



Exploring leadership for local government climate change adaptation

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Research context

- Major break downs in councils being able to move from planning to implementation of climate change adaptation responses.
- Implementation gap an outcome of two key factors:
 - limited institutional capacity; and
 - absent or ineffective political leadership.
- The most frequently identified barrier to municipal adaptation is a **lack of support from local government elected leaders.**



Coastal erosion, Waratah-Wynyard Council, TAS
Photo credit ABC News

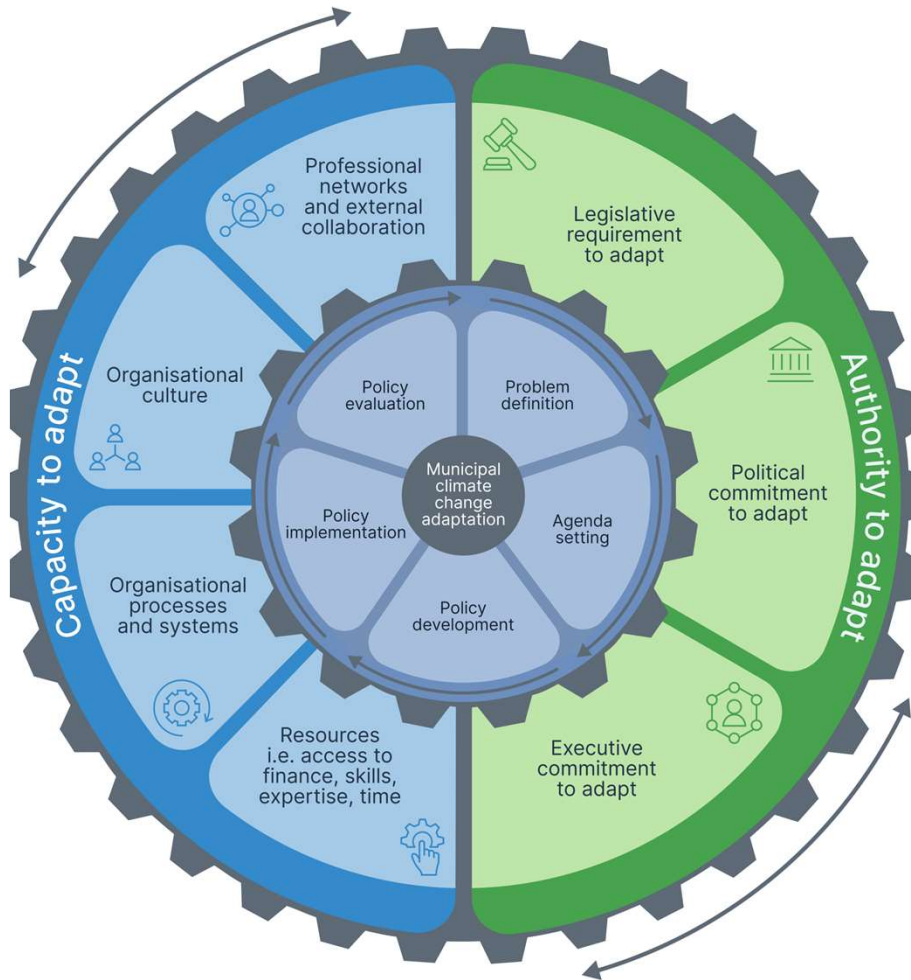
The global literature

- Issues of capacity actively explored in the literature.
- Few studies have critically examined issues of authority and policy leadership for municipal adaptation.
- Fewer still give primacy to the experience and understandings of municipal leaders (e.g., mayors, councillors, and executive staff) on adaptation.
- **In-depth consideration of the effects of politics and leadership on municipal adaptation is uncommon.**
- Literature review published in *Climate Policy* (May 2023)



