



Exchange Commentary



Reflections from Adaptation Futures 2025 (Christchurch) Bridging Science, Story, and Survival



Setting the scene

I have just returned from a jam-packed week in **Christchurch, Ōtautahi**. The conference was amazing, full of inspiring ideas and wonderful people. The city itself is both beautiful and broken (as my taxi driver to the airport put it). It is a living, breathing symbol of resilience. I loved wandering along the **River Avon (Ōtākaro)**, watching the eels glide beneath the surface, and seeing the artworks that have sprung up among the post-earthquake ruins. It was hard to say goodbye.

A real highlight was the **strong presence of Indigenous knowledge and voices** from around the world, bringing such depth and perspective to the conversations.

At **Adaptation Futures 2025**, thousands of practitioners, policymakers, and researchers gathered under one urgent question: how can we build more just, grounded, and transformative adaptation pathways in an era of compounding crises?

As an educator and researcher immersed in climate-change responses, I found the week in Christchurch profoundly humbling. The conference's diversity of voices, especially from the Pacific, Indigenous communities, and youth, reminded us that adaptation is not a technical exercise. It is, as **was** declared in one of the opening plenaries, "survival, it is dignity."

Cynthia Houniui, from the **Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change** network, underscored that adaptation "is not about the individual but about what you do for your community." From the **World Adaptation Science Program (WASP)** Forum to the legal, social, and Indigenous panels, one message came through clearly: **adaptation is a moral and collective project**, and the science of adaptation must be intertwined with justice, culture, and care.

Acknowledgement of Country



The Climate Change Exchange brings together scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers who are thinking, working, and acting towards justice and sustainability in a warming world. We therefore acknowledge that we live, work, and learn on Aboriginal land and that sovereignty was never ceded. We pay respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their Ancestors, and to all Traditional Owners and Custodians of all lands and waters with which we live, work, and learn. Through the Exchange, we invite conversations and work that seek to honour our reciprocal obligations to Country and each other.



From policy to legal obligation: changing the narrative

One of the most significant shifts discussed was the recognition of climate action – and by extension, adaptation – as a **legal obligation**, not a policy preference. A **landmark decision in the International Court of Justice** has begun to align law with science: climate inaction can be construed as a violation of states' duties to protect life and dignity.

Speakers urged us to see the connection between moral and legal accountability. "Change happens when legal strategy meets moral obligation. Storytelling has a big role there."

For researchers and practitioners, this means moving beyond policy design into normative accountability:

- Embed adaptation frameworks within human-rights, health, and equity principles.
- Recognise that law, ethics, and culture co-constitute adaptation legitimacy.
- Use storytelling and communication to humanise climate obligations; showing adaptation not as a compliance act but as a collective right to live well.



Context, Indigenous knowledge, and decolonisation

Dr Maina Talia, Minister of Climate Change for Tuvalu, reminded the audience that "adaptation needs to be contextualised so that adaptive efforts are meaningful and have outcomes. There is no one-size-fits-all."

At the WASP Forum, participants reiterated the need to recognise **Indigenous knowledge as systematic and valid data** – not anecdotal, not symbolic, but essential to science itself. Researchers must build trust and respect knowledge-sharing boundaries: "Enable them to share the knowledge in a way they are comfortable with, and respect that knowledge."

Yusseff Nasseff, Director of Adaptation at the **UNFCCC**, cautioned against "integration" that erases difference:

"The objective should not be integration but respecting the plurality. The value systems coming from different knowledge systems should be reconciled."

Dr Talia went further:

"Decolonise mind, body, and soul. Take ownership of our own adaptation narrative. Do not let others come and tell us what to do."

These challenges resonated deeply in **Christchurch**, where the **Kia Tūroa Te Ao: Climate Resilience Strategy (2021)** integrates **Ngāi Tahu** and local Māori voices in shaping adaptation pathways. This partnership represents what Dr Talia called "taking ownership" of adaptation narratives, grounded in **place, culture, and kinship**.





A particularly resonant resource referenced during the conference was the report **From Risk to Resilience: Indigenous Alternatives to Climate Risk Assessment in Canada**, published by the **Yellowhead Institute**. The report critiques conventional risk-assessment frameworks for focusing heavily on built infrastructure while neglecting the interconnected social-ecological systems that underpin Indigenous communities. It calls for a paradigm shift, from colonial risk narratives to **relational, place-based models of resilience** that privilege Indigenous epistemologies and collective wellbeing. The link is clear: when adaptation is framed only as hazard mitigation, we miss the structural roots of vulnerability. The report invites researchers and practitioners to ask: How do our risk frameworks reproduce inequity, and how might we co-design assessments that centre Indigenous sovereignty, intergenerational justice, and ecological reciprocity?¹

For practice:

- Co-design adaptation initiatives with Indigenous and community leadership, not consultation after the fact.
- Recognise plural ontologies, different ways of knowing, valuing, and caring for Country, as legitimate evidence.
- Cultivate long-term trust, not transactional relationships.

