

Engaging diverse knowledge holders in adaptation research

Nature Climate Change

Cundill, G.; Harvey, B.; Ley, D.; Singh, C.; Huson, B. et al

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-024-02056-5>

This publication is made publicly available in the institutional repository of Wageningen University and Research, under the terms of article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, also known as the Amendment Taverne.

Article 25fa states that the author of a short scientific work funded either wholly or partially by Dutch public funds is entitled to make that work publicly available for no consideration following a reasonable period of time after the work was first published, provided that clear reference is made to the source of the first publication of the work.

This publication is distributed using the principles as determined in the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) 'Article 25fa implementation' project. According to these principles research outputs of researchers employed by Dutch Universities that comply with the legal requirements of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act are distributed online and free of cost or other barriers in institutional repositories. Research outputs are distributed six months after their first online publication in the original published version and with proper attribution to the source of the original publication.

You are permitted to download and use the publication for personal purposes. All rights remain with the author(s) and / or copyright owner(s) of this work. Any use of the publication or parts of it other than authorised under article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright act is prohibited. Wageningen University & Research and the author(s) of this publication shall not be held responsible or liable for any damages resulting from your (re)use of this publication.

For questions regarding the public availability of this publication please contact openaccess.library@wur.nl

Engaging diverse knowledge holders in adaptation research

G. Cundill, B. Harvey, D. Ley, C. Singh, B. Huson, P. Aldunce, R. Biesbroek, J. Lawrence, D. Morchain, J. Nalau, N. P. Simpson & E. Totin



Adaptation evidence and knowledge are diverse and unequally represented in global adaptation discourse. The Adaptation Futures 2023 conference sought to bring this diversity together to advance more inclusive and impactful adaptation science, and confronted both the benefits and the trade-offs that this effort entails.

Adaptation Futures is the flagship event of the World Adaptation Science Programme, and since its inception in 2010 it has offered a dedicated space for adaptation researchers to discuss progress and set new avenues for adaptation science and implementation. As the largest conference series dedicated to climate change adaptation, the Adaptation Futures 2023 conference attracted over 2,000 participants from 127 countries, with 180 sessions in the core agenda and 15 side events. The conference received glowing reviews for the range of under-represented perspectives it showcased and the diverse forms of exchange it featured¹.

Successive host organizations of Adaptation Futures have increasingly made efforts to engage a wider diversity of knowledge holders in the conference, including practitioners, policymakers, funders, and local and Indigenous communities. This trend has come, in part, from a groundswell of recognition that locally led adaptation needs to be guided by those directly affected by climate change, and they, first and foremost, have a right to make adaptation decisions about their own futures. This shift reached its fullest expression so far in Montreal in 2023, where the conference was locally hosted by Ouranos, an organization specializing in regional scale climatology and adaptation to climate change. Both the steering and science committees were purposefully selected for their breadth and diversity of knowledge, expertise and ability to bridge science, policy, Indigenous knowledges and practice. Also, their selection was based on the geographic diversity of their experience and expertise. Of particular concern was ensuring robust representation from the Global South.

Advancing work on equity and diversity in conferencing spaces requires making concrete changes that disrupt established norms of practice. Here we describe some of the steps that were taken, and the challenges and trade-offs encountered.

Shaking up the format

Academic and professional conferences have long been dominated by one-directional formats of ‘knowledge transfer’, such as slideshow presentations by individuals, punctuated by brief and highly structured opportunities for dialogue. These formats have been shown to privilege particular kinds of speakers and forms of knowledge over others².



In an era of information overload, their value in comparison to more dialogical, co-produced and even embodied forms of interaction has come into question³.

Recognizing that expanding the ways we explore adaptation in conferences can broaden participation, foster new perspectives on the complexity of adaptation challenges and practices, and create pathways to co-create knowledge, the conference purposefully offered a range of session formats. The call document encouraged the submission of a more diverse range of session formats, including creative and co-creation sessions. The conference also set a target ratio of each session format, with traditional panels not exceeding 30% of all sessions. Session hosts were offered a virtual consultation ahead of the conference to enable them to prepare for the more creative session formats, and specific rooms in the conference venue were dedicated to creative sessions by equipping them accordingly (for example, with IT resources, flipcharts, movable tables and so on). Mentoring sessions were also held with early career researchers and those new to Adaptation Futures.