Flooding, Latrobe Council, TAS
Photo credit ABC News

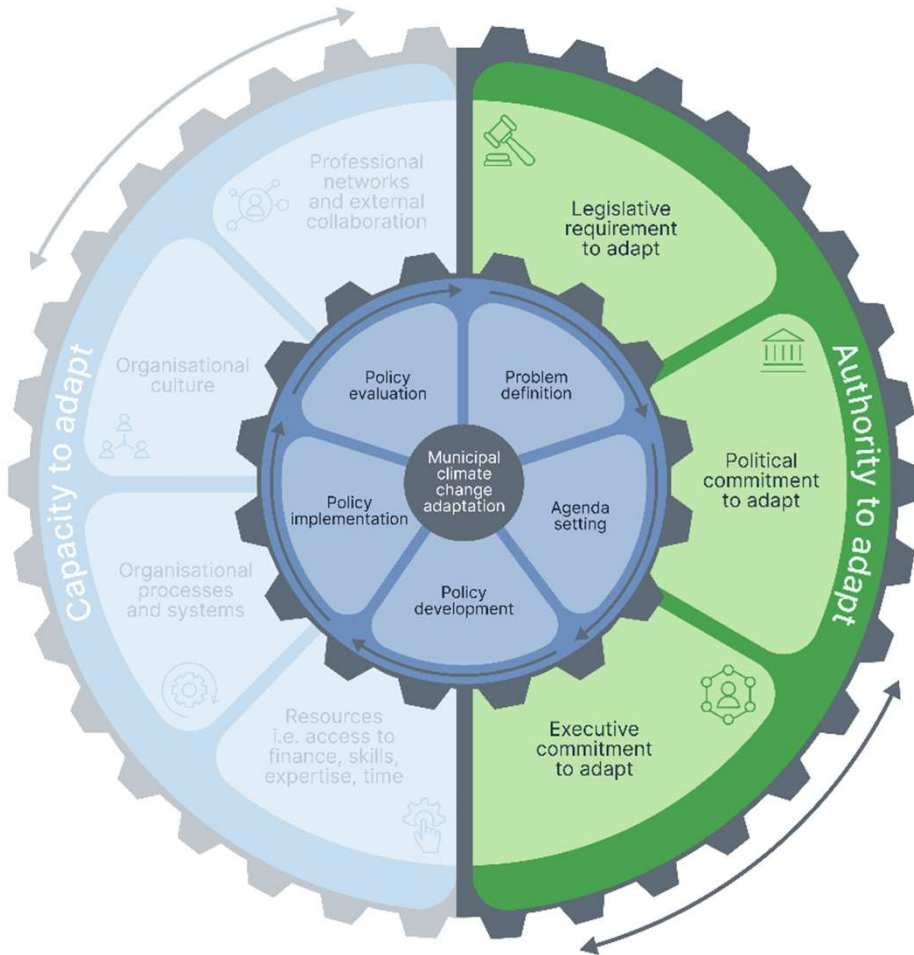
Conceptual framework



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Exploring “Authority to Adapt”



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Key research questions

- My PhD research examines two key research questions:
 1. What motivates and hinders the commitment of local government leaders to progress climate adaptation on the municipal policy agenda?
 2. Which elements can be considered key to advancing leadership support for the mainstreaming of climate adaptation in municipal policy and practice?



Research methods

- A qualitative approach, to create rich, detailed data concerning leadership for municipal adaptation.
- 25 in-depth interviews (completed mid-2022).
- With local government elected and executive leaders, plus adaptation lead officers.
- Four small- to medium-sized municipal councils in Tasmania, each with a population < 60,000 people.
- Fifteen males and ten females interviewed.
- Names of participating councils and interviewees not disclosed, to enable candid engagement.



Coastal storm damage, Waratah-Wynyard Council, TAS
Photo credit The Advocate

Perceptions of climate risk

- Most interviewees consider climate change real and a present risk, not just an issue of the future.

“Climate change could very significantly wipe out our municipality. There is a chance for the whole municipality to be burned out.” (Elected leader)

- Climate change scepticism still present amongst municipal elected leaders, but far less openly disclosed than in the preceding decade.



