

Looking back at the 5th European Climate Change Adaptation Conference (ECCA 2021)

Lessons for adaptation
in Europe and beyond

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Key messages

- The European Climate Change Adaptation (ECCA) Conference, organised bi-annually since 2013, offers a platform to exchange knowledge on climate adaptation strategies and policies between scientists, policy-makers and practitioners. The aim is to drive innovation and come forward with actionable solutions.
- The theme of the 5th ECCA edition in 2021 was ‘Bringing adaptation solutions to life: inspiring climate adaptation action for a resilient future’. Four overarching messages were a common thread throughout the conference: (1) We need to leave behind ‘business-as-usual’ and focus on change in time of increasing risks; (2) Cooperation across and between various governance scales is a key enabler; (3) Empowering people and communities through a bottom-up approach and ensuring inclusivity is crucial for a just transition; and, (4) Science and policy should make uncertainty manageable, by taking a long-term approach and balance trade-offs across development objectives.
- Climate adaptation is a global goal, going beyond Europe. Therefore, the EU Green Deal, and related policies like the EU Adaptation Strategy, have important international dimensions. The EU can help partner countries to adapt to negative climate impacts in three ways, by (1) taking a collaborative approach to adaptation and integrating climate risk management measures into its wider group of policies; (2) raising the financing bar to support adaptation in Africa’s most vulnerable countries and communities; (3) rebuilding trust with Africa via climate diplomacy to advance the adaptation agenda.

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Introduction

Right in the middle of 2021, the 5th European Climate Change Adaptation Conference (hereafter ‘ECCA’ or ‘ECCA 2021’) took place, centred around the theme “Bringing adaptation solutions to life: inspiring climate adaptation action for a resilient future”.¹ First held in 2013, it is Europe’s largest biennial science-driven conference on climate change adaptation. It offers a forum for exchanging knowledge between scientists, policy-makers and practitioners. The aim is to drive innovation and to come forward with actionable solutions for more effective climate adaptation strategies and policies.

ECCA 2021 was convened by projects that have received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Framework Programme, notably the SINCERE, CASCADES and RECEIPT projects.² The organisation of the conference was led by partners of these three projects and JPI Climate³ together with the European Commission (EC). The conference was set up as a virtual event, combining a webinar series of nine webinars in May and June that led up to the high-level conference on 22 June 2021, hosted by the EC as a standalone event.



Picture 1 – ECCA 2021 Conference logo

The conference could not be more timely: in February 2021, the EC adopted its new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change, setting out how the EU can become climate resilient by 2050. The Strategy also has an important external dimension, as Europe promises to play an increasingly big role in supporting partner countries in their fight against the climate crisis. During the most recent UN climate conference COP26 in Glasgow, Vice President Frans Timmermans also announced that Europe would more strongly support adaptation in partner countries.⁴

But, how to turn policy and pledges into practice to ensure effective adaptation and climate resilience on the ground? This short policy brief responds to this question by looking back at the key lessons from ECCA 2021, drawing on concrete examples of projects and initiatives discussed during the conference, and a follow-up event, co-organised by ECCA partners in the EU Pavilion at COP26 in November 2021.

ECCA 2021: four ingredients for successful adaptation

ECCA 2021 welcomed approximately 200 speakers, ranging from youth leaders, community activists to high-level decision-makers, to share knowledge with an audience of almost 2000 participants. The main goal was to bridge the findings of the climate adaptation research community and the needs of policy-makers, financial institutions and funders, businesses, cities and communities. The topics of the nine webinars ranged from ‘financing climate adaptation’, to ‘climate change and health’, to discussions on ‘novel approaches to coastal adaptation’.⁵

Four key messages - discussed hereafter - were a common thread throughout the entire conference. In the following sections, each message is accompanied by a concrete example of an adaptation or resilience-building practice, presented during the webinars.

Focus on change in time of increasing risks

Change is needed to finance, deliver and accelerate sustainable and meaningful climate adaptation solutions at a time of unprecedented risk. But these times can also present opportunities to improve climate resilience. The ECCA community questioned the logic of the existing financial system and its ability to meet the adaptation and resilience-building needs of the most vulnerable communities and people. During the discussions, public-private partnerships were often presented as the way forward for adaptation investments. For example, the Climate Policy Initiative created the Blockchain Climate Risk Crop Insurance.⁶ This is a digital platform, combining public and private finance for standardised crop insurance for smallholder African farmers. This system helps build these farmers’ resilience to climate impacts by enabling transparent pay-outs in times of extreme weather events.

