



Exchange Commentary

Moving from Adaptation Strategy to Implementation

Key Messages

Adaptation requires enabling conditions, not simply plans.

Effective implementation depends on mandates, resources, accountability, organisational capability and institutional conditions.

Adaptation is a multi-level governance challenge.

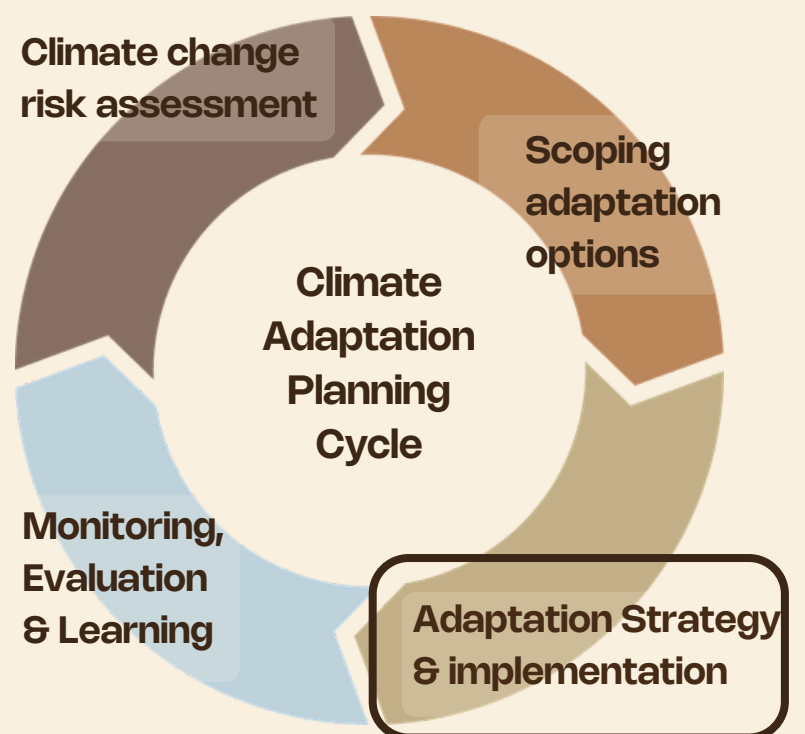
Implementation requires coordination across jurisdictions, organisational boundaries, sectors and scales, supported by relationships, shared responsibility and knowledge exchange.

Adaptation must be embedded within and influence existing systems and priorities.

Connecting and reconsidering climate risks and responses to organisational mandates and existing decision-making processes can increase salience and actionability.

Adaptation implementation is iterative and reflexive. Given uncertainty and changing conditions, implementation is better understood as an ongoing process of experimentation, learning, coordination and adjustment rather than execution of a predetermined plan.

The Learning Exchange series and its corresponding Exchange Commentaries follow a Climate Adaptation Planning Cycle. This commentary dives into the intricacies of Moving from Adaptation Strategy to Implementation.



Snapshot

Turning adaptation plans into action requires investment in the conditions that enable change. This means building mandates, relationships, shared responsibility and organisational capability; connecting adaptation to existing priorities; and supporting collaboration, experimentation and learning. Adaptation is not simply plan implementation, but an ongoing process of navigating change across complex systems.



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.



Introduction

A persistent challenge in climate change adaptation is the gap between planning and implementation. Research with local governments in Tasmania, for example, found a disconnect between organisations' adaptation policy goals and their subsequent implementation of intended actions (Rogers et al. 2025). This reflects a broader problem: producing an adaptation strategy does not, in itself, create the conditions needed to put that strategy into practice.

The implementation gap

The causes of this implementation gap are multiple and interconnected. Organisations may lack sufficient funding, staff, project-management capacity and practical expertise. Adaptation initiatives can be displaced by competing priorities, particularly in small organisations where staff have multiple responsibilities. Implementation can also be weakened by unclear accountability, poor coordination across organisational units, lack of senior leadership support, and limited understanding of what acting on climate change means in practical terms. The packaging of adaptation into 'projects' can increase feasibility but decrease flexibility, learning and continuity (Hellquist et al. 2025, Putkowska-Smoter 2025). Adaptation therefore depends not only on technical knowledge, but also on leadership, organisational capacity, governance and ongoing resources.

