

# How the theme of Adaptation and Resilience marginalizes Loss and Damage and why we must focus on addressing loss and damage



**Practical  
ACTION**



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Despite repeated calls for **Loss and Damage**<sup>1</sup> to be reflected prominently in the themes of COP 26, the UK presidency continues to champion [Adaptation and Resilience](#) as a key theme of COP 26, alongside clean road transport, energy transition, finance and nature. In its description of the importance of adaptation and resilience, the website for the COP 26 presidency does not mention loss and damage. Rather, it stresses that:

**[i]nternational commitments around adaptation and resilience should deliver action which spans beyond COP 26 and provides long-term security to those that suffer the greatest consequences from climate change.**

The theme of Adaptation and Resilience ignores Loss and Damage entirely and uses instead the term “resilience” as a blanket term, ostensibly to include Loss and Damage without explicit recognition. This is problematic on several fronts. Firstly, the UK is refusing to recognize and engage constructively with an agenda that is critical for more than half the world’s countries. Secondly, Loss and Damage has a dedicated article in the Paris Agreement. Thirdly, there is no agreement on the theme of “resilience” amongst Parties. Finally, this would appear to be part of the process by developed countries to sideline Loss and Damage. The UK, as the president of COP 26, which has been billed as an ambition COP, must be challenged for its failure to mention, let alone engage constructively with, Loss and Damage.

The marginalization of Loss and Damage has also been playing out with the UNFCCC secretariat. Developing country negotiators and ExCom members have long been calling for Loss and Damage - the policy agenda aimed at addressing loss and damage - to be reflected more openly on the UNFCCC website<sup>2</sup>. Instead, it is hidden amongst adaptation agendas under the overarching theme of [Adaptation and Resilience](#); despite loss and damage being raised continuously by developing countries as a vital component of climate action. This brief describes why it is critical that Loss and Damage be reflected prominently, both as a theme for discussions and as a focus of action, in the lead up to, and beyond COP 26.

## **PROBLEMATIZING “RESILIENCE”**

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The first problem with Adaptation and Resilience as a theme for COP 26, is that resilience is not an agreed theme of action under the UNFCCC. The importance of building resilience as an objective of adaptation is often invoked in discussions and within negotiating texts, but equally resilience is a desired outcome of development in general. However, loss and damage from climate change has been recognized as being “beyond adaptation.” The decision which established the Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage (WIM) acknowledges that, “loss and damage associated with the adverse effects of climate change, includes, and in some cases involves more than, that which can be reduced by adaptation” ([UNFCCC, 2014:6](#)). The limits to adaptation have been recognized, both by the UNFCCC and the IPCC.

The UNFCCC has a [page](#) on its website dedicated to answering what adaptation and resilience, in the context of climate change, means. Adaptation is defined and adaptation options are described broadly, but resilience is neither defined nor described. In fact, the term “resilient” appears only once in the document in the context of recognizing that countries and communities are already implementing actions to build resilient societies and economies. Neither Loss and Damage as a policy agenda, nor loss and damage as the impacts of climate change that cannot be avoided by adaptation, are recognized. The overview of adaptation and resilience ends with links to the various workstreams and work programs on adaptation under the UNFCCC.

The second problem with “resilience” is that there is no universal agreement of what resilience means. Like its predecessor sustainability, resilience can be and has been co-opted to mean different things to different actors ([Anderson, 2015](#)). Resilience as a concept in climate policy originated in the socio-ecological systems literature ([Holling, 1973](#); [Walker et al., 2004](#); [Folke, 2006](#)). In that literature, resilience is defined as, “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks” ([Folke, 2006:259](#)). Resilience infers that a system maintains its structure and continues to function as it did before the arrival of a disturbance or shock. However, climatic-related loss and damage often makes it impossible for social systems like communities to maintain their structure and function. In fact, increasingly, households and communities are being displaced by loss and damage and losing their identities altogether and there is no going back to life before the climate change.

Resilience as a term also obscures the politics of climate change and the fact that the capacity of households, communities and entire countries to maintain resilience in the midst of climate change are overwhelmed on a regular basis. Resilience obscures forces

such as the historical responsibility that developed countries hold for climate change. It also sidelines issues such as compensation for the impacts of loss and damage, which continues to be a source of tension in the UNFCCC negotiations on Loss and Damage. However, recent research (see: [Caliari et al., 2020](#)) on the politics of Loss and Damage found that there are varying interpretations of what compensation entails. For some representatives of vulnerable developing countries, compensation simply means supporting developing countries in their efforts to address loss and damage, including through mechanisms to facilitate capacity building and technology transfer (Ibid).

The Adaptation and Resilience agenda sidelines issues critical for developing countries while letting developed countries effectively off the hook for long acknowledged responsibilities. If we are to address loss and damage as a global community we must first acknowledge that loss and damage is occurring. How can we do this if we cannot even find it within ourselves to reflect Loss and Damage as a theme of what has been billed an “Ambition COP”? Ambition must be defined broadly to reflect all the elements of the UNFCCC including mitigation, support for adaptation and both acknowledging and financing Loss and Damage.

## **WHY WE MUST MAINTAIN FOCUS ON “ADDRESSING” LOSS AND DAMAGE?**

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The Paris Agreement recognizes the importance of averting, minimizing and addressing loss and damage ([UNFCCC, 2016](#)). It is important to note this recognition does not change the role of the UNFCCC in promoting the implementation of approaches to address loss and damage nor does it change the mandate of the WIM, which was established by the COP. While the Paris Agreement provides for the WIM to also be governed by the CMA, it does not change the mandate of the WIM from the COP decision that established it. The attempt by developed countries to see the WIM governed exclusively by the CMA is also an attempt to dilute efforts to address loss and damage and further marginalize the Loss and Damage agenda. In addition, averting, minimizing and addressing loss and damage captures the entirety of efforts under the UNFCCC, from mitigation to avert loss and damage to adaptation to minimize loss and damage and finally, addressing loss and damage from the impacts of climate change that are not avoided by mitigation and adaptation. Increasing ambition on mitigation and scaling up support for adaptation are essential, but they will not be enough to entirely avoid the impacts of climate change which are already manifesting worldwide.

