Bridging the climate divide

Why climate adaptation & mitigation must work together

Mindworks

Introduction

Climate organisations can be split into those working on mitigation and adaptation, especially in the Global North. With increasing climate impacts, especially in vulnerable countries, and the growth of the climate justice movement in the past 15 years, adaptation has gained more political and public attention. The distortion between contribution to the problem (emissions) and suffering the consequences (climate change impacts) saw countries and organisations from global majority countries taking the lead in integrating adaptation and mitigation needs, whether at the UNFCCC or domestically. In the past few years, a dramatically increasing number of people have been exposed to the impacts of climate change (including the Global North), notably extreme heat events. This again increased the attention in politics and the philanthropic sector to address adaptation needs.

Nevertheless, traditional mitigation groups and funders are often reluctant to allocate significant resources to adaptation as it is not seen as part of their critical pathway to keep temperature rise in check. Not only is it seen as competition for the same resources: “A Euro spent on adaptation cannot be spent on mitigation”, but adaptation is also still seen as a threat to mitigation as it is perceived as an alternative or even a competing strategy to deal with the climate crisis: “If we give people the feeling that they can adapt, they believe that mitigation is not urgent anymore.”

For years, these organisations operated under the belief that simply providing information and showcasing the impacts of climate change would naturally lead to broad public support for climate action. This perception, often reinforced by superficial public surveys, led them to develop strategies that relied heavily on technology rather than reshaping narratives or addressing deeper emotional and psychological barriers. As a result, in this era of polycrisis, these organisations have been caught off guard by the public’s and political leaders’ rollback on climate commitments and the waning support for bold climate action. Their misreading of the public’s mindset has left them unprepared for the growing resistance and lack of urgency surrounding climate initiatives.

This paper argues that integrating adaptation and mitigation will create synergies and new strategic pathways to build more political and public support for climate action. Creating synergies by integrating mitigation and adaptation is being discussed in the design of policies to reduce the overall financial burden of the climate crisis and prevent the creation of infrastructure that serves one objective but hinders the other. Interventions that benefit both goals have been designed, especially in forestry, agriculture, ecosystem restoration, and urban climate action plans. This paper focuses on the most critical impact of integrating both objectives: the ability to communicate and engage new audiences on climate change to prevent a political and public rollback on the issue. At the end you will also find a list of integration ideas and case studies.

1. Creating Agency

In the midst of the polycrisis, one of the most pressing societal challenges is the growing sense of powerlessness felt by large segments of the population. Global disruptions—ranging from economic instability and pandemics to the worsening impacts of climate change—have fueled a pervasive feeling that individuals no longer have control over their own lives. As uncertainty mounts, so does frustration and disillusionment with governments and political elites, leading to a diminished sense of political agency—the belief that people can meaningfully influence or enact change within the system.

Climate change intensifies this sense of helplessness. As extreme weather events become more frequent and severe, people not only experience its harsh effects firsthand but are also confronted with the sobering reality that even dramatic global efforts to reduce emissions won't bring immediate relief. The growing geopolitical divides further erode hope in international climate cooperation, leaving many to feel that mitigation efforts, however necessary, offer no immediate improvement to their daily lives. True agency is not just the ability to act but the ability to take impactful action—and in the face of climate change, mitigation alone leaves individuals feeling powerless to change their imminent reality.[1]

This lack of control has dangerous consequences. Anger, once constructive, can curdle into toxic resentment, as the underlying causes of suffering feel beyond resolution. This, in turn, leads to emotional disengagement, with denial becoming a refuge from overwhelming issues. These psychological shifts create fertile ground for populist and extremist groups to manipulate narratives, deepen polarisation, and weaken social cohesion, ultimately reducing public support for climate action.

However, adaptation offers a pathway to restore agency. By focusing on improving immediate living conditions and building resilience, collective adaptation efforts empower people not only to tackle the direct impacts of climate change but to reclaim personal and political power. Adaptation can strengthen communities' ability to advocate for resources, hold institutions accountable, and negotiate for a fair share of support. When managed as a highly participatory process that addresses physical, economic, social, and psychological needs, adaptation can revitalise a sense of agency and reduce the backlash against climate action, counteracting the limitations of mitigation-focused strategies.

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1 Mitigation action, whether personal or through pushing corporations and governments, serves more than just environmental goals. It can reduce feelings of guilt and offer hope for future generations. Additionally, it provides a sense of political empowerment, showing individuals that they can influence powerful elites and drive meaningful change, turning helplessness into agency.

