



Addressing the Political–Economic Barriers to Climate Adaptation in Ireland

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Identifying pressures

This research examined why climate adaptation in Ireland is not keeping pace with ongoing environmental change. Historically, Ireland's climate policies have prioritised reducing emissions over adapting to unavoidable climate impacts. With climate-related costs in Ireland projected to reach billions of euros annually by 2050, the study aimed to assess how current governance structures support or hinder adaptation. Using a political economy approach, it sought to uncover the interests, incentives and institutional factors that shape adaptation decisions across three key sectors: agriculture, flood risk management, and water quality and water services infrastructure. The research combined a literature review, document analysis, interviews and a stakeholder workshop to identify barriers preventing timely and effective adaptation. The goal was to provide evidence to inform more robust policy frameworks, ensuring that Ireland's climate adaptation efforts keep pace with emerging challenges and protect the country's economy, society and environment in the long term. Thus, this research is important for both the government and the general public. The research was innovative, as it was the first to explore Ireland's adaptation barriers through a political economy framework.

Informing policy

The study found that, while Ireland's National Adaptation Framework sets a strategic direction, political, economic and social factors hinder actual progress. Common barriers include (i) a perceived lack of urgency, where climate change is not seen as an immediate threat or one that requires widespread change; (ii) adaptation unsuccessfully competing with more immediate short-term political and economic priorities; and (iii) centralised governance and siloed thinking. In the agriculture sector, prioritising climate mitigation over adaptation, unclear goals, weak trust in advice, and powerful interest groups limit effective adaptation. In the flood risk management sector, slow progress is attributed to a lack of a sense of urgency, public disagreements on solutions, unclear division of responsibilities between agencies, and

rigid funding criteria. In the water sector, a perceived abundance of water, unclear metrics that need landscape-scale implementation, prioritisation of current water challenges, and fragmented policies impede adaptation. These findings indicate that shifting underlying institutional and societal conditions is essential. This research further highlights the need for stronger leadership, consistent policies and greater stakeholder involvement, ultimately enabling Ireland's adaptation efforts to better align with the scale and urgency of climate impacts.

Developing solutions

The research provides a road map for policymakers, sector leaders and communities to strengthen adaptation efforts. Establishing high-level political support and appointing dedicated leadership can encourage long-term thinking. Initiating a national conversation – using participatory processes like citizens' assemblies – can build shared understanding and consensus on issues such as sustainable food systems and integrated landscape management for better adaptation. Pilot projects, such as experimental catchments for nature-based solutions, can demonstrate practical approaches that support adaptation across multiple sectors. Increasing local-level resources, training staff and fostering cross-sector collaboration will also help embed adaptation within governance structures. Sector-specific recommendations include giving farmers clear adaptation goals (agriculture), engaging communities in co-designing flood risk solutions (flood risk management), and raising public awareness about water resources and aligning related policies to deliver progress in water infrastructure (water quality and water services infrastructure). Over time, these measures can shift priorities and incentives, ensuring that adaptation actions become core elements of Ireland's policy landscape. Ongoing evaluation and further research will help refine and improve strategies, assisting Ireland in responding more effectively to climate challenges and ensuring long-term resilience.