Given that global average warming has already surpassed 1°C ([IPCC, 2018](#)), the work on Loss and Damage, including under the WIM, must prioritize addressing loss and damage. The link between mitigation, adaptation and Loss and Damage has long been recognized by the academic and scientific community. The greater mitigation and adaptation efforts, the less loss and damage there will be ([Eckstein et al., 2021](#); [CSO Equity Review, 2019](#)). However, insisting that averting and minimizing be featured alongside addressing loss and damage – which developed countries have done since the Paris Agreement was established – diverts focus from the important work of equipping vulnerable developing countries to address the impacts of climate change that are not avoided by mitigation and adaptation.

## WHAT DOES “ADDRESSING LOSS AND DAMAGE” MEAN?

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The role of the Convention in Decision 3/CP.18 is to promote the implementation of approaches to address loss and damage ([UNFCCC, 2013](#)). The mandate of the WIM in Decision 2/CP.19 is to, “address loss and damage associated with impacts of climate change, including extreme events and slow onset events, in developing countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change” ([UNFCCC, 2014](#)).

Just as there is no agreed upon definition of “loss and damage” under the UNFCCC, there is no agreed upon definition of what is meant by “addressing loss and damage”. Over time a framework for differentiating types of approaches to address loss and damage has evolved but this is not the result of an agreement among Parties. In 2012, the UNFCCC prepared a literature review on approaches to address the risk of loss and damage (see: [UNFCCC, 2012](#)) which acknowledges that loss damage will arise from a spectrum of climate impacts ranging from extreme weather events to slow onset climatic processes. It proposes that there are two aspects to addressing loss and damage: reducing the risk of loss and damage occurring in the future through mitigation, adaptation and risk management, and addressing loss and damage when it occurs. The literature review described four types of approaches to address loss and damage: risk reduction, risk retention (such as contingency planning and social protection), risk transfer (including climate risk insurance) and approaches to address loss and damage from slow onset climatic processes.

These four typologies have been used to frame addressing loss and damage since 2012 with a significant focus on risk reduction and risk transfer in particular. In 2016, the Executive Committee which guides the WIM began developing a [compendium on comprehensive climate risk management](#) which was finalized in late 2019 ([ExCom, 2019](#)). The compendium includes four types of approaches to address loss and damage: risk reduction, risk retention, risk transfer and transformational approaches. It is important to note that just as there is no agreed upon definition of “addressing loss and damage” there is also no definition of “transformational approaches” though some work has been done to describe what transformation could mean in the context of Loss and Damage (see: [Roberts and Pelling, 2019](#)). In 2019, developing countries were invited to make [submissions](#) on the type and nature of actions to address loss and damage for which they require finance. A recent [brief](#) unpacked further what “addressing loss and damage” means based on the submissions of vulnerable developing countries and the needs at the sub-national and local level ([Stamp Out Poverty et al., 2021](#)). We agree that a more concrete definition of addressing loss and damage is needed that aligns with what vulnerable developing countries and the vulnerable people and communities require rather than what is palpable for funders and developed countries.

Ensuring that ongoing loss and damage does not further impede poverty eradication, impoverished and unhealthy childhoods, and energy access, will require a huge amount of high-quality finance to be mobilized. Projected financing needs to address loss and damage in developing countries, range between 290 billion and 580 billion USD by 2030 ([Markandya, and González-Eguino, 2018](#)). What is clear is that in the wake of extreme climatic events, loans will only further drive-up a country’s debt levels ([Fresnillo, 2020](#)). As such, finance must be in the form of grants. Doing so will ensure that the fiscal space for sustainable development does not further shrink. In addition, debt repayments must be cancelled or at the very least suspended, to relieve financial pressure and allow vulnerable developing countries to redirect finance already in their budgets, to address extreme climatic events. Addressing loss and damage is not a one-time commitment. Climate finance providers must work with vulnerable communities and countries and carry-out gender and equity analyzes to identify evolving needs, which will change as more loss and damage is incurred.

## CONCLUSION

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Adaptation and Resilience as a theme of COP 26 marginalizes Loss and Damage and ignores the fact that the frequency and magnitude of loss and damage from climate change impacts is increasing. There is a real human toll to climate change which “adaptation and resilience” does not encompass. In its failure and refusal to reflect Loss and Damage prominently as a theme of both COP 26 and the UNFCCC negotiations, the COP 26 presidency and the UNFCCC secretariat are obscuring and sidelining an agenda that is critical for over 130 developing countries. This reflects the power imbalance in the multilateral negotiations and must be called out and corrected. We therefore propose that the theme be called: Adaptation and Loss and Damage to reflect these two important policy agendas prominently. In addition, we must ensure that work on Loss and Damage under the UNFCCC focuses on addressing loss and damage, the role of the Convention and the mandate of the WIM. Doing so is essential to build the kind of global solidarity we need to cultivate to ensure that vulnerable developing countries are supported and equipped to address loss and damage from the impacts of climate change.

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<sup>1</sup>The glossary of the IPCC’s report on 1.5°C defines loss and damage as the manifestation of climate change impacts on the ground and Loss and Damage as the policy agenda to address loss and damage.

<sup>2</sup>The UNFCCC website can be found at: <https://unfccc.int/> but Loss and Damage is buried in a sea of agendas under the Adaptation and Resilience theme.

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