

# Communicating climate change adaptation

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO VALUES-BASED COMMUNICATION



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Adaptation Scotland provides advice and support to help organisations, businesses and communities in Scotland prepare for, and build resilience to, the impacts of climate change.

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## Foreword

Engaging meaningfully with a diverse range of individuals and organisations is one of the biggest challenges surrounding climate change adaptation. As part of the ‘Adaptation Learning Exchange’, Adaptation Scotland invited communication experts Climate Outreach to deliver an interactive seminar on values-based climate change communication.

Climate Outreach’s mission is to ensure climate change and its impacts are understood, accepted and acted on across the breadth of society, in a manner that creates a truly sustainable future. Climate Outreach has a unique position as a bridge between research and practitioners, which enables them to disseminate key principles of climate change communication and public engagement. Central among these is the idea that effective engagement starts by understanding how people’s *values* underpin their views about climate change.

This practical ‘how-to’ guide introduces the concept of values-based climate change communication for adaptation. It provides clear, concise summaries of the principles of engagement, combined with practical examples of how public bodies in Scotland can use and tailor these principles in their work.

The guide is primarily aimed at staff within public bodies who want to communicate more effectively on climate change adaptation within their workplace, to external stakeholders and to members of the public. However, it will also be of use to those in the private sector, third sector and other communities who need to communicate the challenge of climate change adaptation.

*Karen Miller, Project Coordinator  
Sniffer and Adaptation Scotland*

## **Summary: The principles of values-based climate change communication**

- **Pay close attention to your audience's values**

Values are the bedrock on which attitudes to climate change are built. Use a values map (page 4) to help identify the values of your audience that you want to engage with.

- **Frame your messages in the right way**

Look for the overlap between the values that are important to your target audience and values such as 'protecting the environment' and 'helping others' that are crucial for building longer-term support for tackling climate change. Frame your messages so that they build a bridge between the values of the audience and the values of a more sustainable society.

- **Overcome the 'psychological distance' of climate change**

Who are you trying to engage with? What are the things they are passionate about? How can you make climate change adaptation relevant to their lives? Identify the interests of your audience and think about how climate change affects them.

- **Don't focus on 'doom and gloom'**

Emphasising the benefits of climate adaptation policies is much more effective than pointing to the risks of not adapting.

- **Extreme weather can be a powerful opportunity to engage on climate change**

People will not necessarily 'join the dots' between extreme weather and climate change on their own. Use severe weather as an opportunity to discuss preparing for future events, and emphasise the benefits of adaptation using the powerful narratives of resilience, community pride and mutual caring that often emerge during the experience of severe weather events.

- **Promote the health benefits of adapting to climate risks**

Connecting climate change with health problems which are already familiar and seen as important - such as heat-stroke, hypothermia or asthma - can make the issue seem more personally relevant.

- **Try to engage across the political spectrum**

Scepticism about climate change is more common among political conservatives. But it doesn't have to be this way. Use language and 'narratives' that have been designed to appeal to the 'right', as well as the 'left' of politics – for example by focusing on conserving the beauty of the Scottish countryside, or improving the health and wellbeing of communities.

- **Harness the power of social norms and social networks**

Representatives of diverse social communities can communicate with their own groups better than any politician or public figure. People respond well when they can see that 'people like them' are also taking climate adaptation seriously. Promote social norms on climate change wherever possible.

## Section 1: Understanding your audience

For most people in Scotland, climate change is ‘not here and not now’. The impacts will be felt mostly in the future, and more intensely by people in countries overseas. The evidence before our eyes can also lead people in the wrong direction. For example, a cold winter can make it hard for people to accept that globally, temperatures are increasing.<sup>1</sup>

People have a ‘finite pool of worry’, and can only concentrate on so many things at once.<sup>2</sup> When day-to-day concerns about employment and financial security arise, they are likely to take priority over the ‘psychologically distant’ issue of climate change. People are far more tolerant of risks from ‘natural’ hazards (such as climate impacts) than from human attack (like terrorism) or technology (for example nuclear threats).

All in all, climate change is a very difficult risk for people to get to grips with – which makes communicating in the most effective way all the more important.