Cooperation as a key enabler

Society and governments can build on lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic to increase collaborative actions for more effective adaptation, as was said at several instances during ECCA. A good example of this type of multi-actor cooperation is the adaptation and resilience-building work done by the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), created in 1998. This transnational body, involving ministers, technical experts, the scientific community, national delegates and civil society, aims at the sustainable and equitable use of the Danube river basin covering a large part of South-Eastern Europe. ICPDR has made considerable progress on the management of river-floodplain systems while dealing with challenges such as the

diverging national interests along the Danube that hamper the implementation of an integrated water management approach. To overcome these challenges, ICPDR's ecosystem-based management approach prioritises sites along the length of the river independent from jurisdictional, administrative and political borders.⁷ This provides lessons for other river basin organisations, such as the ones in Africa, where water management is a constant negotiation to deal with conflicting interests and competing claims between upstream and downstream countries.⁸

The benefits of a bottom-up approach

Empowering people at every level through sharing knowledge via diverse communication channels, and providing them with the tools to create change, is crucial. This creates a sense of ownership, critical of successful adaptation. Concretely, climate services, such as climate adaptation knowledge platforms, play a key role in connecting people with the information they need to act.⁹ Web-based climate change adaptation platforms, such as the Knowledge Exchange between Climate Adaptation Platforms (KE4CAP) project, provide access to high-quality climate information and adaptation strategies to ensure informed decision-making.¹⁰ KE4CAP brings together more than thirty adaptation platforms in more than twenty-five countries in Europe and the rest of the world. The idea is that developers and operators of all platforms join together to share knowledge and best practises, during events, workshops or via surveys. KE4CAP looks at several topics, including 'social justice and equity' and 'integration of cultural knowledge into adaptation platforms'. The initiative, coming to an end in January 2022, has proven to be effective thanks to the active participation and information-sharing of its stakeholders and members.

The importance of inclusivity

Sustainable solutions should leave no one behind. Key examples of proven adaptation measures with a specific inclusivity character can be found in nature-based solutions (NbS). NbS is an umbrella concept to save nature and simultaneously tackle societal challenges. It also bridges science and indigenous knowledge.¹¹ Local hubs that connect people and solutions are also a way to ensure inclusivity. Research by Kooij et al. (2018),¹² presented during ECCA 2021, revealed that the speed and progress of renewable energy transitions between European member states differed depending on the emergence of grassroots initiatives. The more integrated these initiatives were with knowledge institutes, technology developers and political parties, the more influence they had on changes in the energy system.¹³ These types of participatory approaches are also a condition for effective adaptation and resilience-building.

COP26 side-event: perspectives for adaptation cooperation with Africa

As aforementioned, the 2021 EU adaptation strategy underlines the need to better link the internal and external dimensions of adaptation with partner countries, particularly in Africa. The ECCA 2021 (championed by partners in the H2020 Cascades project and JPI Climate), together with the French Development Agency (Afd), the NAP Global Network, Stockholm Environment Institute (also a partner in the CASCADES project), the African Union Development Agency (NEPAD), the Walker Institute and the University of Reading, organised a side-event during COP26 in Glasgow to discuss how Europe can support African partner countries in their endeavours to adapt to climate change. The event focused on three overarching themes: science and data generation; governance and policy design; policy implementation and concrete projects on the ground.¹⁴



Picture 2 – ECCA 2021 co-hosted side-event in the EU Pavilion at COP26, Glasgow, UK (from left to right: Sally Stevens, Institute for Environmental Analytics; Carla Montesi, EC DG INTPA; Frank McGovern, JPI Climate; Katy Harris, CASCADES/SEI; Kwame Ababio, AU NEPAD; Christophe Buffet, Afd; and, Hanne Knaepen, CASCADES/ECDPM, joining virtually).

The session offered a platform to look back at the key outcomes of ECCA 2021. But it also took the discussions from ECCA further by responding to the following question: which steps should the EU take to ensure adaptation and resilience-building at the global level? Three ways were proposed.

First, the new EU Adaptation Strategy, discussed in detail in Box 1, specifically refers to the fact that “impacts of climate change have knock-on effects across borders and continents.” The text says that the EU will respond to these types of transboundary climate risks by “strengthening cooperation and dialogue on adaptation in trade agreements.” EU policies on paper now take into account global interconnectedness.

