

# Just Adaptation:

what does justice mean, and how can it guide adaptation planning and decision-making?

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**Climate change adaptation and the effects of climate change both have significant potential to worsen inequalities.**

**At its most simple level, justice means fairness and equity.**

## **Introduction**

When people think about justice, it is most often in the context of punishment for laws that have been transgressed. But justice is a much broader and more positive concept. It is fundamentally about fairness and equity.

Climate change adaptation has the potential to be unfair or inequitable, especially for groups who are more susceptible to harm. In this report we describe how to incorporate justice considerations into adaptation work, starting with theories of justice and ending with their practical implications. We draw from academic literature as well as from international and national reports. It is intended for anyone involved in adaptation processes, including government agencies, councils, researchers and community members.

Climate change adaptation generally refers to adjustments that respond to actual or expected impacts of climate change (IPCC, 2022). These may include new laws and policies, changes in governance, planned relocations, education and engagement with communities, as well as physical changes and structures. Generally, adaptation aims to reduce people's susceptibility to harm in relation to the effects of climate change. But adaptation can harm people in other ways.

Justice reminds us to consider the broad implications (for harm or betterment) of any course of adaptation action. It is an important consideration in adaptation processes (e.g. how people are included in decision-making), adaptation outcomes (e.g. whether a new seawall prevents people from accessing the coast), and the broader socio-environmental implications (e.g. enabling or constraining future possibilities).

At its most simple level, justice means fairness. Applied to adaptation, this means that costs and benefits, as well as rights and responsibilities, should be distributed fairly. But this does not necessarily mean that they should be distributed equally, as justice also entails the recognition of existing inequalities and differences in exposure to harm. Justice also means that the interests of the public and of future generations need to be considered alongside individual and corporate interests.

Sometimes 'equity' is used in a similar way to 'justice'. For example, Aotearoa's National Adaptation Plan (NAP) (2022) states 'our adaptation journey must be equitable' (p32) and describes equity as 'the principle of being fair and impartial, often also aligned with ideas of equality and justice' (p183).

The NAP says that equity 'provides a basis for understanding how the impacts of, and responses to, climate change (including costs and benefits) are distributed in and by society in more or less equal ways. The principle can be applied in understanding who is responsible for climate impacts and policies; how those impacts and policies are distributed across society, generations and gender; and who participates and controls the processes of decision-making' (p183).

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## Maladaptation

If adaptation results in negative outcomes and unforeseen consequences for some people, or increases people's susceptibility to harm, it is often referred to as maladaptation (Schipper, 2020, Juhola et al., 2016). Maladaptation is often an indication of unjust processes or outcomes.

Unjust processes might include:

- **Prioritisation of advantaged groups' interests:** the protection of high value property or infrastructure may affect others' interests, such as a sea-wall disrupting public access, recreation, and the gathering of seafood, or worsening erosion on adjoining properties.
- **Exclusion of groups that are susceptible to harm:** if decision-making process exclude or are inaccessible to people that are the most susceptible to harm, the design and delivery of adaptation measures won't cater well to their needs and interests.
- **Short-term thinking:** adaptation approaches that respond to proximate, or immediate, causes of risk, rather than addressing the root causes and considering future generations, will have a limited effectiveness.

Unjust outcomes might include:

- **Limited benefits:** protective measures may only help a few people.
- **Reinforcement of susceptibility to harm:** existing inequalities may be increased.
- **High costs to the community:** engineered solutions may be expensive to construct and have a relatively short lifespan.
- **Generation of conflict:** the issues above can lead to outcomes that are less accepted by affected individuals and groups, leading to conflict between groups or between communities and councils.

There is a growing acknowledgement of the need to incorporate considerations of justice to avoid maladaptation. International climate agreements including the Paris Agreement (2015) and the Glasgow Climate Pact (2021) as well as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015) acknowledge the importance of justice in adaptation responses.

**“Climate resilient development is advanced when actors work in equitable, just and enabling ways to reconcile divergent interests, values and worldviews, toward equitable and just outcomes.”**

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2022, p29).

**So, what does adaptation justice mean in practice, and what are its implications for shaping climate change responses in Aotearoa New Zealand?**



**Maladaptation is often an indication of unjust processes or outcomes.**

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## Theories of justice relevant to adaptation

The idea of 'just adaptation' has mostly emerged where people have applied established ideas about justice to adaptation issues. From reviewing the literature, we identified nine main concepts of justice that are relevant to adaptation.