Beyond making space for under-represented groups

Allocating spaces for groups that have historically been under-represented in international academic conferences, such as researchers from the Global South, early career researchers and Indigenous people, is not enough. Even if seats are left open for these groups, the systemic barriers that have prevented them from participating in the past will remain. It is essential for conferences to adapt their abstract review process, respond to funding needs, assist participants in navigating visa and immigration hurdles, offer facilitated hybrid sessions for those unable to attend in person and offer capacity support for participants on site. At Adaptation Futures, 227 travel grants were awarded in total. Of these, 100 were given to participants from the Global South, most of whom were early career professionals, and 120 travel grants were given to Canadian Indigenous people.

Latin American and African pavilions were created to ensure dedicated space on the agenda and representation of the adaptation priorities for those regions. These efforts made a difference: 80–90% of session submissions from Latin America and the Caribbean and from sub-Saharan Africa were accepted, compared with an acceptance rate of 50–60% of session submissions led by individuals based at institutions in North America and Europe.

Indigenous people played a vital role in this Adaptation Futures conference. Indigenous representatives were engaged in the conference planning process as members of both the science and the steering committees. Also, the conference host established a partnership with an Indigenous-led environmental organization to provide guidance on appropriate protocols and invite speakers. Moreover, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge were actively advocated for throughout the conference planning. For example, there was a dedicated call for abstracts specifically aimed at Indigenous groups, and dedicated sessions set aside exclusively for Indigenous groups to share their knowledge, together with regular sessions featuring contributions from Indigenous people. The final ceremony to transfer the leadership of the conference to New Zealand also included Indigenous leaders from that country, signalling the engagement of Indigenous leadership in the conference in the future. This was key: continuing to offer a welcoming space for Indigenous knowledges will allow the number of applicants, funding and collaborations to grow into the future.

Challenges and trade-offs

Despite this equity-seeking approach, achieving a balanced representation of individual researchers from around the world, along with their knowledge and insights, was not fully realized. In the end, 70% of all conference participants came from North America and Europe, with participation from the Global South remaining a minority. This may be a product of the location of the conference, which took place in Canada, where the travel costs and visa requirements, including extended waiting times on occasion, may have deterred some participants from the Global South. The impact of 'passport privilege' on participation in global science engagements has been well documented in recent years⁴.

Creating space for new actors means giving up space by others, thereby resulting in both winners and losers, and requiring trade-offs. For example, capping the space for traditional paper sessions meant that some compelling submissions could not be accepted. For some, the result of equity-seeking approaches was exciting, even transformative, and heralded a more inclusive and impactful kind of adaptation science. The under-represented groups felt, for the first time in some instances, that they could contribute to adaptation research on a global stage. For others, it implied that they had lost one of the few remaining spaces dedicated to adaptation science. The conference received formal complaints from scholars who felt sidelined due to what they perceived as a flawed selection process for abstracts. Some participants also felt that there was a lack of finalized research results presented and too many tentative and emergent dialogues.

Furthermore, all of the equity-seeking interventions mentioned above were costly. The entire event depended on substantial fundraising by the host organization. On a finite budget, choices needed to be made between, for example, funding travel grants versus purposeful geographic coverage via the pavilions for Africa and Latin America. These pavilions required dedicated organizational leadership and translation equipment. At many points, choices needed to be made, for example, between representation of different regions and stakeholders.

Every decision came with trade-offs for some groups. The inevitable trade-offs described here are necessary to reduce the inequalities in access to global scientific discourses.

