

# The language of climate change adaptation – alternatives to the term 'adaptation'

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## 1. Key Points

- Of the strategies we reviewed in the Comparative Analysis of Adaptation Strategies (Low *et al.* 2012), none use an alternative term at headline level.
- Many of the strategies we reviewed use alternative terms to *describe* adaptation or adaptation actions.
- On the basis of our review we feel that 'adaptation' and 'adapting to climate change' are appropriate terms to use in a national adaptation strategy. These terms have currency at this level.
- It may be useful within a strategy document to supplement 'adaptation' with other terms that have wider resonance. Alternative terms can (and arguably should) also be used when engaging with particular audiences.
- We judge the best alternative to be *climate resilience*. *Climate ready/climate readiness* may also be appropriate in some contexts.

## 2. Introduction

The Scottish Government asked ClimateXChange to present and evaluate alternatives to the term 'adaptation'. In doing this, we have drawn mainly on the strategies reviewed in our comparative analysis of adaptation strategies. We have also considered evidence from a small number of other sources of information on climate change, and have elicited expert opinion. We drew mainly on high-level strategy documents because we felt these were most relevant to the Scottish Adaptation Programme.

We present our conclusions below. Two important issues should be borne in mind. The first is the context-specific nature of the terms. The language best used to describe adaptation in a national adaptation strategy – or the Scottish Adaptation Programme – may be different to that which is appropriate at a local level or with a particular sector or other stakeholder groups. The high-level term should be augmented with language that already resonates with the audience, such as, for the business sector, that around risk management.

The second important consideration is that whilst 'adaptation' is overwhelmingly being used at a headline, strategic level, many alternative terms and phrases are being used *within* adaptation strategies and in other climate change literature to help audiences understand and interpret 'adaptation'.

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### 3. Alternative Terms

We came across the following genuinely alternative terms that could substitute for the word ‘adaptation’:

#### i. Climate resilience

The EEA press release launching the report *Urban adaptation to climate change in Europe* talks about cities being resilient to climate change (EEA 2012). However, it also refers frequently to adaptation, as indeed does the report itself including in its title. California’s adaptation strategy (California Natural Resources Agency, 2009) uses the term ‘promoting resilience’. New York’s strategy talks of increasing the city’s climate resilience (New York City Panel on Climate Change, 2010). Germany’s strategy uses ‘resilient systems’ (Federal Ministry for the Environment, 2008). OFWAT uses the term ‘resilience planning’

([www.ofwat.gov.uk/sustainability/climatechange/adapt/prs\\_web120503resilience](http://www.ofwat.gov.uk/sustainability/climatechange/adapt/prs_web120503resilience)).

‘Climate resilience’ chimes well with other discourses on resilience – e.g. community resilience which is about much more than adaptation. ‘Resilience’ appears to be gaining popularity in a number of contexts and therefore its usage would be expected to increase. It also seems to resonate well in terms of risk management. A stakeholder survey for the Environment Agency found that the words most commonly used to talk about the benefits of risk management, used widely across sector themes, are: resilient, flexible & responsive, sustainable and adapting (Blue Marble 2012). ‘Risk management’, ‘risk reduction’ and ‘future proofing’ resonate well with businesses (e.g. farmers, SMEs and retailers) (Beckmann, pers comm.). However, the ubiquity of ‘resilience’ could also be a drawback. The term has a broad and perhaps differently interpreted meaning. Some people might therefore believe they know what ‘climate resilience’ means but not in fact understand it to mean ‘adaptation’. Adaptation is also only one part of ‘resilience’ in the broadest sense of the term, and this too might create confusion.

#### ii. Climate ready / Climate readiness / Preparing for climate change

‘Climate ready’ is being used by the Environment Agency to describe its adaptation support and advice service (Environment Agency 2012). It is also being used in the Clyde Valley project *Climate Ready Clyde*. This term is widely used by government offices and agencies in both the US and Canada. However this is often as a headline term or in organisation nomenclature, with other terms (e.g. ‘resilience’ or ‘adaptation’) being favoured within documents (Ontario Ministry for the Environment, 2011; Oregon Dept. of Land Conservation and Development, 2009; United States Environment Protection Agency, 2011).

California’s strategy talks about ‘preparing for climate change’. Denmark’s strategy uses ‘planning for climate change’ (The Danish Government, 2008). Defra has used the term ‘preparing for a changing climate’ (see for example Defra, 2011). The disaster risk management community increasingly uses ‘preparing for’ and ‘preparedness’ (Brown, pers comm.). A similar alternative that we came across is ‘living with a changing climate’, which is not widely used (perhaps because it could imply some passivity – that we just have to ‘live with it’) but has the advantage of suggesting that the climate is changing *now*.

‘Climate ready’ is perhaps better than climate-proof – though the difference is nuanced – as it may not as easily be interpreted as implying certainty<sup>1</sup>. The sense is more of being prepared. However, like ‘climate-proof’ it also tends to imply coping with threats rather than taking advantage of opportunities and fails to convey the need to adapt to current climate change.

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<sup>1</sup> However, like ‘climate-proof’, ‘climate ready’ could also be seen to imply certainty and an outcome rather than a process. Interpretation

### iii. Climate-proof planning / Climate-proof decisions

This term is used throughout the Netherlands' strategy, interchangeably with 'adaptation', in relation to spatial planning (The Netherlands ARK Programme 2007). Atlantic Canada's strategy (Council of Atlantic Environment Ministers, 2008) has a section on 'climate-proof decisions'. The Town and Country Planning Association uses 'climate-proofing' (Shaw *et al.* 2007).