Barriers to action: implementation, trust, and communication

The **World Adaptation Science Program Forum** identified three recurring barriers: the **implementation gap**, the **trust gap**, and the **communication gap**.

Many adaptation plans remain aspirational because trust and relationships are under-developed. "Honesty means researchers and communities listening to each other," one participant reflected. Another added: "Scientists and policymakers orbit different worlds."

To overcome these divides:

- Build **human-level interactions** – relationships, ceremonies, shared experiences – not just data exchanges.
- Translate science into culturally meaningful communication; socialise technical language so it empowers, not alienates.
- Remember: **trust is the fundamental enabler of adaptation**.

In Christchurch, post-earthquake recovery research revealed similar insights: neighbourhoods with strong **social networks** and **collective efficacy** recovered faster and became better prepared for future shocks.

Finance, scale, and the justice gap

The economics of adaptation remain troubling. As one speaker noted, **less than one percent of global climate finance reaches household-level adaptation**, and when it does, it is often filtered through layers of bureaucracy.

"Industrialised decarbonisation is a survival strategy," another added. **"Life should come before short-term financial gain."**



Christchurch's Long-Term Plan (2024–34) has taken a proactive stance:

- Establishing a **Climate Resilience Fund** for flood-risk management and coastal planning.
- Committing billions to upgrade waterways and manage stormwater.
- Directing \$1.8 million in operational funding toward climate-adaptation programmes.

These examples show how **local finance mechanisms** can operationalise global principles of justice. The lesson for others is to make funding equitable, **reaching the community scale**, and to monitor not only policy adoption but **who benefits** and **who remains excluded**.



From reactive to transformative adaptation

Throughout the conference, the call was to move from **reactive, project-based responses** to **transformative, justice-centred adaptation**.

Dr Jon Hellin posed a direct question:

"If we have not involved people and have not considered vulnerable populations, how do we expect to suggest adaptation options to them?"

Transformative adaptation means shifting power, governance, and knowledge relations – not just engineering new infrastructure. It asks us to **re-imagine what adaptation success looks like**: wellbeing, representation, reciprocity, and restored relationships with land and sea.

Dr Ritodhi Chakraborty explored adaptation as a "\$4 trillion industry," asking how relationships themselves might become indicators of resilience. Others proposed decoupling "climate" from "adaptation": seeing adaptation as the **by-product of justice and wellbeing**, not just risk-management.



Storytelling, imagination, and knowledge justice

One of the most inspiring sessions, "Navigating Change," showed how story-based tools can transform adaptation learning. Participants wrote **persona cards** – two human and two non-human, across past, present, and future – to explore empathy, agency, and imagined futures.

Storytelling was reframed not as soft communication, but as **knowledge justice** – a way of balancing cognitive power, enabling communities to author their own adaptation narratives.

As one Māori facilitator said, "We cannot do adaptation as reactive disaster response. Land restitution is not just a justice issue – it is an adaptation strategy." Returning land allows communities to restore ecosystems and reclaim agency over adaptation.



Lessons for Researchers and Practitioners

To distil a week of dialogues, debates, and shared reflection:

- **Question your hypothesis.** As Mirey Atallah urged, reflexivity must be embedded in climate research.
- **Respect plurality.** Integration without power equity is assimilation.
- **Build partnerships, not projects.** Relationships come with work and responsibility.
- **Invest in trust.** Without it, even the best-funded adaptation plans will fail.
- **Teach futures.** In education, use story, imagination, and plural knowledge to nurture agency.
- **Finance justice.** Channel adaptation funding to local entrepreneurs, households, and community initiatives.
- **Think intergenerationally.** Adaptation is as much about ancestors and future generations as it is about today's emissions.





Closing reflection

Christchurch – scarred yet strong – embodies what it means to live adaptation daily. Its people know that resilience is not built in a policy cycle but in **everyday relationships between people, place, and planet**.

At Adaptation Futures 2025, the message was unmistakable: **adaptation is survival, and survival is dignity**.

Legal frameworks can compel it, science can guide it, but only communities can embody it.

So, as **Miriama Kamo** urged us: “Don’t get anxious, get active.”

For all of us in research and practice, that means questioning extractive systems, amplifying Indigenous and local leadership, embedding justice in finance, and crafting adaptation stories that restore hope. Because adaptation, ultimately, is not about surviving the storm – it is about **re-imagining how we live together after it**.

Endnotes

1. <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/report/from-risk-to-resilience/>



**The Climate
Change Exchange**



Contact us:

www.climatechangeexchange.org.au

The Climate Change Exchange exists to bring together research, policy and practice to build our collective capacity to create inclusive, just and transformative adaptation futures.

We create spaces for people to connect, grow their understanding and act to transform systems through building relationships and practicing adaptation together.



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