2. Building Social capital

Organisations must prioritise climate crisis response and adaptation initiatives that actively build social capital to avoid further rollbacks in climate mitigation efforts. Disasters have a unique way of bringing people together in moments of urgency, inspiring spontaneous acts of collective action, particularly in the early "honeymoon phase"[2] of a crisis. As formal systems falter and institutional support proves insufficient in the initial rush of disaster relief, communities often rise to the occasion, instinctively organising themselves into mutual aid networks. Neighbours who may have barely interacted before suddenly find themselves working side by side, sharing resources, skills, and emotional support. This organic process, built on trust, cooperation, and shared purpose, sows the seeds of social capital. This vital resource strengthens the fabric of the community and helps it adapt to future challenges.

But this newfound social capital, fragile and nascent, must be carefully nurtured and expanded if it is to serve as a lasting force for resilience in the face of future crises. The bonds formed during these intense periods of crisis are not only instrumental in immediate rescue and recovery efforts, but can also transform into powerful political capital. When communities learn to trust and collaborate with each other, they are better equipped to advocate for themselves, to demand external resources, and to influence political decisions. Particularly important is the formation of "bridging social capital"—connections between groups and networks that might not ordinarily cooperate. These bridges reduce fragmentation, helping the community resist the forces of polarisation that often pull it apart in the aftermath of a crisis.

However, when institutions and authorities step in with rigid, top-down interventions, focusing solely on managing rescue and recovery by rebuilding infrastructure, the delicate social fabric that communities have woven can unravel. Instead of empowering people, these interventions can strip communities of their agency, leading to disillusionment and a breakdown in the very social capital that had emerged. We saw this vividly during the COVID-19 pandemic, where top-down public health strategies contributed to the deepening divide between pro- and anti-vaccine groups, fragmenting communities and eroding trust in institutions.

The trajectory of social capital in the wake of a crisis—whether it flourishes or deteriorates—can profoundly shape the long-term political and social health of a community. As crises become more frequent and severe, social capital becomes increasingly volatile. In many parts of the world, this volatility has led to a sharp decline in communal bonds, exacerbating polarisation and fueling the rise of "culture wars." Climate mitigation efforts have not been immune to this phenomenon, becoming entangled in the broader cultural conflicts that define modern political landscapes. At the same time, the unfolding polycrisis has heightened political instability and given rise to protest voting, making governments more vulnerable to backlash. Coupled with the financial diversion away from climate funding, these trends have contributed to public and political backpedalling on climate action and weakened democratic systems.

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2. In the wake of most disasters, impacted communities tend to follow recognizable patterns of response that unfold across a crisis timeline. Early on, during what is known as the honeymoon phase, a sense of solidarity sweeps through the affected population. In this fleeting moment, individuals are eager to lend a helping hand, driven by a profound need to come together. Strangers become allies, and differences dissolve as people rally around the shared experience of survival. A strong, inclusive identity begins to form, as if everyone is bound by a common fate, creating a surge of social capital. This newfound unity fosters cooperation, trust, and mutual support, as the community works together to overcome immediate challenges.

Yet, institutions and civil society have largely missed critical opportunities to harness the early stages of crises[3] to build and solidify social capital while preventing its deterioration in later stages. If we fail to engage communities in this way, we risk stalling the progress needed for climate mitigation. By their very nature, Crises are moments of rapid change where political action either accelerates or grinds to a halt, and public narratives and social norms shift dramatically. Failing to recognise the role of social capital during these pivotal moments means forfeiting the chance to shape these shifts in a positive direction.

By fostering community bonds and resilience now, during the unfolding climate crisis, we can ensure the strength and unity needed to maintain momentum in the fight for meaningful climate action.

3. Reducing Climate Denial

Empowering people through adaptation and giving them the tools to safeguard their lives and communities offers a powerful way to dissolve the growing emotional climate denial in many societies. Denial operates as a deeply ingrained defence mechanism, shielding us from the emotional weight of fear or guilt. When overwhelmed by these emotions, the mind instinctively seeks relief by rejecting the source of discomfort. It's a mental escape hatch, offering temporary comfort by disbelieving the realities that trigger unease. Yet, emotional denial should not be confused with politically motivated climate denial. Often fueled by deliberate disinformation, the latter can be challenged with facts and reason. Emotional denial, however, is far more insidious. It erects a cognitive barrier, filtering all incoming information through a lens of confirmation bias, allowing only what aligns with pre-existing beliefs to seep through. When facts challenge these beliefs, the reaction is often defensive—those in denial metaphorically "shoot the messenger," dismissing the source with hostility rather than confronting the truth.