### 1.1 The importance of values

Through a programme of research that has spanned several decades, 44 nations and over 25,000 people, the role of personal values in public engagement with climate change is now well established.<sup>3</sup> Values are guiding principles in an individual’s life. The ‘values map’ on the next page shows the 56 different values that research has identified, and how they relate to each other.

People have a range of values and most people will recognise themselves in more than one part of the values map.

As a general rule, values that are near to each other on the map tend to fit together. The further apart two values are, the more they contradict each other. For example, values such as ‘equality’ and ‘protecting the environment’ (sometimes called ‘self-transcending’ values because they relate to concerns that go beyond self-interest), tend to be opposed to values such as ‘social power’ and ‘wealth’ (sometimes called ‘self-enhancing’ values because they are based on enhancing self-interest).

People who favour ‘self-transcendent’ values (like altruism and concern for the welfare of others) are generally more likely to be concerned about climate change, to support policies to cut carbon, and to engage in sustainable behaviours. ‘Self-transcending’ values can be seen as the values of a more sustainable society. It is these values that should be promoted to build support for a more climate-resilient Scotland.

**TOP TIP:** Spend time speaking with your target audience. Use the values map to identify their values, and consider where there is overlap with the (self-transcending) values of a more sustainable society.

<sup>1</sup> Capstick, S. & Pidgeon, N. (2014) Public perception of cold weather events as evidence for and against climate change. *Climatic Change* <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10584-013-1003-1>

<sup>2</sup> Weber, E. (2010) What shapes perceptions of climate change? *WIREs climate change* 1, 332-342.

<sup>3</sup> Corner, A. J., Markowitz, E. & Pidgeon, N. F. (2014) Public engagement with climate change: the role of human values. *WIREs climate change*. doi:10.1002/wcc.269



**Figure 1:** A values map for understanding your audience. Similar values are closer together; values that are opposed to each other are further apart. Image credit: Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC).

### **Case study: Welsh Government**

Climate Outreach worked with the Welsh Government to develop a communications ‘toolkit’ for engaging the public on sustainable development<sup>1</sup>. The toolkit was based on developing language that reflected core Welsh values, but that would also promote the values of a more sustainable society. Core Welsh values that emerged were:

- a sense of ‘belonging’ (linked to a shared national identity);
- pride in modest leadership;
- fairness and ‘fair play’; and
- a strong sense of attachment to the landscape of Wales.

The Welsh project began with research identifying the values of a range of different constituencies, and then worked on the ‘common ground’ between them. This kind of approach would easily be transferrable to the Scottish context, where there is perhaps an even stronger sense of national identity.

## **1.2 Frame your messages so that they build a bridge between the values of the audience and the values of a more sustainable society**

The way that a message about climate change is ‘framed’ will have a big impact on how people respond to it. Different ways of framing a message incorporate very different values. Consider two different ways of encouraging people to car-share on the commute to work. One option would be to tell people how much money they will save on petrol (a ‘self-enhancing’ value). A second option would be to emphasise the environmental benefits (a ‘self-transcending’ value).

Research has found that when people were asked to consider the environmental reasons for car-sharing, they were more likely to subsequently recycle – that is, one environmental behaviour ‘spilled over’ to another.<sup>4</sup>

The findings can easily be applied to adaptation behaviours, such as whether to invest in flood defences. There will often be both an environmental and financial justification for adaptation measures – but focusing exclusively on the money-saving (or wealth-enhancing) reasons for adapting to climate change is likely to undermine people’s motivation for engaging with the issue in the longer term.

When a person acts for self-interested reasons, that person will perceive themselves as someone who does things for their own benefit. They will only engage further with climate change if there is something in it for them. As soon as the ‘sweeteners’ dry up, so will their interest in climate change. If people think of themselves as ‘someone who does things for the environment’ or for the ‘collective good of Scotland’, the chance that they will engage in other adaptation behaviours is much higher.

**TOP TIP: When designing adaptation messages, focus on ‘self-transcending’ values wherever possible. For example, “Growing more drought-resistant crops will mean we have a fair and resilient food system for the benefit of everyone in Scotland as the climate changes”.**

**Be careful not to focus solely on profit. Instead, talk about creating secure jobs and markets for new technology. These have obvious financial benefits as well as wider social benefits.**

**For example, “Growing more drought-resistant crops will mean Scotland can create jobs and develop new technology even as the climate changes”.**

<sup>4</sup> Evans, L., Gregory, R.M., Corner, A., Hodgetts, J., Ahmed, S. & Hahn, Ulrike (2013). Self-interest and pro-environmental behaviour. *Nature Climate Change*, 3, 122-125.

## Section 2: Overcoming the psychological distance of climate change

Making climate change real for people in Scotland means starting with tangible, practical examples. It should focus on the things that people are passionate about that climate change will affect, and using severe weather as an opportunity to ‘join the dots’ between climate impacts and people’s lives.

### 2.1 Show how climate change affects the things people love

Connect with the things that your audience are passionate about, and then make the link between these and the broader issue of climate adaptation. This means:

- identifying something that your target audience is passionate about (e.g. playing football) and how climate change will affect it (e.g. flooded football pitches preventing games from being played); and
- using this as a way of starting a conversation about the ‘bigger picture’ on climate change.

**TOP TIP: Identify something that your target audience is passionate about. How will it be affected by climate change?**

This is a classic climate change adaptation message, stark and focused on the environment far away from the majority of the population.



Image credit: <http://www.continuum.com.au/>

By comparison, the following website connects to local readers by focusing on a strong community image (beach huts) to communicate adaptation in a positive way, locally relevant way. It is more likely that people will have had experience with the changing face of the British coastline than the changing nature of Penguin's habitats.

A screenshot of the LiCCo website. At the top, there are links for 'WHAT IS LiCCO?', 'PROJECT SITES', 'CHANGING COASTLINE', and 'ADD YOUR STORY'. Below this, a banner reads 'HOME POLE HARBOUR 60% OF STUDLAND VOTERS LOVE THE ICONIC BEACH HUT SHAPE'. A large image shows a modern beach hut with a curved roof and large glass doors. To the right, there is a map of Studland Beach with coordinates 50.6501° N, -1.9521° W. A sidebar titled 'MORE STORIES' includes links to 'CHANGING COASTS – A TREMENDOUS TALE', 'CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION FOR BUILDINGS', 'FUTURE PROOF BEACH HUT EXHIBITION – STAY TUNED TO FIND OUT WHICH DESIGN WILL BE BUILT AT STUDLAND', 'LiCCO PROJECT BATHING MACHINE AT STUDLAND BEACH', and 'UPDATE ON LiCCO SCHOOLS RESOURCES'. At the bottom, a section titled 'DISCOVER PROJECT SITES' shows a thumbnail for 'EXE ESTUARY' with the text 'South Coast of Devon, in South West England'.

Image credit: LiCCo future proof beach hut © Nathan Ball

## 2.2 Severe weather is an opportunity to engage on climate change but proceed with caution

Severe weather events offer the prospect of communicating about climate change in a way that connects directly with people's lives. An event like a flood may make climate change feel more real, but there is mixed evidence about whether people 'join the dots' between severe weather and climate change. Experiencing severe weather impacts first-hand does not always make people more attuned to climate risks and the need for adaptation.

The victims of severe weather events may in fact have strong personal and social reasons for not wishing to accept that these events will increase in frequency and severity. It is therefore crucial that communicators help to make the link between severe weather and climate change.<sup>5</sup>

### TOP TIPS

- **Use severe weather to start a discussion about long-term preparedness and adaptation.**
- **Emphasise the benefits of adaptation: increasing local resilience to future weather events, drawing on powerful narratives of community pride and mutual caring that often emerge during the experience of severe weather events.**
- **Take care not to over-exaggerate the link between a single weather event and climate change.**

The image below is from Talybont, a Welsh community that was badly flooded in 2012. However, it shows positive community spirit and resilience, and the quotes from the community that accompany it suggest that many positive emotions were stirred despite the sadness of the flood.



Image credit: CERI JONES

<sup>5</sup> Marshall, G. (2014). After the Floods: Communicating climate change around Extreme Weather Events. Climate Outreach.

**“I had 30 people in my garden helping me out; without that support life would have been much harder”**

**“From out of nowhere a workforce turned up from the village with wheelbarrows and spades and within half an hour had opened the road. It was an amazing thing to see and gave us hope”.**

**“We know more than ever, but rather than wait until we’ve dotted all the ‘i’s and crossed all the ‘t’s in terms of understanding we’re going to have to put more things in place because people are going to become more vulnerable”.**

### 2.3 Use adaptation as a way of engaging people more widely on climate change

A study conducted in a coastal community in New Zealand found that when people considered adaptation measures to potential local sea-level rise, they were more likely to agree with climate change mitigation options too.<sup>6</sup> This effect was observed even for people who said they were sceptical about climate change. In contrast, participants who were asked to consider climate change mitigation policies in isolation were less inclined to adopt pro-mitigation behaviour.

**TOP TIP: Connect the ‘bigger picture’ of climate change to people’s lives and communities.**

### 2.4 Use the right tool for the right job

Climate change adaptation communications tend to be dominated by the language of science, graphs and detailed reports. Graphs are appropriate for certain audiences but they must be clear. For many audiences, though, scientific language and technical figures are not helpful.

**TOP TIP: Reports can be made more engaging by using personal stories and images. They should also be kept succinct or include key bullet points at the start as many people do not have time to read lengthy reports.**

<sup>6</sup> Evans et al., (2014). Considering local adaptation increases willingness to mitigate. Global Environmental Change. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2013.12.013>

The following three images show the importance of using language people can relate to. Both are taken from the European ‘Living with a changing coastline’ (LICCO) project, helping coastal communities to better understand and prepare for the impacts of climate change. The first image emphasises the natural cause of coastal change, giving very little sense of urgency of place-based risk:

# What is coastal change?

- Coastal change describes the natural processes which shape the coastline
  - The coast has always changed and it always will
  - This presents challenges and opportunities



Image credit: 1586 'Survey of the Isle of Purbeck' by Ralph Treswell © National Trust Images

In contrast, the second image - which aims to achieve a similar message - is focused on the present, identifies practical risks and opportunities for a local area, and more effectively engages people:



The third image uses a very similar format to the second image but the map is used as a background, and is obscured, and there is a high proportion of text. When used for public engagement side-by-side, the second image proved far more engaging to the audience than the third.

**"When using both the climate and coastal change boards it became clear very quickly that people were drawn to the large map of the area where they live. They could see themselves within the context of the local climate change impacts. We also discovered that showing a wider area put local issues in perspective and allowed people to see that they were not the only ones dealing with coastal and climate change issues. It made it easier for us to talk about good examples of adaptation in other locations."**

**Elli MacDonald, Living with a Changing Coast Project Manager**

## Section 3: Breaking out of the ‘green ghetto’: how to engage wider audiences

Although the effects of climate change will be felt widely across society, it is still seen by many as a ‘niche’ issue, that only ‘greens’ care about. So how can wider audiences be engaged?

### 3.1 Talk about the health impacts of climate change

Connecting climate change with health problems which are already familiar and seen as important - such as heat-stroke, hypothermia or asthma - can make the issue seem more personally relevant.<sup>7</sup> In fact, there is growing evidence that making links between health and climate change is a way of reaching a much wider audience.

**TOP TIP: Concrete, tangible examples of how health and climate impacts are related are an extremely valuable communication tool. What are the health implications of climate impacts for your target audience? Are they elderly, or vulnerable in another way?**

### 3.2 Don’t focus on ‘doom and gloom’

Many early campaigns to engage the public on climate change used the fear of catastrophic climate impacts to attempt to motivate concern. The use of appeals based on fear or guilt has a long history in the health-behaviour domain, and research has shown the potential for fear-based messages to change attitudes. But while fear of a negative outcome (e.g. lung cancer) can be an effective way of promoting behavioural changes (e.g. giving up smoking), the link between the threat and the behaviour must be personal and direct. Typically, climate change is perceived as neither a direct nor a personal threat – and so deliberate attempts to instil fear or guilt in people carry a considerable risk of backfiring.<sup>8</sup>

Emphasising the benefits of acting rather than the negative consequences of not acting is likely to produce more support for climate policies.<sup>9</sup>

**TOP TIP: Emphasise the benefits of action rather than the risks of in-action. For example: Say sea defences will enhance the safety and security of a coastal community, rather than stressing the increased risks from not installing the defences.**

### 3.3 Try to engage across the political spectrum

Studies consistently show that scepticism about climate change is higher on the right of the political spectrum. For this reason, there has been particular interest in how to engage citizens with ‘centre-right’ views more effectively. [A previous Climate Outreach project](#) identified four different ‘narratives’

<sup>7</sup> Myers, T.A., Nisbet, M.C., Maibach, E.W., & Leiserowitz, A.A. (2012). A public health frame arouses hopeful emotions about climate change. *Climatic Change* 113(3-4), 1105-1112; Nisbet, M.C. (2009). Communicating climate change: Why frames matter for public engagement.” *Environment* 51(2), 12-25.

<sup>8</sup> O'Neill, S. & Nicholson-Cole, S. (2009). “Fear won’t do it”: Promoting positive engagement with climate change through visual and iconic representations. *Science Communication* 30(3), 355-379; Witte, K., & Allen, M. (2000). A meta-analysis of fear appeals: implications for effective public health campaigns. *Health, Education & Behaviour* 27(5), 591-615.

<sup>9</sup> Pidgeon, N. & Spence, A. (2010). Framing and communicating climate change: The effects of distance and outcome frame manipulations. *Global Environmental Change* 20(4), 656-667.

for effectively engaging centre-right citizens, using the values map on page 4 to identify key conservative values that also fit with sustainability:<sup>10</sup>

1. **'Localism'**: Making connections between the conservation of the 'green and pleasant land', and protecting it from the risks that climate change poses to it (drawing on values such as aesthetic beauty and responsibility).
2. **Energy security**: Investing now to create sustainable, secure jobs and a reliable energy supply (the values invoked here are mainly around security, justice and protecting the environment).
3. **A new type of environmentalism**: The approach is optimistic, and embraces rather than opposes progress (values targeted would include freedom and creativity).
4. **The concept of the 'Good Life'**: Happiness is about the health and wellbeing of our communities, not simply financial wealth (touching on values of respect for tradition, and a sense of belonging).

These narratives were developed to interest citizens with 'centre-right' values, which is a lot broader than simply Conservative voters. In fact, values like security, freedom and a sense of belonging are widely shared across the political spectrum. Do these narratives resonate with your target audience?

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<sup>10</sup> Corner, A. (2013). A new conversation with the centre-right about climate change: Values, frames and narratives. Oxford: Climate Outreach.

## Section 4: Harness the power of social networks and social norms

There are very few opportunities for ordinary people – whether in their day-to-day lives or in the organisations they work in – to see examples of other people ('like me') engaging in positive climate adaptation behaviours. Partly because of the 'social invisibility' of climate change, many people underestimate how interested other people are in the issue.<sup>11</sup> Pictures and videos of ordinary people engaging in adaptation behaviours are a simple and effective way of generating a sense of social normality around climate change preparedness. In this Climate Outreach leaflet, local people's voices and images are used to help connect the message to their community:

**Clearing the Air**

**What causes Climate Change?**

Climate Change is a destabilisation of climate patterns caused by pollution from burning fuels.

A few gases in the air have a special capacity – they can hold the heat in sunlight and warm up the earth. This is similar to the way that glass traps heat inside a greenhouse and, for this reason, they are called 'Greenhouse Gases'. The main Greenhouse Gas is Carbon Dioxide, but Methane, Nitrous Oxides and Water Vapour are also significant. Some artificial industrial gases also have a very powerful 'greenhouse' effect.

Greenhouse Gases occur naturally in the air at very low levels and play a vital role holding in the warmth that makes life possible on earth. The problem is that pollution from the oil, coal and gas we burn pumps an extra 31 billion tonnes of Carbon Dioxide into the air each year.

These fuels are still the main source of energy for every aspect of our lives – from transport, electricity and heating our homes. The clearing and burning of forests, the cement industry, and large scale agriculture, especially meat production, are also major sources of Greenhouse Gases.

Matthew Rutter  
Fruit Seller

**What is the effect of climate change in Wales?**

Significant, but the greatest impacts will probably come from changes outside Wales.

A few gases in the air have a special capacity – they can hold the heat in sunlight and warm up the earth. This is similar to the way that glass traps heat inside a greenhouse and, for this reason, they are called 'Greenhouse Gases'. The main Greenhouse Gas is Carbon Dioxide, but Methane, Nitrous Oxides and Water Vapour are also significant. Some artificial industrial gases also have a very powerful 'greenhouse' effect.

Greenhouse Gases occur naturally in the air at very low levels and play a vital role holding in the warmth that makes life possible on earth. The problem is that pollution from the oil, coal and gas we burn pumps an extra 31 billion tonnes of Carbon Dioxide into the air each year.

Mrs Kaitun Mohammed  
Student Nurse

**Mrs Kaitun Mohammed**

### 4.1 What do 'people like me' think?

Social norms – the standards people use to judge the appropriateness of their own behaviour – are crucial for engaging the public on climate change. Studies have shown that guests in a hotel are more likely to re-use their towels if the sign in their hotel room encouraging them to do so informs them that a majority of other guests are re-using theirs.<sup>12</sup>

**TOP TIP: Behaviours that are socially approved tend to spread. Communicating the idea that adapting to climate risks is 'the norm' is, therefore, a powerful tool, but it is not always obvious how to do this. One possibility is to conduct a short survey of people's views, and then publicise the findings to show that other people are already thinking along similar lines.**

### 4.2 Use peer-to-peer communication and diverse, trusted messengers

It can sometimes be difficult to identify widely-trusted messengers when engaging the public on adaptation and climate change. The media, energy companies and politicians are all common sources of climate change information. They are also all widely distrusted.

<sup>11</sup> ECIU - Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit (2014). Study shows widespread misconceptions about energy and climate change. Retrieved from: <http://eciu.net/press-releases/2014/survey-reveals-widespread-misconceptions-about-energy-and-climate-change>

<sup>12</sup> Griskevicius, V., Cialdini, R.B. & Goldstein, N.J. (2008). Social norms: An underestimated and underemployed lever for managing climate change. International Journal of Sustainability Communication 3, 5-13.

This underscores the importance of peer-to-peer communication. If messages about climate change adaptation can be spread through a representative of a particular social group or community, e.g. a faith network or sports club, they are much more likely to be effective.

Different social networks will take ‘ownership’ of climate change in different way. Climate Outreach’s own research suggests that this should be encouraged, because people expect to hear multiple, diverse and perhaps even ‘competing’ voices on climate change.<sup>13</sup> Providing a platform for diverse voices to talk about climate change is a powerful way of showing the breadth of support across society. They don’t need to agree on the specifics so long as the overall message – supporting meaningful action on climate change – is the same.

**TOP TIP: List the social networks you can think of that are relevant to your target audience. Are there ‘unusual suspects’ among them who could communicate about climate change in their own language and style?**

Scientists continue to be perceived as highly trusted messengers on climate change (Pidgeon, 2012) despite some attacks on their credibility from sceptics. So having a scientist involved in a campaign to engage the public on adaptation risks would be likely to strengthen its credibility.

Echoing the importance of using ‘health frames’ to communicate the advantages of adaptation (see Section 3.2), health professionals are seen as having moral authority, professional prestige and a reputation for science-based analysis. Because of their special position in society, health professionals are valuable assets when speaking with the public about the health impacts of climate change and the need to adapt to climate risks.<sup>14</sup>

**TOP TIP: Make links with health professionals who are dealing with many of the same issues. If diverse voices, other than climate change professionals, are making the same argument, it is more likely to be taken on board.**

### What to learn more? Check out these resources for communicating climate change

- ❖ Talking Climate [www.talkingclimate.org](http://www.talkingclimate.org)
- ❖ Marshall, G. (2014) *After the Floods: Communicating climate change around Extreme Weather Events*. Climate Outreach & Information Network

<sup>13</sup> Corner, A.J. & Roberts, O. (2014). How narrative workshops informed a national climate change campaign. Oxford: Climate Outreach.

<sup>14</sup> Frumkin, H., & McMichael, A.J. (2008). Climate change and public health: Thinking, communicating, acting. American Journal of Preventive Medicine 35(5), 403-410.

Adaptation Scotland provides advice and support to help organisations, businesses and communities in Scotland prepare for, and build resilience to, the impacts of climate change.

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