# Climate adaptation alone cannot offset failure to accelerate mitigation, warns Thinking Ahead Institute



The dialogue surrounding climate change has increasingly recognised the necessity for both adaptation and mitigation strategies. The Thinking Ahead Institute’s climate transition working group has underscored that focusing solely on the narrow definition of mitigation—primarily concerned with decarbonising economic activities—risks failing to address the multifaceted nature of climate change. Instead, a broader definition of transition, which integrates adaptation efforts along with considerations for biodiversity loss, social inequality, and the circular economy, is posited as the more effective approach.

Adaptation is characterised as a defensive strategy, one that seeks to enhance future security in response to an evolving climate. This might mean constructing houses on stilts in flood-prone areas or altering agricultural practices to ensure food security in light of changing rainfall patterns. A comparison of adaptation and mitigation reveals their complementary nature, each addressing different aspects of the climate crisis. While mitigation seeks to tackle the root causes—primarily greenhouse gas emissions—adaptation focuses on reducing vulnerability and managing the symptoms already evident and escalating due to climate change.

The dominant narrative within investment circles has historically leaned towards mitigation, with numerous entities pledging to achieve net-zero emissions. This focus is logical; by addressing the underlying causes of climate change, it stands to reason that the complications arising from it—such as extreme weather events, ecosystem degradation, and economic disruption—could be mitigated. However, the urgent reality is that the delay in implementing substantial mitigation measures has left many communities ill-prepared for the extreme phenomena they are now facing.

Recent analyses indicate that without prompt and decisive mitigation efforts, adaptation will become not only imperative but also burdensome. The consequences of inaction are staggering; projections suggest a global temperature increase of approximately 2.7 degrees Celsius by the year 2100, intensifying reliance on adaptation strategies. With this reality, the question arises: Can adaptation sufficiently shield populations from the adverse effects of climate change, or are we inadvertently sealing our fate to endure significant suffering?

Confronted with such uncertainties, a deeper examination of adaptation reveals the mental frameworks guiding our responses. A dominant model posits an expectation of returning to a mean—a belief that, despite shocks from climate events, societies can readjust to a prior state. However, an intriguing alternative model asserts that the 'mean' is obsolete, particularly as we confront temperature rises outside the thresholds for sustainable human societies. This shift in perception challenges us to reconsider not just how we adapt but what we can realistically expect from our environments moving forward.

Adaptation strategies can generally be classified into distinct categories: behavioural (voluntary changes at the individual or community level), forced (regulatory changes imposed at broader governance levels), and technical (technological adaptations). However, issues complicating large-scale adaptation investment remain prevalent. For instance, the geographical disconnect often sees emissions produced in the Global North fail to correlate with impacts felt in the Global South, where adaptation resources are most urgently needed. Furthermore, the high upfront costs associated with implementing significant adaptation infrastructure—like flood barriers and seawalls—render many regions hesitant or incapable of mobilising necessary investment.

The investment landscape exhibits both small-scale opportunities and broader systemic challenges. While bridging adaptation and mitigation investments may yield some returns, the aggregate difficulties in securing capital for large-scale adaptation initiatives cannot be overlooked. The stark reality looms: without a profound re-evaluation of our commitments to both mitigation and adaptation, we may find ourselves uniquely positioned to endure the most severe impacts of climate change, burdened by suffering that could have been mitigated.

Tim Hodgson, co-founder and head of research at the Thinking Ahead Institute, asserts that this evolving dialogue is critical, prompting essential reflections on how we allocate both capital and attention in combatting climate challenges. While adaptation may serve as a necessary response to the impending climate crisis, it cannot replace the urgent need for substantial, proactive mitigation efforts; together, they represent the dual pathway toward a sustainable and resilient future.

In navigating these complex discussions, the importance of a holistic perspective becomes evident. Adaptation alone, while crucial, cannot serve as the sole safeguard against climate change; instead, it must be integrated within a comprehensive strategy that prioritises both immediate needs and long-term sustainability.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 8, 9
2. Paragraphs 4, 5
3. Paragraphs 6, 7
4. Not used
5. Not used
6. Not used
7. Not used

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.top1000funds.com/2025/05/why-adaptation-alone-wont-solve-the-climate-change-conundrum/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.top1000funds.com/2025/05/why-adaptation-alone-wont-solve-the-climate-change-conundrum/> - This article discusses the limitations of focusing solely on climate change mitigation and emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive approach that includes adaptation strategies. It highlights the need for a broader transition encompassing biodiversity loss, social inequality, and the circular economy to effectively address climate challenges. The piece also explores the dynamic relationship between mitigation and adaptation, suggesting that a balanced approach is more likely to yield successful outcomes in combating climate change.
3. <https://www.ifaw.org/journal/climate-change-mitigation-vs-adaptation> - This article explains the differences between climate change mitigation and adaptation, emphasizing that both are essential in addressing climate change. Mitigation focuses on reducing greenhouse gas emissions to slow global warming, while adaptation involves adjusting to the current and future effects of climate change. The piece underscores the importance of integrating both strategies to protect communities and ecosystems, noting that neither approach is sufficient on its own.
4. <https://climate.nasa.gov/solutions/adaptation_mitigation/> - This resource from NASA's Climate Portal provides an overview of climate change mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation involves reducing the flow of heat-trapping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, either by reducing sources or enhancing sinks. Adaptation involves adjusting to actual or expected future climate, aiming to reduce risks from harmful effects like sea-level rise and extreme weather events. The page highlights the complementary nature of these strategies in addressing climate change.
5. <https://climate.mit.edu/explainers/mitigation-and-adaptation> - This article from the MIT Climate Portal explains the concepts of mitigation and adaptation in the context of climate change. Mitigation refers to actions taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and limit future warming, while adaptation involves adjusting to the current and anticipated effects of climate change. The piece emphasizes that both strategies are necessary to protect people from the harms of climate change, with mitigation aiming to make future climate change as mild as possible and adaptation addressing the climate change we fail to prevent.
6. <https://climate.nasa.gov/solutions/adaptation_mitigation/> - This resource from NASA's Climate Portal provides an overview of climate change mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation involves reducing the flow of heat-trapping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, either by reducing sources or enhancing sinks. Adaptation involves adjusting to actual or expected future climate, aiming to reduce risks from harmful effects like sea-level rise and extreme weather events. The page highlights the complementary nature of these strategies in addressing climate change.
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