Denial takes on many forms, ranging from outright rejection—"Climate change is a hoax!"—to more nuanced deflections: "It's not as severe as people claim," "A rapid transition away from fossil fuels will do more harm than good," or "Technology will fix everything, we'll adapt." These statements act as psychological armour, deflecting the urgency of the crisis and allowing the individual to remain in a state of comfortable inaction. Much like a person in denial about their drinking habits, seeking out any rationale to justify continued behaviour, those in climate denial gravitate toward narratives that downplay the problem. This selective absorption of information makes them particularly susceptible to populist rhetoric, which often opposes meaningful climate action.

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3. Many organisations, including disaster relief agencies, excel at leveraging the surge of social capital during the Honeymoon phase of a crisis, rallying support, donations, and volunteer efforts when communities are united by a sense of shared purpose. However, as the crisis progresses and enters the Disillusionment phase, much less attention is given to sustaining that social capital. The initial energy and solidarity begin to fade, yet efforts to strengthen these crucial community bonds often wane, leaving the networks of trust and cooperation to weaken just when they are most needed.

Denial is one of the greatest obstacles to rallying public support for climate initiatives. By dulling the sense of urgency, it erodes the motivation for change, making widespread support for climate action a distant goal. Without confronting and addressing this denial, the path to meaningful mitigation becomes increasingly difficult. Combatting denial, therefore, is not just important—it's essential for building the momentum needed for climate action. Paradoxically, even direct encounters with climate impacts, such as wildfires, floods, or extreme heat, can deepen denial. Research shows that when individuals feel powerless in the face of these events, their instinct to deny the future risks of climate change strengthens. The inability to protect oneself from future impacts feeds this psychological retreat.

4. From Adaptation to Mitigation: Harnessing Natural Shifts in Climate Action

As adaptation resolves the imminent needs of people, it is a more straightforward issue to engage people than mitigation. It can engage new audiences beyond the climate-converted (those who already know about and believe in the actual impacts). In many countries, extreme weather is not only a health but also an economic risk for people. In contrast to mitigation, it provides relevance even for those concerned about the end of the month. This is especially true during extreme weather events when people long for relief and are motivated to engage in ways to improve their experiences of present and future extreme weather events.

But adaptation is not only an easier engagement point. As shown in the previous three points, engaging people in adaptation efforts can strengthen social capital and agency and thereby reduce climate denial. This creates the social foundation for collective mitigation action. Even more, people who seriously engage in adaptation work, will soon be confronted with the limits of adaptation. In contrast to people who passively hope that we will be able to adapt (denial optimism), those who engage with the design of adaptation measures and their funding will soon discover that further increasing temperatures or water levels pose insurmountable technical or economic limits, providing strong incentives to combine adaptation action with mitigation action.

Organisations that have engaged constituencies through adaptation will be able to engage the same empowered communities to support their mitigation efforts, as the adaptation work has not only created vested interests but agency and social capital to build on.

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4. Many climate organizations continue to use extreme weather events to educate the public or stoke anger against the fossil fuel industry, while engagement teams tend to focus on offering practical tips for coping with heat.

Conclusion: Participation at the Heart of a New Adaptation-Mitigation Strategy

Integrating adaptation and mitigation strategies opens the door to engaging a broad spectrum of people, guiding them from immediate adaptation efforts to long-term mitigation action. During extreme weather events, when the need for relief is most urgent, organisations can connect with communities by addressing their immediate concerns. During the Honeymoon phase, they need to abstain from educating or blaming but focus on building agency and social capital.

Authorities need to act with care to not disempower communities. Tempted to enforce top-down decisions to save time, they can create long-term harm and negate the opportunities that crisis offers[5]. Initial experiences of collective agency need to be sustained by providing opportunities to engage in preventative adaptation action through giving access to decision-making and agency to create impact. By allowing communal participation in exploring adaptation needs and opportunities, people can collectively understand the possibilities and limitations of adaptation. At this stage, social capital and agency should be strong enough for people to confront inconvenient realities without denial.

For this strategy to succeed, it's crucial that organisations—and particularly governments—design adaptation and mitigation efforts with a strong emphasis on participation. By using tools like Citizen Assemblies, Participatory Budgeting, Digital Platforms and E-Democracy Tools, Digital Conversation and Collective Impact Initiatives, they can ensure these processes are inclusive and empowering, fostering a sense of ownership and collaboration within communities.