However, policy ownership for transboundary climate risks has not been designated in the EU context. This is because so far, European policy-makers have given lower priority to risks that occur in the future or that are geographically remote with second- or third-order implications.¹⁵ For instance, research by the CASCADES project reveals how Tunisia, heavily import-dependent on cereal imports from places such as Ukraine or Russia, is very vulnerable to possible climate impacts in third countries from where it imports its staple food. This is because adverse weather conditions, due to climate impacts, in Ukraine or Russia, could lead to poor harvests. As a result, the exporting countries would be likely to halt their cereal exports to Tunisia. Rising food prices in Tunisia, in combination with other factors such as weak governance and declining employment opportunities, could then lead to political instability and rioting in the streets of Tunisia. In turn, this situation could have direct and indirect consequences for the EU which considers Tunisia as an important ally in the region. Hence, the EU, in its cooperation with climate-vulnerable, food import-dependent states such as Tunisia, should integrate climate risk management measures into its wider group of policies, including its development, governance, security, migration and trade policies.¹⁶ Cross-border and cascading risks will become an increasingly defining issue for climate diplomacy in the years ahead. The only way forward for Europe is to commit to building resilience to climate change on a fully global and transformative scale.¹⁷

Box 1 - What is new about Europe's new adaptation strategy?

In recent decades, climate impacts have been felt across Europe. In 2003, the heatwave left almost 20,000 people dead in France. Last summer, the deadly floods struck Belgium, Germany and France in an unpredictable and unforeseen way. In Europe, economic losses from more climate-related extreme events are already over EUR 12 billion annually.¹⁸ The human costs of climate change, from casualties to displacement to job loss, have become evident. Due to increasing impacts, more scientific evidence and awareness, adaptation has climbed the European policy agenda. In February 2021, the European Commission published its much anticipated EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change.¹⁹ This long-term strategy raises the profile of adaptation as a key element of the European Green Deal. It is in line with the Paris Agreement and the European Climate Law.²⁰



Picture 1 - Frans Timmermans, Executive Vice-President for the European Green Deal, European Commission, speaking during the ECCA high-level event on 22 June, underlining the importance of the new and more ambitious EU adaptation strategy.

The new Strategy was well-received, because it steps up international action on adaptation, beyond Europe's borders. There is a strong focus on small island developing states and least developed countries in Africa. The international dimension also includes a recognition of transboundary climate impacts.²¹ Furthermore, the new EU Adaptation Strategy aims for better data collection, faster action and a more systemic approach, integrating nature-based solutions, creating synergies with ecosystem restoration, biodiversity, water management and health. The policy recognises adaptation as a priority in Covid-19 recovery. Importantly, the Strategy brings justice to adaptation, which is about addressing fundamental inequalities in society, and about protecting the most vulnerable²²

However, critics say that the Adaptation Strategy fails to set out concrete, measurable and time-bound targets for the EU and its member states to become climate-resilient. This contradicts a request from the European Parliament for binding and quantifiable targets.²³ There is a strong call for a clear action plan on how to support locally-led community-based adaptation. It also remains to be seen how the Strategy can trigger stronger adaptation action by the development finance institutions, and how it can respond to issues of policy incoherence between, for instance, agricultural adaptation and trade policies.²⁴

Second, Europe can lead by example by raising the financing bar to support adaptation in African least developed countries and small island development states, as mentioned in the Adaptation Strategy (See Box 1). In the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027, the EU has committed to spending 30 percent of the EU's external financing on climate change and the environment, including adaptation. Under the new framework, the Commission is moving towards purely geographical allocation of funding in the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), with a much stronger alignment with countries' priorities, such as National Adaptation Plans. However, the EU must integrate 'climate justice' principles more strongly in its financing schemes, which it has partly failed to do so far.²⁵

Third, "we [in Europe] will only be as resilient as the most vulnerable around us", as was said at several instances during ECCA 2021. The most vulnerable are often located in African countries. Unfortunately, the European and African climate agendas struggle to find common ground. Climate finance is one of the biggest stumbling blocks between European and African actors, as evidenced again during the COP26 negotiations: the slow and inadequate delivery of climate finance showed the gap between bold pledges and follow-through actions. Therefore, the EU's delivery on the Paris Agreement should be fully embedded in the financial structures that make transitions possible. African observers of COP26 often talked about a 'two-faced' issue: while the EU publicly cares about adaptation inside the talks, most of the money goes to emission reductions. Therefore, rebuilding trust via climate diplomacy between Europe and Africa is crucial. One concrete way to do this will be for the EU to support partners dealing with the devastating loss and damage from climate change.²⁶