- 1 Through a *Te Tiriti* lens, justice means fulfilment of the obligations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, including the exercise of rangatiratanga.
- 2 *Distributive justice* seeks fair allocations of costs and benefits, and equitable outcomes.
- 3 *Procedural justice* expects fair and inclusive processes of decision-making.
- 4 *Recognition justice* seeks the recognition of existing inequities and inclusion of those who are particularly susceptible to harm.
- 5 Theories of *Indigenous justice* or *racial justice* seek recognition that climate change is just one outcome of oppressive power structures that have also caused other social, cultural, racial, and Indigenous injustices.
- 6 The *capabilities approach* argues that people must be able to access the resources, opportunities, freedoms and institutions needed to achieve wellbeing. Adaptation should maintain or improve access to these enabling conditions.
- 7 *Restorative justice* approaches seek to restore relationships and trust, compensate for harms, and foster collaboration in adaptation planning.
- 8 *Intergenerational justice* highlights the rights and needs of future generations in adaptation planning due to the long-term effects of climate change.
- 9 *Transformative adaptation* seeks to address the root causes of climate change and other environmental degradation by transforming societal structures and systems.

More detail on these theories or approaches is available in the [Just Adaptation report](#).

### Achieving justice in adaptation

There is a lot of overlap across these approaches to justice. For example, many approaches are concerned with aspects of *equity* — that some people are already marginalised or already impacted by climate change, and that adaptation responses can make those inequities worse. Several propose that *susceptibility to harm* is not exclusively about exposure to climate risks but is interrelated with historic marginalisation. *Inclusion and participation* in decision-making are often identified as ways to address justice concerns.

Three themes appear repeatedly: that justice involves *fair processes, equity of outcome, and recognising and addressing structural injustice*. Each has important implications for adaptation planning.

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## Achieving justice through fair processes

The processes by which adaptation occurs may create, reinforce or worsen inequalities. Much adaptation planning is undertaken through top-down and expert-led decision making processes, whereby marginalised groups have little input (Juhola et al., 2022, Malloy and Ashcraft, 2020). Discriminatory policies or attitudes, lack of access to information, cultural or language barriers, and lack of representation may mean a lack of consideration of the implications for those most susceptible to harm (Malloy and Ashcraft, 2020, Paavola and Adger, 2006). This can reinforce and exacerbate inequalities.

*Te Tiriti, procedural justice, recognition justice, Indigenous justice and the capabilities approach* all emphasise the importance of fair processes. This means that adaptation processes must be inclusive and transparent, otherwise outcomes will not be equitable. Lead agencies must put special focus on the inclusion and participation of those who are already marginalised and those who are most susceptible to harm. Some groups may need resourcing and a range of opportunities to influence decision-making. In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, adaptation decision-making processes must also reflect Te Tiriti o Waitangi, enable Māori participation and the expression of rangatiratanga (Bargh and Tapsell, 2021, Ihirangi, 2021).

### Implications for adaptation planning:

Adaptation planning should

- include groups that are frequently absent in consultation and engagement processes
- enable the meaningful participation of marginalised groups and those that are susceptible to harm through resourcing and building political capabilities
- go beyond consulting and informing: processes must be collaborative and continuous, from policy design, to planning, implementation, and evaluation
- be Te Tiriti-led, and include partnerships with Māori and enabling rangatiratanga
- determine responsibility for adaptation actions: i.e. who pays, why, and how they will be resourced
- involve regular evaluations and opportunities for adjustment: to account for uncertainty and changes in susceptibility to harm

### Further considerations:

- this may involve new or different decision-making and power-sharing processes
- fair processes do not address the root causes of susceptibility to harm

**[...] adaptation processes must be inclusive and transparent, otherwise outcomes will not be equitable.**



**Adaptation processes can lead to an uneven distribution of benefits and burdens. These effects are disproportionately experienced by individuals and groups who are historically marginalised.**

## **Achieving justice through equity of outcomes**

Adaptation justice is also about the equitable distribution of outcomes. The impacts of climate change are greater in some places than others. Adaptation processes can lead to an uneven distribution of benefits and burdens. These effects are disproportionately experienced by individuals and groups who are historically marginalised (Klinsky et al., 2017). Just adaptation will require the redistribution of resources, opportunities and power to create equitable outcomes across groups in society and across generations (Satyal et al., 2021, Chu and Cannon, 2021, McManus et al., 2014, Winter, 2022). This means assessing which groups are susceptible to climate and adaptation related harm to determine how to reallocate to reduce harm.

