations. In fact, adopting a regional and global approach to adaptation will provide opportunities to strengthen national resilience for the long term.

Our vision is one in which countries and non-state actors adapt in ways that “do no harm”, or at least minimise harm globally. Recognising equity, historical responsibility and support for the most vulnerable countries as the primary rationales for supporting adaptation internationally, countries should also provide support and coordinate their adaptation efforts in ways that deliver global public goods, to achieve a resilient world in which all people are secure and can prosper.

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In association with:

