

Climate Change Adaptation: Lessons Learned from Three Territories

The climate events experienced in France in 2022, such as repeated heatwaves, floods, major forest fires, and drought, reflect the ongoing trend of global warming. They dramatically highlight the need for immediate adaptation. Through these events, the French population has become aware of the necessity to anticipate climate change, while local communities have recognized their vulnerability and the importance of resilience and transformation for their territories. The main objective now is to mobilize all stakeholders, especially local authorities who are at the forefront of the efforts.

In France, adaptation policies have lagged behind mitigation policies because they have long been seen as an admission of failure. Due to their strong territorial dimension, these policies need to be designed and implemented locally. However, local decision-makers face a significant challenge: they must politically acknowledge the situation and make potentially costly investment choices to prevent crises that will occur in a relatively distant future, with uncertain risks and impacts, complex adaptation solutions, and anxiety-inducing announcements.

To fully comprehend this collective challenge, we have interviewed stakeholders from three territories, each with their own experience in territorial resilience and climate change adaptation: Grand Poitiers, which has adopted preventive measures; Dunkirk, with its centuries-old experience in flood risk management; and the valleys of Roya, Vésubie, and Tinée, which have faced a natural disaster.

It appears that scientific knowledge on climate change is well disseminated, but there is a lack of methodological and technical support for local decision-makers to translate this knowledge into action. Operational implementation requires several conditions: reliable and localized knowledge of the impacts of climate change; a clear definition of resilience criteria; support that addresses both technical issues and change management; proximity between government services and project stakeholders to establish a relationship of trust and enable dialogue.

Unfortunately, experiences of disasters, such as the storm Alex in the hinterland of Nice in October 2020, remain the most effective trigger for taking action. However, they can also be counterproductive in the sense that it is necessary to go beyond traditional crisis management and short-term responses to implement preventive and systemic measures.

The multitude of actors with competence in one or more areas of climate change adaptation presents a significant governance challenge. One approach could be to improve local coordination by asserting the role of the region and the regional prefect in aligning adaptation objectives and strategies at the regional level, and by strengthening the role of the departmental prefect as a unifying force for local actors. The most successful experiences of taking action are those where co-financing supports cooperation between stakeholders. Vulnerability assessments and the definition of resilience criteria for projects should be prerequisites for their co-financing by the government. Lastly, dialogue between decentralized government services, elected officials, and project stakeholders should be ongoing, based on lessons learned, to ensure that adaptation becomes less of a constraint and more of a desirable opportunity for vulnerable territories.