Future of adaptation scholarship

Expanding the depth and breadth of knowledge available to adapt to climate change can only be achieved by creating more inclusive spaces. On the one hand, the purpose of these inclusive spaces is to grow our ability to imagine and enact new plausible futures, solutions and collaborations. Participants from Adaptation Futures 2023 reported new collaborations emerging from the conference on such diverse topics as adaptation resistance, knowledge co-production, queering theory and disability, early career trajectories and education, demonstrating the value of broadening the adaptation knowledge base through inclusive approaches. On the other hand, inclusive spaces are necessary for epistemic justice. Holders of local and Indigenous knowledges have historically been excluded from adaptation research, despite being disproportionately impacted by the effects of climate change⁵.

The efforts made at Adaptation Futures 2023 to diminish the substantial disparity in adaptation evidence and knowledge represent an important step forward, but they were just a small step. Expanding access to conferences, funding and opportunities to publish, and to mentorship for under-represented groups, is a long-term enterprise that all adaptation scholars must engage in going forward. Indeed, addressing this injustice in the future requires concerted efforts, not only for adaptation conferences, but indeed for all aspects of adaptation work. Journal editors, grant makers, student supervisors and intergovernmental bodies (such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the World Meteorological Organization) should be applauded for their equity-seeking work and encouraged to do more.

The 2023 Adaptation Futures experience has demonstrated that there are inevitable winners and losers involved in the various trade-offs that come with efforts to seek equity and inclusion in adaptation science. Expanding the range of voices, knowledge and expertise within finite spaces like scientific conferences inevitably means that some groups will have to cede ground to newcomers. Doing so, however, creates new opportunities for collaboration that can drive adaptation research forward. Therefore, we consider these trade-offs worthwhile, and look forward to the outcomes and continued broadening of the adaptation community.

G. Cundill ¹✉, **B. Harvey** ², **D. Ley** ³, **C. Singh** ⁴, **B. Huson** ⁵, **P. Aldunce** ⁶, **R. Biesbroek** ⁷, **J. Lawrence** ⁸, **D. Morchain** ⁹, **J. Nalau** ¹⁰, **N. P. Simpson** ^{11,12} & **E. Totin** ¹³

¹International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. ²McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. ³Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, Mexico City, Mexico. ⁴Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. ⁵University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. ⁶Universidad de Chile, Santiago, Chile. ⁷Wageningen University & Research, Wageningen, The Netherlands. ⁸Climate Change Research Institute, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand. ⁹The Nature Conservancy, Arlington, VA, USA. ¹⁰School of Environment and Science, Cities Research Institute, Griffith University, Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia. ¹¹Climate and Sustainability Programme, ODI, London, UK. ¹²African Climate and Development Initiative, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa. ¹³Université Nationale d'Agriculture, Porto-Novo, Benin.

✉e-mail: gkemp@idrc.ca

Published online: 26 June 2024

References

1. *Commun. Earth Environ.* **4**, 481 (2023).
2. Oliver, C. & Morris, A. *Gend. Place Cult.* **27**, 765–787 (2020).
3. Byskov, M. & Hyams, K. *Ethical Theory Moral Pract.* **25**, 613–634 (2022).
4. Owusu-Gymfi, S. *Nature* **627**, 705 (2024).
5. Nagendra, H. et al. *Nat. Sustain.* **1**, 341–349 (2018).

Acknowledgements

Contributions from the Science Committee and the Steering Committee of Adaptation Futures 2023, as well as the organizing committee based at Ouranos, are gratefully acknowledged. Without the tireless input of these individuals over an 18-month period, this conference, and therefore these reflections, would not have been possible. B. Harvey

acknowledges the funding support of Canada's International Development Research Centre (grant no. 109596-001). N.P.S. acknowledges funding support from the South African National Research Foundation (grant no. 150906). R.B. acknowledges funding from the Dutch Scientific Research Council (NWO-VI.Vidi.211.132).

Author contributions

G.C. and B. Harvey drafted the text. G.C., B. Harvey, P.A. and D.L. conceptualized the paper and provided editorial input. B. Huson and C.S. wrote sections of the paper and provided editorial input throughout. D.M., J.N, N.P.S., J.L., R.B. and E.T. provided essential input on the framing of the paper and assisted in writing and editing the manuscript. R.B. provided the data analysis of acceptance rates for sessions.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.