Bushfire damage, Huon Valley Council, TAS
Photo credit The Advocate

Authorizing environment

- Interviewees recognise a municipal statutory responsibility to consider projected climate impacts on local land-use planning and development decisions.
- Beyond this, municipal adaptation is a largely discretionary role for councils (in Tasmania).
- Limited reference to *Local Government Act 1993* (Tasmania) > Core function of a municipal council to *provide for the health, safety, and welfare of the community*.

“To me, if you're responsible for health and wellbeing of the community then it (climate change) simply has to be part of your role. That's all there is to it.” (Municipal staff)

Coastal erosion, Clarence City Council, TAS

Photo credit Peter Boyer



Issue prioritisation

- The absence of a legislated responsibility for municipal adaptation enables high levels of discretion in how municipal leaders prioritise adaptation on the policy agenda.
- Municipal councils face immense pressure from their communities to respond to day-to-day issues, at the expense of longer-term, less visible policy matters.

"I guess there's a lot of number one priorities (in council)".
(Elected leader)

"(In) local government, you can only do so much. ...The fundamentals, as far as I'm concerned is that traditional Roads, Rates, and Rubbish, and things that our ratepayers expect to happen seamlessly." (Elected leader)



Bushfire damage, Sorrell Council, TAS
Photo credit Chris Kidd

Issue salience

- Adaptation lacks issue salience amongst municipal leaders. This affects leaders' resolve to address climate risk on the current policy agenda.
- Adaptation is not yet viewed as a central concern of municipal operations and governance.
- The language used to talk about climate change within a municipal council greatly affects the degree to which adaptation is seen as a municipal priority.

"You've got to...adjust your sales pitch. I think climate as an overall issue has got issues with the way that people are brought along in that conversation." (Elected leader)