The term 'climate-proof' has a rather final ring to it: it implies an outcome rather than a process, whereas adaptation is clearly a process. It could perhaps create a false sense of certainty about the robustness of decisions or actions. It also brings to mind climate risks rather than opportunities. And again, it seems to imply that impacts from climate change are something to be tackled in the future, inadequately conveying current change and how this should affect current decision-making. A further disadvantage to this term is that it is only really useful as an adjective - creating a noun from it is clumsy.

### iv. Climate robustness

This is used in the German adaptation strategy, where it is explained as: "The capacity of systems, organisations or (individual) actors to survive with-out any loss of essential functions under a broad range of climatic conditions or to be capable to cope with climatic changes" (Federal Ministry for the Environment, 2008). New York's strategy talks of increasing the robustness of current systems [to climate impacts].

We do not feel that the term 'climate robustness' would resonate with a Scottish or UK audience as it could be confusingly interpreted as meaning that the climate itself is robust. We would argue that 'robustness' is less clear and meaningful in a Scottish context than 'resilience', which is much more widely used.

### v. Addressing / managing / tackling climate change impacts

The Norwegian expert commission's report on adaptation (Norwegian Ministry of the Environment 2011) and California's adaptation strategy use these terms to describe adaptation. California and Atlantic Canada also talk of reducing or minimising the impacts of climate change.

These sorts of terms are generally used to explain and qualify 'adaptation' and are not used as substitutes.

However, they could, in principle, be substitutes. They are not perhaps short and snappy enough to be used as high-level terms, which is probably why they have not been used in strategy or report titles. Again, they also imply impacts are negative and tend to relate less well to opportunities.

## 4. Discussion

The majority of the strategies we reviewed employ the term 'adaptation' at a high level and use 'adaptation' in their titles. The new EEA portal (formerly the Clearing House) uses 'adaptation' throughout and in its name, Climate-ADAPT. Wales, Finland and Norway consistently use only the term 'adaptation' in their strategies (Welsh Government 2010; Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry for Finland 2005; Norwegian Government 2008). Other strategies qualify the term by describing what adaptation *is* using language such as:

- Adjustments that take future climates into account – Denmark's adaptation strategy.
- To reduce the risks [from] and vulnerabilities [to] predicted climate conditions – Atlantic Canada's adaptation strategy.
- Minimising the risks and impacts of climate change and taking as much advantage as possible of the new conditions – Spanish adaptation strategy.
- Minimise the potential consequences – New York's adaptation strategy.

- Withstand climate conditions that differ from the current conditions – Norway’s expert commission report on adaptation.
- Avert climatic risks or to take such risks into consideration in a responsible way, mitigate the damage that may ensue, and identify and exploit opportunities at an early stage – German adaptation strategy.
- Become less vulnerable and better equipped to meet climate change – Norway’s expert commission report on adaptation.
- To reduce vulnerability to the consequences of climate change, to maintain or improve the adaptability of natural, social and economic systems, and to take advantage of any opportunities – German adaptation strategy.
- Adaptation involves “acknowledging that the climate is changing, understanding how these changes may affect nature and society, and making choices that will mitigate or minimise the negative aspects of the impacts, while at the same time taking advantage of possible opportunities that derive from a changing climate” – Norway’s expert commission on adaptation.
- Mitigate (vulnerability to) the consequences of climate change – German adaptation strategy. And, mitigate [climate] risks – New York’s adaptation strategy. Note that there is potential here for audience confusion with Mitigation policy.
- Counteracting climate change and its consequences; Adjust to the unavoidable effects of climate change; Limit damage in the various production sectors, develop a sustainable forest, protect biological diversity and make careful use of the resources water and soil; Appropriate preventive measures – all from the German adaptation strategy.

Other documents and projects refer to adaptation in terms of:

- Creating communities which are robust to climate change - adapted from Town and Country Planning Association (Shaw *et al.* 2007).
- ‘Sustainable’, ‘preparing & planning’ and ‘adapting’ – these were found in a survey to resonate most strongly with existing UKCIP users and other target organisations. Other words such as ‘protecting’, ‘resilient’ and ‘business continuity’ were also identified as appropriate for communicating adaptation within organisations (Blue Marble 2012).
- Measures to enhance our capability to minimise, adjust to and take advantage of the consequences of climate change - adapted from UKCIP ([www.ukcip.org.uk/essentials/adaptation](http://www.ukcip.org.uk/essentials/adaptation)).

The adaptation strategies we reviewed also refer to adaptation in practice using terms such as:

- Climate-friendly urban development – the German strategy.
- Health: prevention and intervention strategies, alleviate, develop preventive strategies and counter-measures; Buildings: sustainable construction; Biodiversity: maintain or strengthen; Trade and industry: creating new opportunities, take advantage, taking timely steps to adapt to changed probabilities and to prepare for potential damage; and Tourism: sustainable climate protection – all from the German strategy.
- Long-term planning and sustainability; Coordinated planning process; Development of an evolving dynamic process – all from the New York strategy.

- Actions that are Sustainable; Secure; Risk-reducing – Bavaria’s strategy (Bavarian State Ministry of the Environment and Public Health, 2009).
- Building adaptive capacity – The Netherlands strategy (The Netherlands ARK Programme 2007).

## 5. Further information

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Welsh Government (2010) *Climate Change Strategy for Wales*. Available online at: <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/desh/publications/101006ccstratfinalen.pdf> However, like 'climate-proof', 'climate ready' could also be seen to imply certainty and an outcome rather than a process. Interpretation