*Te Tiriti, distributive justice, recognition justice, Indigenous justice, restorative justice and intergenerational justice* all emphasise that adaptation outcomes must be equitable. Attention must be paid to questions of rights, responsibilities and redistribution. Just outcomes may also include rights to basic human needs, rights to development (e.g. to sustainably develop out of poverty) and environmental rights (to an environment that enables future human wellbeing). This can guide considerations of who should pay for adaptation, who has the right to assistance, and what that assistance should entail.

### **Implications for adaptation policy:**

Adaptation planning should

- assess how the benefits and burdens of climate change and adaptation are distributed
- account for historic marginalisation including the impacts of colonisation for Māori
- enable rangatiratanga and tikanga in the design and implementation of adaptation solutions by and for Māori (including the protection of taonga, maintaining kaitiakitanga, and supporting Mātauranga Māori)
- ensure that current inequities are not worsened, and ideally are improved, as a result of adaptation
- identify more responsible parties as well as groups that are more susceptible to harm
- provide resources to groups that are susceptible to harm to enable their adaptation
- rectify potential and actual maladaptation, including the effects of adaptation on income, job opportunities, sustainable environments and public facilities

### **Further considerations:**


- equity of outcomes is not just a matter for central government to consider: it needs to be built into adaptation processes by all actors including regional and local governments, iwi, businesses and non-governmental organisations
- redistribution of outcomes addresses the symptoms of susceptibility to harm, but may fail to address its root causes



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## Achieving justice by recognising and addressing structural injustice

Several approaches take the position that transformative change is needed because climate change and adaptation issues are symptoms of structural injustice. Structural injustice is understood as the systemic privileging of particular groups, systems of knowledge and ways of living that are embedded in social, economic, and political arrangements. Structural biases have enabled capitalist and colonial exploitation of resources, people, and other species (Tschakert et al., 2021, Pulido and De Lara, 2018). This results in advantages for some and disadvantages for others (Young, 2011). These inequalities are embedded in everyday life, so they are often invisible to those not affected by them because they seem normal. Groups that have been systematically disadvantaged by these structural arrangements are more susceptible to be harmed by climate change and adaptation.



**Groups that have been systematically disadvantaged by [...] structural arrangements are more susceptible to be harmed by climate change and adaptation.**

Addressing structural injustice is central to *Te Tiriti*, *recognition justice*, *Indigenous justice*, *racial justice*, and *transformative adaptation*. As with the two previous themes, this theme seeks to address susceptibility to harm and historic marginalisation but goes further in confronting where these originated and what is sustaining them. Fair and equitable adaptation must be oriented around the disruption of structural injustice (Schlosberg, 2012, Ihirangi, 2021). A structural justice approach seeks to understand the root causes of inequities and injustices, and where necessary to alter or transform powerful and damaging social, economic, and political systems. Māori leadership is critical in change processes that address *Te Tiriti*, and/or involve Māori communities and *mātauranga* (Bargh and Tapsell, 2021, Blackett et al., 2022).

### Implications for adaptation policy:

Adaptation planning should

- recognise the context and history that has created susceptibility to harm (e.g. impacts of colonisation and breaches of *Te Tiriti*) and develop solutions that help rectify these
- engage and partner with *mana whenua*, and seek opportunities for enabling *rangatiratanga*
- actively disrupt systems that perpetuate susceptibility to harm, including harmful institutional practices, and industries reliant on exploitation of the environment
- seek to address intersecting issues caused by structural inequalities such as poverty, food insecurity and poor access to energy, education and healthcare
- co-develop plans with groups that are susceptible to harm, allowing them to define their own adaptation needs, priorities, interests and solutions
- recognise and respect multiple forms of knowledge, including *mātauranga*
- consider the rights and needs of future generations

### Further considerations:

- using the institutions and systems that have caused structural injustice is unlikely to achieve structural change, so these may need to be transformed
- Māori and their knowledge systems offer important insights into addressing structural injustices. However, it is critical that this is Māori-led to ensure *mātauranga* is not appropriated or taken out of context



**Ideas relating to 'just adaptation' [...] can help guide adaptive responses that can reduce inequalities [...]**

## Conclusion

The effects of climate change and climate adaptation both have significant potential to worsen inequalities. Ideas relating to 'just adaptation' outlined here can help guide adaptive responses that can reduce inequalities or at the very least ensure that current inequities are not worsened. Just adaptation requires fair processes, equitable outcomes and the rectification of structural injustices. In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, this includes paying particular attention to Te Tiriti and to the needs of those who are historically marginalised and/or more susceptible to harm.

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