

## **Taking Limits of Societies Seriously: Distinguishing Entitlements for Adaptation and Loss and Damage Action Fairly**

### **Abstract:**

Most ethical reflection has been devoted to the question of who should bear the burdens of abatement and how emission entitlements should be distributed. Less attention has been paid to the entitlements of those affected by the adverse impacts of climate change, regardless of who finances the action to be taken. Yet this is critical to advancing just adaptation and loss and damage finance and action.

Many individuals and communities around the world are facing climate impacts that cannot or will not be avoided. This requires immediate action to minimize the risks associated with these impacts or to be prepared to cope with them. In order to do this, it is essential to define the just entitlements of individuals and communities suffering the adverse effects of climate change. Only when this is known will it be possible to fairly distribute the financial burdens and support associated with adaptation and loss and damage policies.

In this paper we focus on the concept of soft limits to adaptation. We suggest that a normative understanding of this concept can provide important guidance for designing just climate adaptation and loss and damage finance and action. We argue that limits to adaptation correspond in important ways to sufficiency thresholds of justice. They mark the minimum conditions for the functioning of different sectors of societies and, taken together, indicate what it means for a society to maintain its vital, social, cultural, and economic functions and structures.

We propose that a normative definition of such societal aggregated sufficiency limits should distinguish between "chosen" and "imposed" soft limits to adaptation. Chosen soft limits to adaptation capture moral and cultural values or collective decisions of societies that, if breached or transformed, would constitute a loss to them. Imposed soft limits to adaptation arise from unjust social structures that increase the vulnerability of individuals, communities, or whole societies to the negative impacts of climate change, such as gender or racial inequalities.

This distinction implies that, first, fair adaptation finance should prioritize ensuring that "chosen" adaptation limits are not breached and that societies become resilient to these limits. Second, loss and damage financing should aim at restoring the sufficiency thresholds of the chosen adaptation limits that have been breached. In contrast, in cases of 'imposed' social limits to adaptation, measures should be financed to transform the underlying social mechanisms in order to reduce vulnerability to climate threats and thereby improve social justice.

**Policy relevance:**

Our proposal is policy relevant in at least two ways. First, our general approach to limits to adaptation and sufficiency thresholds of justice helps clarify what adaptation and loss and damage finance should provide to societies in need of assistance and up to what threshold. Second, our distinction between chosen and imposed social limits to adaptation can help guide transformative adaptation policies, which are becoming increasingly important in dealing with climate change. In the case of 'chosen' social limits to adaptation,

transformational adaptation should be kept to a minimum in order to protect vital aspects of society. In the case of 'imposed' social limits to adaptation, transformation should be undertaken to address the root causes of vulnerability and thus undue structural injustices.