

Clarifying perspectives to promote action on loss and damage from climate change

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The hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria highlight the potential for the climate system to cause loss and damage. A new study clarifies the definitions of "loss and damage" from different perspectives, which is a key issue now that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC, is encouraging the creation and implementation of actions to address loss and damage from climate change.

Loss and Damage (L&D) has been debated at [climate](#) negotiations for decades. In the early days of the UNFCCC, small island states called for an international insurance pool covering residual damage associated with rising sea levels that couldn't be prevented by mitigation and adaptation efforts. The L&D issue is complex and sensitive, involving [climate change](#) impacts and risks and their effects on developing countries that are more vulnerable to climate change.

Despite the challenges, L&D has now entered the formal architecture of the UNFCCC. First, in 2013, there was the establishment of the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) for Loss and Damage associated with Climate Change Impacts. Then, in 2015, the Paris Agreement established a separate article on L&D and confirmed the long-term existence of the WIM. But what does addressing L&D actually mean? And, in particular, how might efforts to minimise and address L&D from [climate change impacts](#) differ from existing efforts under "adaptation?"

The official documents do not provide clear answers to these questions. "Strategic ambiguity" has arguably been fundamental for successful agreement between countries. But now, researchers and practitioners are starting to ask how they can address L&D, and many are confused about what this might involve. Experts have begun to develop concepts and frameworks for L&D policy, but until now, there has not been an empirical research study to analyse expert opinions.

"Given this rather confusing landscape, we hope our work will provide important clarity on the range of perspectives on L&D in order to move the discussions forward. Especially since the way we speak and think about these matters has implications for actions on the ground," says lead author of the study, Professor Emily Boyd at Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies.

"As scientists, we found ourselves asking 'what kind of research might be relevant to inform L&D policy?' But it is hard to identify specific research gaps when some of the policy discussions are quite vague. This led us to start asking people working on L&D what it meant to them, and we realized that we were getting a range of rather different answers," says co-author Dr Rachel James, from the Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford.

"As we began exploring these different perspectives, we also realized areas of commonality such as the relevance of climate risk assessment and monitoring and evaluation and the importance of research-policy dialogue to identify and prioritize research questions," says co-author Dr. Richard Jones from the Met Office Hadley Centre.

In the study, a number of stakeholders across science, practice and policy (such as UNFCCC negotiators, [climate scientists](#) and economists) from both industrialised and developing countries were interviewed about their viewpoint on L&D. Four perspectives on L&D emerged:

1. **Adaptation and Mitigation**—where stakeholders highlight all human climate change impacts as potential L&D and have the opinion that current UNFCCC mechanisms for adaptation and mitigation are sufficient to address L&D.
2. **Risk Management**—where stakeholders view discussions around L&D as an opportunity to work towards comprehensive risk management by building on existing efforts under disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and humanitarian work.
3. **Limits to Adaptation**—this viewpoint is centred around the limits to adaptation, and how to deal with residual L&D that cannot be, or has not been, avoided through mitigation or adaptation. Stakeholders suggest that L&D applies to impacts of any climate-related event, not just those directly linked to climate change, and have a focus on vulnerability.
4. **Existential perspective**—The viewpoint where L&D discussions represent a means to highlight the importance of addressing the inevitable harm which climate change will impose on vulnerable countries, populations, cultures and ecosystems. There is also discussion of compensation, whether monetary or non-monetary.

"By identifying that there are different perspectives on L&D, we can move toward creating a shared platform for future research and policy work. We found it especially interesting that there was no clear dividing line in terms of perspective variation between stakeholders from industrialised and developing countries, which could have been expected in light of the risks associated with climate change and extreme events."

Emily Boyd notes that it is the complexity surrounding the meaning and use of L&D which is important to highlight. "Even if countries might be reluctant to acknowledge that there are different perspectives in political [climate negotiations](#), we see it as key that policy makers are aware of these diverse viewpoints. Otherwise, we think that it will be very hard to

move forward and develop this policy space," she concludes.

More information: A typology of loss and damage perspectives, *Nature Climate Change* (2017) [DOI: 10.1038/nclimate3389](https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate3389) , www.nature.com/nclimate/journal/11/nclimate3389.html

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