

Evidence Brief: Adapting Rural Climate Cultures

About the project

Rural Canada's diverse landscape is experiencing rising pressures from climate change. Rural communities and governance bodies have increased their focus on climate adaptation in order to adjust to these changes. Culture – our worldviews, beliefs, languages, ceremonies, stories, values and other symbols of meaning, shape the tools that are available for adaptation. As rural communities experience loss, change, and increased uncertainty due to anthropogenic climate change and evolving economic realities, it is critical to understand culture's role in influencing adaptation decisions to ensure communities are well supported.

This research aimed to develop new understandings of the relationship between climate adaptation and culture, and identify key implications for rural communities. We conducted two scoping reviews of peer-reviewed and grey literature: The first focused on understanding the relationship between adaptation and culture, and the second synthesized knowledge on adaptation and culture in rural Canada. We also completed a scan of federal adaptation programs.

We locate this work in the historical and current cultural, socio-political and economic context of rural Canada, which exists today as a result of Indigenous communities residing here since time immemorial; the presence of settler colonialism on these lands since the 15th century; and a now globalized, profit-driven economy that demands the extraction and displacement of resources and people. We conducted this work with the understanding that anthropogenic climate change exists as a result of the dominant economic system, capitalism, and how its economic growth requires the exploitation of people, land and resources gained through colonialism.

Key findings

The following statements have been simplified to meet this knowledge sharing format. They may not accurately reflect the nuances that exist within and between rural communities and culture.

Culture and Adaptation Tools

- Adaptation tools available to rural communities vary from climate monitoring, knowledge transfers, and protecting physical infrastructure. Culture impacts the types of adaptation tools that are available to communities; it influencing which tools are seen as relevant, how tools are selected and funded, and which adaptation actions are prioritized.
- Social, economic, and political resources facilitate or restrain which cultural adaptation tools communities have access to, and consequently, which actions are taken for adaptation. For example, the presence of highly engaged community groups (i.e. social capital) can increase access to and success of culturally relevant adaptation actions.

- Communities are more involved in adaptation plans and strategies when these plans and strategies are culturally relevant to community members.

Culture Shaping Adaptation Tools for Rural Communities

- Adaptation tools emerging from predominantly settler cultures and ways of knowing focused on protecting and adapting livelihoods from natural resource economies, and on preserving private properties and cultural heritage landscapes.
- Adaptation actions coming from Indigenous communities and knowledges are predominantly focused on knowledge transferring, land-based activities, and health and well-being. Health and wellbeing are important cultural components of adaptation for Indigenous communities. In contrast to Western perspectives of health which generally focus on physical and mental health, Indigenous perspectives of health are more holistic and complex, and include social, cultural, economic, and spiritual dimensions, and relationships with the land and the physical environment.

Culture in Adaptation Research and Policy

- The link between culture and adaptation in research and policy developed by, with and for Indigenous communities is generally explicit and clear. However, this is rarely the case in adaptation research and policy from settler-dominant communities and governance bodies. This creates a lack of awareness on the role of settler cultures and Western ways of knowing in shaping dominant adaptation actions taken across Canada.
- Federal adaptation funding has prioritized physical infrastructure and emergency preparedness and mitigation (\$4.1 billion and \$700 million since 2016, respectively), while smaller pools of funding have been allocated to health and regional knowledge capacity (\$65 million and \$73.5 million since 2016, respectively). These funding decisions are shaped by the dominant cultures present in governance bodies.
- Approaches to adaptation in research have been predominantly individualistic, resulting in individualized adaptation recommendations. Individualist approaches to adaptation overlook the role that structural factors like financial resources, education and social capital play in facilitating or restraining access to adaptation actions.

Policy Implications

- *Acknowledge the dominant culture shaping adaptation in Canada:* Policy makers, researchers, community members, and adaptation practitioners must understand how the dominant Western culture in Canada, which is shaped by capitalism and settler-colonialism, influences adaptation policies and outcomes. Failing to understand this can result in adaptation actions that increase greenhouse gas emissions and perpetuate colonialism. This should be deeply considered when making federal funding decisions.

- *Center Indigenous knowledges, and Indigenous sovereignty in adaptation strategies:* Indigenous sovereignty is required to bring forth adaptation knowledges and tools that meaningfully counter climate change and colonialism. Adaptation strategies and plans need to center Indigenous peoples and knowledges, and support Indigenous sovereignty.
- *Provide place-based funding:* Current federal adaptation funding pre-determines which adaptation actions are financially supported. Place-based funding would provide financial support for rural communities to take adaptation actions self-identified as relevant. These contexts provide settler communities the opportunity to consider less typical adaptation tools that may still resonate with community values (e.g., health).
- *Build social capital:* Building social capital is crucial for engaging community members in contextually relevant, resource-appropriate adaptation. Funding programs and communities themselves must support relationships and network building.
- *Take a structural approach:* Researchers, policy makers, and funders of adaptation must ensure structural theories and considerations are integrated into adaptation approaches and policies. This ensures adaptation is not falsely posited onto the individual alone, when in reality, structural contexts significantly impact adaptation capacities.

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