Flood damage, Latrobe Council, TAS
Photo credit The Advocate

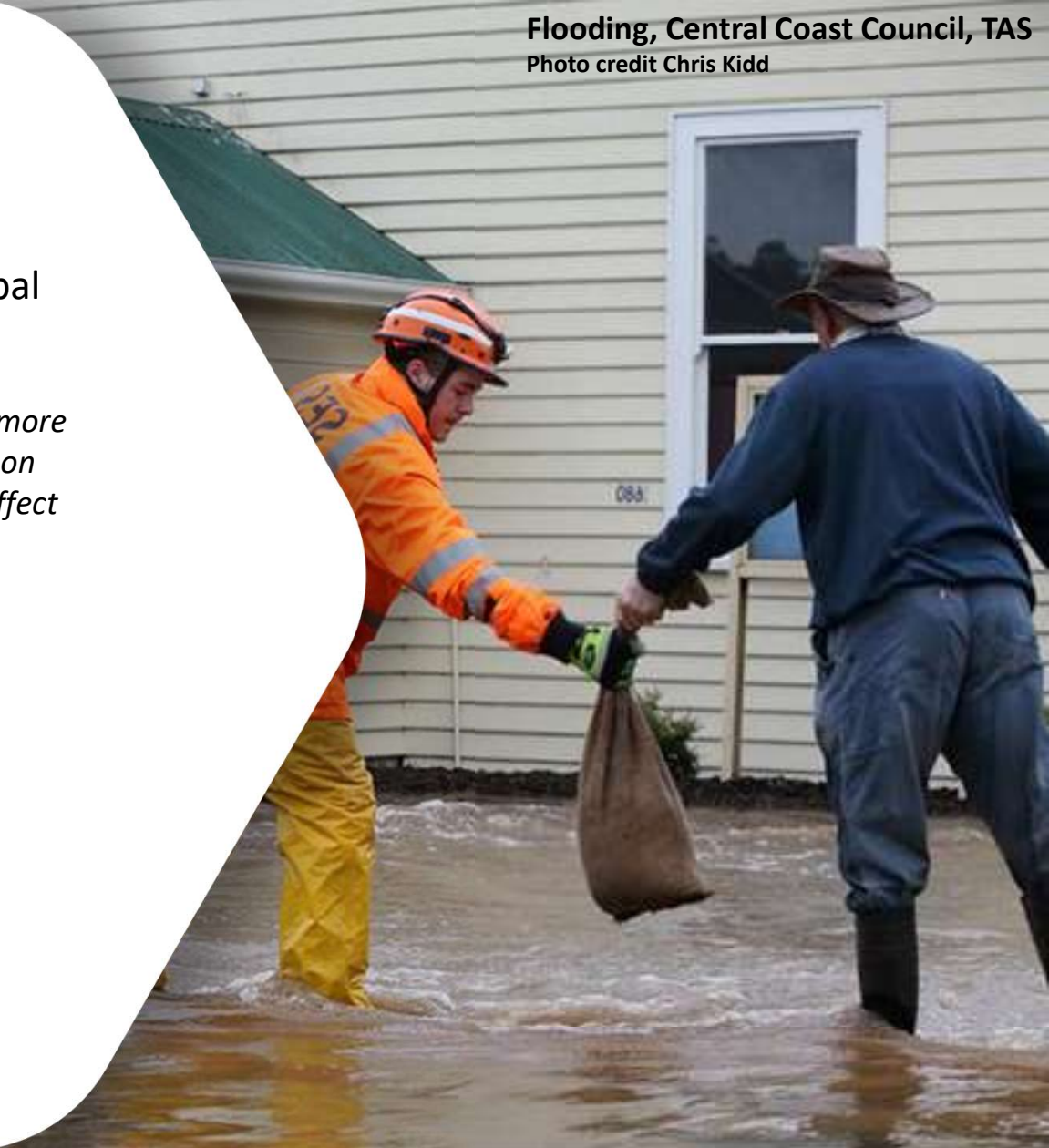


Networks of influence

- The views and expectations of influential and respected actors play a key role informing municipal leaders' priorities.

"We are hearing through the world that this is becoming more important. The insurance people are putting higher value on that (addressing climate-related risk) and it's coming to affect more the day-to-day decisions." (Executive leader)

Flooding, Central Coast Council, TAS
Photo credit Chris Kidd



So, what can be done?

Three key opportunities

1. Enhancing issue salience
2. Activating networks of influence
3. Strengthening governance

Storm damage, City of Hobart, TAS
Photo credit The Mercury



So, what can be done?

Enhancing issue salience

- The language we use describe and justify adaptation as a matter for municipal attention needs to reflect that a changing climate will affect every aspect of municipal operations and service delivery.
- Conversations with municipal leaders on adaptation need to actively engage concepts of:
 - financial impact to councils;
 - insurance costs and coverage;
 - risk management and legal liability; and
 - the human and societal impacts on communities.



Bushfire damage, Sorrell Council, TAS
Photo credit Reuters

So, what can be done?

Activating networks of influence

- Municipal leaders need to be hearing about climate risk from those they respect and look to for thought leadership, i.e., their networks of influence.
 - This includes state and national governments, local government associations, municipal insurers, professional and industry bodies, and financial regulators.

Coastal storm damage, City of Hobart, TAS
Photo credit Sam Rosewarne



So, what can be done?

Strengthening governance

- Efforts must be made to strengthen formal systems of municipal climate governance, to ensure that every significant decision and investment made by a council is viewed through a climate risk lense.
- Important opportunities exist to embed climate risk considerations into municipal decision-making frameworks, policies and plans, with view to triggering appropriate adaptation responses where required.
- *Should climate risk management and adaptation become a legislated responsibility for municipal councils (where it presently is not)?*

Flooding, Burnie City Council, TAS
Photo credit Chris Kidd



Take home messages

- 1. Issue salience:** We need to be specific in the way we talk with municipal leaders about climate change, and how we describe and justify it as a matter for municipal attention.
- 2. Activating networks of influence:** Municipal leaders need to be hearing about climate risk from those they respect and look to for thought leadership, that is, their networks of influence.
- 3. Strengthening governance:** Efforts must be made to strengthen formal systems of municipal climate governance, to ensure that every significant decision and investment made by a council is viewed through a climate risk lense.

Urban flooding, City of Hobart, TAS
Photo credit ABC News





Bushfire damage, Sorrell Council, TAS
Photo credit Chris Kidd

Thank you!

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