Moving forward towards ECCA2023

Adaptation was high on the agenda of COP26 in a way that has been unseen so far. It has become an issue of justice among generations. COP27, to be held in 2022, is already being dubbed the “adaptation COP”. The next ECCA Conference will be held in 2023. Hopefully, it can build on the adaptation progress made at previous COPs, and allow to even further extend the range of diverse voices from across Europe including the young people, local communities, businesses, financial institutions and cultural minorities, and beyond Europe. Living in a world of uncertainty, ECCA 2021 has taught us that making this uncertainty manageable is an important role in science and policy. Moving past adaptation projects and taking a long-term approach can help to manage uncertainty and balance trade-offs across different development objectives.

Endnotes

¹ See: <https://www.ecca21.eu/>.

² For more details, see (in respective order): <https://sincereforests.eu/>;
<https://www.cascades.eu/>; <https://climatestorylines.eu/>.

³ See: <http://www.jpi-climate.eu/home>.

⁴ During COP26, the EU announced to support the Adaptation Fund with a new pledge of 100 million euros. See:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_5886.

⁵ For an overview of all webinar sessions, refer to: <https://www.ecca21.eu/agenda>.

⁶ For more details, see: <https://www.climatefinancelab.org/project/climate-risk-crop-insurance/>.

⁷ See: icpdr.org and <https://aquacross.eu/content/international-commission-protection-danube-river-icpdr.html>

⁸ Medinilla, A. (2018). *African river basin organisations: From best practice to best fit*. ECDPM Discussion Paper 236. Maastricht: ECDPM.

⁹ For more details, watch the full session “At your service: Climate knowledge & information as enablers of climate action” (8 June 2021) here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDAWyWyoO7Y>

¹⁰ See: weadapt.org/platforms

¹¹ For more information on nature-based solutions, see:

<https://www.iucn.org/theme/nature-based-solutions>

¹² For more details, watch the full session “Acting locally – citizen engagement and community mobilization” (9 June 2021) here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krcc4WWUCYM>

¹³ Kooij, H.J., Oteman, M., Veenman, S., Sperling, K., Magnusson, D., Palm, J. and Hvelplund, F. (2018). *Between grassroots and treetops: Community power and institutional dependence in the renewable energy sector in Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands*. Energy Research & Social Science, Volume 37, pp. 52-64.

¹⁴ To watch the full recording of the COP26 side-event, see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNRFA3IQ1Ao&t=1s>

¹⁵ Mackie, J. (2020). *Promoting policy coherence: Lessons learned in EU development cooperation*. CASCADES Policy Brief.

¹⁶ Knaepen, H. (2021). *Climate risks in Tunisia: Challenges to adaptation in the agri-food system*. CASCADES Research Paper.

¹⁷ Harris, K. and R. Klein (2021). *ECCA 2021: Four Cs to foresee a climate-resilient Europe*. CASCADES Blog Post.

¹⁸ European Commission (2021). *Forging a climate-resilient Europe – the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change* (COM(2021) 82 final). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See: <https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/eu-adaptation-policy/strategy>

²¹ During ECCA 2021, partners in the CASCADES project organised a webinar on 31 May about “transboundary climate impacts’: during a policy simulation, participants were confronted with the latest climate impact science that considers climate impacts as interconnected and cross-border changes. They were also asked to work on propositions of actions to counteract the crises, possibly emerging from transboundary climate

impacts. To watch the full session, see: <https://www.cascades.eu/event/360-view-of-climate-impacts-experiencing-the-future-to-plan-adaptation/>

²² Klein, R. (2021). [The EU adaptation strategy is everybody's cup of coffee](#). CASCADES Blog Post.

²³ European Parliament (2020). [European Parliament resolution of 17 December 2020 on the EU strategy on adaptation to climate change \(2020/2532\(RSP\)\)](#).

²⁴ These issues are currently investigated by partners of the CASCADES project. Refer to www.cascades.eu for forthcoming policy analyses.

²⁵ Di Ciommo, M. and P.E. Ahairwe (2021). [Financing the EU Green Deal: Putting Africa and adaptation higher on the agenda](#). ECDPM Great Insights Magazine, Vol. 10, Issue 2. Maastricht: ECDPM.

²⁶ Knaepen, H. (2021). [COP26 through an Africa-Europe lens](#). ECDPM Commentary. Maastricht: ECDPM.



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