The problem also lies partly with adaptation plans themselves. Adaptation plans can be essential, but plan-making **necessarily simplifies complex realities** by defining particular systems, risks, scenarios, organisational responsibilities and courses of action. Yet many of the factors excluded or externalised during planning reappear during implementation. For example, even Australia's comprehensive 2025 National Climate Risk Assessment scoped out many relevant risks, such as those originating outside Australia's jurisdiction or, in the case of climate change risks to agricultural production, other environmental conditions, supply chains, markets and prices, infrastructure, workforce, policy, water supply, social licence and community dynamics. **These interacting conditions can subsequently determine whether an apparently sensible adaptation measure is actually feasible.** Similarly, many plans are premised on **assumptions of stability and thus quickly unravel when conditions and resources change.**

Adaptation as multi-layered and ongoing

Reducing the planning-implementation gap therefore requires **carefully cultivating the enabling conditions for adaptation, not simply better plans.** Priorities include building an adaptation skills pipeline, creating stronger, more robust political mandates for adaptation, allocating clear accountability, making adaptation salient to basic organisational priorities, and developing novel financing solutions to build financial resilience.

Especially important is working across groups, organisations and scales, as the Climate Change Exchange tries to do. Collaboration allows participants to share perspectives, insights, responsibilities and resources while building cohesion, clarity, trust and momentum. Adaptation implementation should therefore be understood as not only the execution of a predetermined plan, but also an ongoing process of coordination, learning and collective action within complex and changing systems (Liss et al. 2025, Rose et al. 2026).





Learning from Experience

The Climate Change Exchange held a third **Learning Exchange** on Moving from Adaptation Strategy to Implementation in August 2026, where we heard rich perspectives across theory and practice.



Acknowledgement

Thank you to all those who participated in the Moving from Adaptation Strategy to Implementation webinar and shared their insights. Thank you in particular to our panellists: Nina Incerti (Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, Australian Government), James Duggie (Department of Water and Environmental Regulation, Western Australia), Marty Gent (Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority) and Estefania Arteaga (Science Committee Member from the World Adaptation program).

Current experiences and arising needs



Build the mandate for adaptation work from the top while building relationships, understanding and credibility across organisations.



Make existing adaptation work visible by celebrating successes, transferring and retaining institutional knowledge.



Build a shared understanding and responsibility of what climate change adaptation means for different roles across organisations.



Recognise that climate change adaptation is about change management, where personal and institutional change are deeply intertwined.



Create strategies that embed safe spaces for reflexivity and learning how to navigate change in dynamic contexts.

Practical challenges



There were 800 barriers to adaptation identified by Estefania Arteaga's research on [Unpacking the theory-practice gap in climate adaptation](#).



Adaptation is a massive governance challenge, as a cross-cutting issue spanning complex systems, scales and responsibilities.



Adaptation is an ambiguous problem with unclear responsibilities, making it difficult to define the challenges and responses needed for a range of stakeholders.



Consultation and collaboration fatigue arise when work isn't building on what has already been done.



Limited adaptation funding, resources and capacity constrain people and organisations' ability to make progress.



Heavy reliance on consultants reduces internal capability and knowledge retention.

Opportunities



Understand motivation and spark connection by making climate change relevant and meaningful to people's everyday lives and aligned with organisations' existing priorities.



Make complexity manageable by breaking challenges into manageable parts while maintaining connection to the bigger picture.



Bridge language and adaptation gaps through translation, knowledge brokering and connecting different sectors and disciplines.



Build allyship and community by creating spaces where practitioners can connect, support one another and learn together.



Innovate in the ways of having conversations that respond to the context and connect climate narratives with what resonates.



Use pilots to de-risk change, demonstrate what is possible and get organisational buy-in.

Concluding reflections

This Learning Exchange reinforced that closing the gap between adaptation planning and implementation is fundamentally a **collective learning and change process**. It requires leadership, relationships, knowledge exchange and spaces for reflection and experimentation that enable people and institutions to navigate complexity together.



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.

We focus on:



Strengthening the capability of organisations and communities to plan for, manage and recover from the impacts of climate change.



Increasing the use of relevant research to inform just adaptation planning.



Building a collaborative network of researchers and practitioners to share and promote innovative thinking and good practice in climate change adaptation.

This is the role of the Climate Change Exchange: to convene diverse perspectives, connect experience and research across boundaries, surface and document what is being learned and translate this into practical insight and capability. By creating the conditions for ongoing collaboration, learning and adjustment, these collective efforts strengthen our capacity for collaborative, adaptive and anticipatory governance, while building an evidence base of what enables adaptation to take root and endure over time.



Resources / Further reading

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Exchange Brief
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