5. When the first COVID lockdown began, there was hope that the shared experience of disruption might foster more compassionate values and strengthen relationships between people and nature. The stillness of the world, with cleaner skies and a slower pace, seemed to offer a moment of reflection. However, as top-down decision-making continued without much public input, this initial optimism faded. Prolonged restrictions began to erode social bonds, weaken trust in institutions, and deepen polarization, replacing the early sense of unity with frustration and division.

Annex 1: Integration Ideas

Funders and changemakers can foster the integration by supporting simple adjustments of already existing initiatives.

1. Creating networks and alliances between emergency relief, adaptation and mitigation organisations to design and implement coordinated engagement strategies.

2. Reform the development and implementation of Urban Climate Action plans into highly participatory processes.

3. Evolve Energy Communities into climate communities by integrating adaptation and mitigation into their goals.

4. Create heat shelters as listening and engagement hubs. Heatshelters will attract the most vulnerable and often most disempowered parts of society. They can be transformed into important spaces to listen to these groups and gather information, to start conversations with and among them as first steps to build social capital and agency.

5. Create trainings for poor residents on how to retrofit houses to make them more heat resistant. Once more, use the training to build social capital, for example empowering women support groups to get access to necessary resources.

6. Do heat resilience training. The human body can, to some degree, adapt to heat. For that it needs times of change between heat exposure and relaxing time. Use boot camps to build social capital on resilience (create identities). Create defining moments (effort and success) and give people initial personal agency over their body. For example, design resilience training and infrastructure that makes the commute a natural training.

Annex 2: Case Studies

Unfortunately, little to no information is available on how these initiatives improved agency and social capital in the communities.

1. Carteret Islands, Papua New Guinea

The Carteret Islands have implemented community-owned and led organisations that utilise deliberative processes to engage residents in climate adaptation strategies. This grassroots approach emphasises community consensus, allowing the local populace to express their values and priorities in response to climate challenges. The engagement has fostered a deeper understanding of climate impacts and has empowered residents to take action collectively.

2. Vorarlberg, Austria

In Vorarlberg, the Citizens' Councils serve as a participatory tool that enables residents to collaborate with the government on environmental decision-making. This ongoing process is regulated by a constitutional amendment, ensuring that a representative sample of the population is involved in discussions about climate adaptation strategies. This model has facilitated a continuous dialogue between citizens and policymakers, enhancing local governance and accountability.

3. Rotterdam, Netherlands

Rotterdam, a city highly vulnerable to flooding due to its low-lying geography, has been a pioneer in using citizen participation to develop climate adaptation strategies. The city launched the "Rotterdam Climate Proof" program, which included extensive community involvement. Citizens were engaged through workshops, public consultations, and interactive platforms like the "Floating Pavilion" exhibition centre, which showcased innovative flood protection solutions. The participation process led to the development of the "Rotterdam Climate Adaptation Strategy," which includes innovative solutions like water plazas, green roofs, and adaptive infrastructure that both mitigate and adapt to flooding risks. The strategy has become a model for urban resilience worldwide.

4. New York City, USA

In response to the devastation caused by Hurricane Sandy in 2012, New York City initiated a series of climate adaptation efforts with strong community involvement. The "Rebuild by Design" competition invited local communities, designers, and experts to collaborate on innovative projects to enhance the city's resilience. Public workshops, community meetings, and participatory design processes were integral to the initiative. The competition led to several high-impact projects, including the "Big U," a series of interconnected protective barriers around Lower Manhattan that incorporate parks and public spaces. These projects reflect the input of local communities and have enhanced the city's preparedness for future climate events.

5. Barcelona, Spain

Barcelona has faced increasing heatwaves and droughts due to climate change. The city government recognised the need for community-based adaptation strategies. The city launched the "Barcelona Climate Plan," which involved residents in the planning process through the "Climate Citizen Assembly." This assembly allowed citizens to discuss and propose ideas for climate adaptation, focusing on issues like urban green spaces and water management. Citizen input directly influenced the plan's focus on increasing green infrastructure, promoting sustainable water use, and enhancing urban cooling through tree planting and green roofs. The participatory approach ensured that the plan addressed the needs and priorities of the local population.

