

Personal, political perceptions stall community action on climate adaptation: Study

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Floods, wildfires and other extreme weather events spurred by climate change can disrupt entire communities, turning residents' lives upside down and costing millions in property damage.

Now, a University of Alberta [study](#) published in *Environmental Science & Policy* gives more insight into how personal beliefs of the public and politicians hamper [decision-making](#) around [climate adaptation](#) to better

protect communities.

Urban planners, engineers, executive managers and emergency management specialists responsible for developing and implementing adaptation strategies have been hindered by ideological barriers from both the governments and the public they serve, the research shows.

"The subjective perceptions people had about climate change and the need for adaptation were stumbling blocks for these professionals to do their job," says Sarah Kehler, a co-author on the study and a Ph.D. candidate in urban and regional planning in the Faculty of Science.

They all expressed "a high degree of frustration," she adds.

"As professionals, they have the technical knowledge—and often the responsibility—to look after the public well-being, but when they can't get a certain amount of support from [political leadership](#) or the general public, they are stuck in the middle."

That's a concern, leaving many communities stagnant on taking proactive measures against increasingly prominent impacts of climate change such as floods, fires, high winds and erosion, adds Jeff Birchall, lead author on the study, director of the Climate Adaptation and Resilience Lab and associate director of the School of Urban and Regional Planning in the Faculty of Science.

"To develop adaptation strategies that will build resilience, it's necessary to have public and [community support](#), which can lead to political buy-in. Once both are in place, local [government](#) decision-makers can affect more purposeful, direct change," Birchall says.

Even when [climate change adaptation](#) is a priority, [local governments](#) need to have the capacity to take action, and sometimes [governance](#)

[processes](#) like jurisdiction, authority and responsibility can make this difficult in practice, he adds.

The study focused on four British Columbia regional districts that had experienced some climate-driven damage but had few active adaptation strategies in place.

Interviews with planners, engineers and other professionals for those communities revealed subjective perceptions politicians and members of the public, such as property owners, hold about the risks and responsibilities they associate with taking protective action.

Denial and discretion lead to inaction

Although the interviewees themselves recognized the need and benefits of developing and implementing climate adaptation strategies, they also told the researchers that belief didn't extend to their communities.

People's personal views led to a pattern of "denial and discretion" that they used to justify their inaction, Kehler says.

That dynamic gave people a way to avoid taking action, yet also provided feelings of safety and control.

"For the public, there's an understanding that climate change exists, but it's seen as really big and scary, so people use denial to cope with it and they can't seem to translate climate adaptation into their own lives."

Along with that, government decision-makers tended to see climate adaptation strategy as either a future problem—50 or 100 years down the road—or as an expensive political liability that would cost them votes.

"If they take some sort of adaptation action that ends up not being

needed in a four-year election cycle, voters might be angry and see it as a waste of money. So they were worried about the risk to their public image and avoided taking action."

People also used their discretion—their freedom to decide what should and shouldn't be done—to avoid responsibility for preparing for climate change impacts, the interviewees told the researchers.

One of the biggest barriers identified had to do with [government policy](#), the study's authors note. Because climate adaptation is only recommended—not mandated—in B.C. for local governments, there was no real impetus to act, Kehler says.

"When policy is designed to be flexible, that legislative discretion shifts responsibility around perpetually, often in favor of [profit-driven decisions](#) such as land development, which may not be a good long-term strategic decision for adaptation."

Private citizens similarly used their discretion to avoid taking more collaborative responsibility, the researchers were told.

"Property owners often felt they had 100 percent autonomy in their decision-making, even in the face of zoning and other bylaws," Kehler notes, citing an example of one coastal landowner who illegally installed shore-hardening concrete, worsening erosion on neighboring properties.

"There was this idea of, 'If it affects other people, it's not my problem.'"

The study also identified a misplaced trust in institutional safeguards, Kehler notes.

"People had so much trust in their governments, they were complacent; they tended to believe the government was going to protect them from

poor decisions and look after them when consequences occurred. So when a property owner gets a variance to build a house on a flood plain and then experiences flooding, people expect the government to rebuild the house."

"But that trust means the public doesn't support adaptation policy."

Collective co-operation on adaptation strategy was also marred by how people felt about the degree of control they had over nature itself, the research suggested.

While the professionals interviewed for the study believed climate change was occurring and there was a need to prepare for it, "the political actors believed little or no change was occurring, so action was thought to be unnecessary, and the public believed that change was occurring but that action was futile," Kehler notes.

Overall, the study findings point to "a big destructive cycle that prevents the collective action that climate change requires, and planning for the future is hard when we can't agree on what reality is," she adds.

Sustaining co-operation through connection

More support from higher levels of government is crucial to motivating local governments and their communities to proactively plan for climate change, says Birchall, who outlined some of those challenges in a recent presentation to Canada's Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications.

"Local governments, as the level closest to the people—and the climate impacts—are in the best position to address climate change adaptation, but it often comes as a downloaded responsibility without appropriate support. Take infrastructure, for instance. Higher levels of government

will significantly support initial development, but then local governments will struggle with maintenance and repair."

"The end result is community vulnerability."

"Ultimately, there's a need for greater provincial initiative to support local governments in adaptation," he adds, noting that other measures could include more overarching, targeted adaptation mandates and policies at the provincial level.

Understanding how local governments view the risk, and how that affects their decisions, can also encourage more strategic approaches to get buy-in on making change, Kehler adds.

"We could shift the way issues are presented to make taking action more palatable, to avoid people shutting down."

That requires "a different approach to adaptation that benefits communities now and in the future," she adds.

"For example, adaptation doesn't need to be expensive. It can be in the form of planning communities in a different way, perhaps different zoning, or bolstering ecosystem services, such as protecting and reclaiming wetlands that absorb floodwaters."

Fostering a greater sense of community before [climate change](#) becomes overwhelming is also vital to moving collective action forward, she believes.

"When people are connected to one another, it fosters a sense of reciprocity. They care more about what is happening to their neighbors, and it's not a mindset of 'us versus them.' It's about making good choices for everyone."

In turn, that attitude would result in the kind of sustained co-operation needed for successful adaptation, Kehler adds.

"Often after an event happens, political leadership is willing to move on adaptation, and the public has a wonderful sense of cohesion ... and then it ends. But what if we had those strategies in place ahead of time?"

More information: S. Jeff Birchall et al, Denial and discretion as a governance process: How actor perceptions of risk and responsibility hinder adaptation to climate change, *Environmental Science & Policy* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.envsci.2023.05.017](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2023.05.017)

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