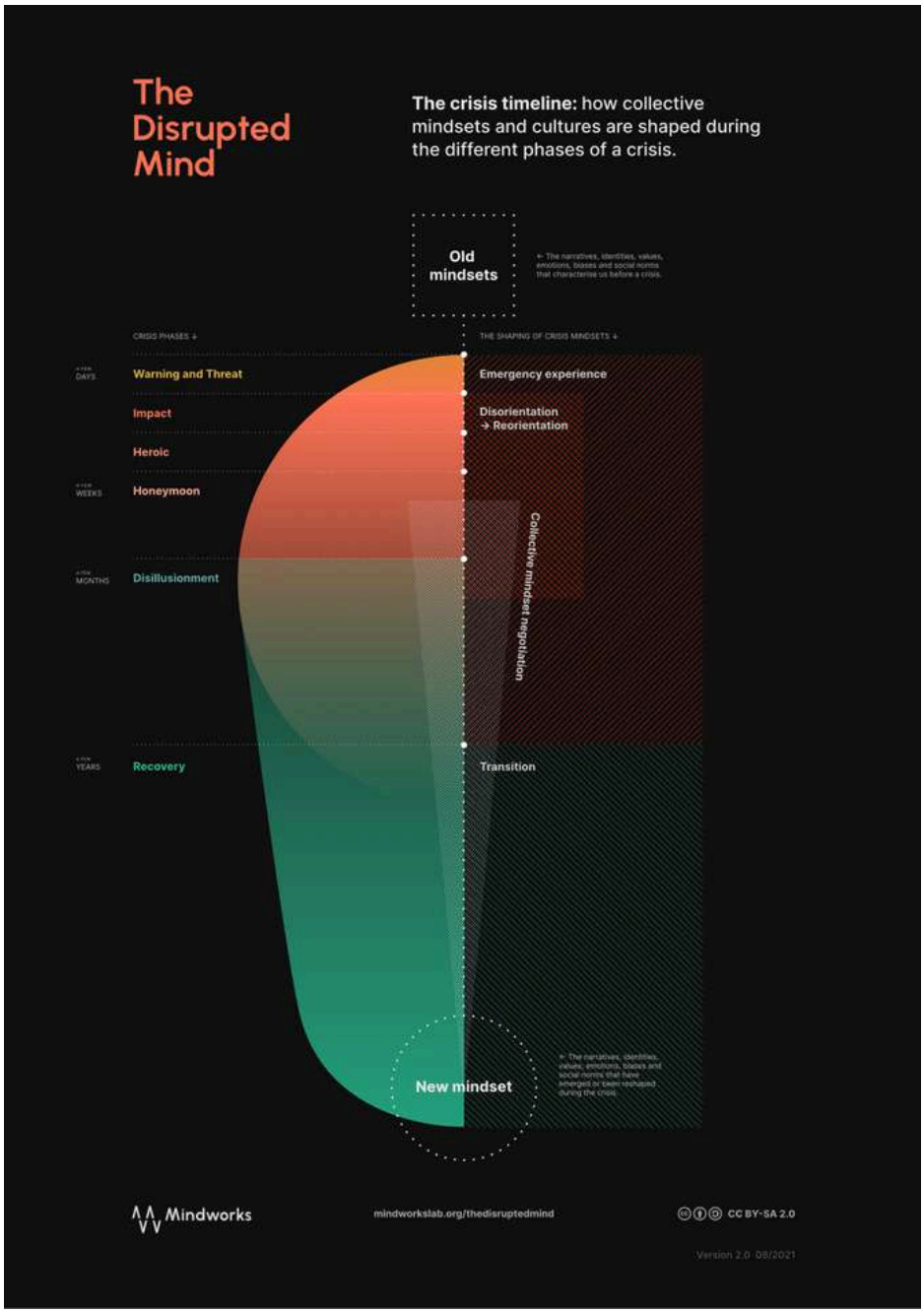
6. Christchurch, New Zealand

After the 2010-2011 earthquakes, Christchurch recognised the importance of resilience, particularly in the face of climate change-related challenges like flooding and sea-level rise.

The city implemented the "Share an Idea" campaign, which invited residents to contribute ideas for the city's rebuild and adaptation strategies. Over 100,000 ideas were submitted, focusing on how the city could become more resilient and adaptive to future risks. The extensive citizen input led to the development of the "Christchurch District Plan," which includes a range of adaptation measures such as flood protection, sustainable drainage systems, and the creation of green belts. The process has been hailed as a model for participatory urban planning.

Annex 3: The Crisis Timeline

Explore the full timeline here.



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