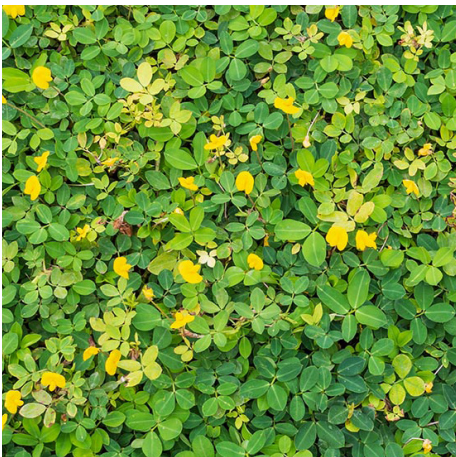


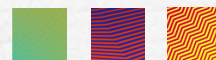
“Changing minds, not the climate”:

culture-based solutions to
local climate adaptation



From old waterways to knowledge that is passed on from generation to generation, culture and heritage provide us with an abundance of readily available solutions to today's climate problems facing our society. Not only does climate change force us to protect our heritage, our heritage can also protect us.

Climate adaptation is often approached as a matter of technological innovation, requiring investments in technology to support this shift. The Netherlands Commission for Unesco considers climate adaptation first and foremost to be a *human* process, requiring cultural resources and a change in mindset to succeed. It considers culture, heritage and historical knowledge as powerful assets for local climate adaptation strategies.¹





'*Changing minds, not the climate*' is Unesco's tagline in the approach to climate change. This forms the point of departure for the Netherlands Commission for Unesco's vision on climate adaptation, which will be discussed in greater depth in this background paper. Local and traditional forms of knowledge, experiences from the past, and the use of culture and heritage are of vital importance in order to create the necessary change in mindset and to make climate action more inclusive and more socially acceptable.

Changing minds, not the climate

The current climate discourse revolves around the question of how the global warming of our planet can be stopped. Global warming results in sea level rise and furthermore causes extreme heat, drought and flooding. One tends primarily to turn to the natural sciences to find solutions to these problems: How can airplanes fly more sustainably? What technological innovations will help us keep our feet dry? How can we make our energy supply carbon-neutral?

With the tagline 'changing minds, not the climate', Unesco demonstrates a broad and multifarious approach to climate adaptation. Can global warming be partly explained by our current worldview, our typical way of thinking? For example, how does our view of nature explain our current economic system? In its approach to facing the climate crisis, Unesco puts the central focus on a needed shift in mindset. What is that needed shift?

A crisis in modern dualist thought

In the history of Western modernity, dualist thought has been very influential. Dualist distinctions have influenced ways of thinking and how society has been structured. Scientific practice is a clear example: nature and culture were long considered separate domains. Nature is quantified, culture is understood.

¹ In the context of this background paper, culture is understood as everything created and passed on by humans, tangible as well as intangible, referring primarily to cultural historical aspects, and to a lesser extent to various forms of cultural expression such as art, music and theatre.



The philosopher René Descartes is one of the most influential philosophers of the modern age and one of the founders of modern dualist thought. He concluded his search for true knowledge, after having distrusted his senses, with only one certainty: I think, therefore I am, *cogito ergo sum*. Opposite the 'thinking subject', Descartes placed the 'other substance', the material world. This duality disconnected man from nature, subject from object, the mind from the body.

Since Descartes, the question has been raised whether dualist thought is an adequate description of the world as we know it. Can we even conceive of a subject that is separate from the world? In this view, man is an active force as distinct from nature, which is a passive background or decor. The French philosopher Bruno Latour has criticized the nature-culture dichotomy in his recent work *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*.² According to Latour, nature is not a decor, a setting for human actors. Instead, nature is comprised of a multitude of non-human actors. He signals that our planet is not an inexhaustible source of natural resources.

In light of the climate crisis, this means that the answer to climate change cannot just be found in technical inventions designed by human beings. There are limits to technological solutions devised by the 'subject' (humans). The climate crisis

demonstrates the limitations of a worldview in which man acts, and nature is passively affected. Maintaining this way of thinking obstructs the road towards a climate-adaptive and sustainable future.³ If we understand nature to be not just a passive background, we need to factor in more actors than human beings alone in our answer to a changing climate.

Mētis: towards an intimate relationship with nature

How can we begin to view nature as not just something lying outside of ourselves that can be quantified and manipulated? A possible answer is to pay more attention to more 'intimate' forms of knowledge. Scientific knowledge tends to objectify nature. It sees nature as obeying universal laws and subject to manipulation. Local forms of knowledge are sometimes better at acknowledging specific circumstances. These 'intimate' forms of knowledge recognise the fact that there are more actors than just humans.

² Bruno Latour. *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (2018)

³ Thomas Heyd, Nick Brooks *Exploring cultural dimensions of adaptation to climate change* (2009)

⁴ James C. Scott *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (1998)



Such local knowledge can be meaningful for climate adaptation. Adapting to a changing climate is not about humans taking on a challenge presented by a passive and predictable nature. It means continuously adjusting to ever-changing local conditions by people who directly experience flooding or drought and the consequences of climate change. The American political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott used the Greek concept of *mētis* to refer to this local adjustment.⁴ *Mētis* can be translated as cunning, sensible and is for example used by Homer to describe Odysseus' ability to adapt to ever-changing challenges on his voyage to Ithaca.

In his monumental work *Seeing Like a State*, Scott describes examples of states in the twentieth century and how their grand 'schemes to improve the human condition', based on a highly modern ideology, failed. From the planning of urban Brasilia to the agricultural collectivization in the Soviet-Union, Scott shows how states that fail to recognize local contingencies, practical experience and specific conditions, fail time and time again to develop successful policies. In Scott's words, 'mētis represents a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment'. The distinction between subject and object, and a worldview in which nature is merely a decor threaten such intimate forms of knowledge.

Dispensing with the subject-object or nature-culture dichotomy opens up the possibility of seeing how climate change intervenes in the way we live, and vice versa. This view broadens the range of possible policy solutions. Take, for example, a residential area that struggles with flooding. The moment there is an understanding of the way in which humans affect their living environment and how their habitat conversely has an effect on them, possible solutions can be found not only in technology, such as the construction of a drainage system. An alternative solution may be to create new bodies of water in the neighbourhood to tackle flooding problems: humans living with water rather than fighting against it.

Cultural historical experience

Experience is an important element of Scott's concept of *mētis*. It takes time to get to know local conditions. Such historical knowledge builds up gradually and cannot simply be abstracted and theorized.



Despite the strong focus on future-oriented technology and innovation in the current climate debate, dealing with climate adaptation is not new. Continuous adjustment to ever-changing natural and climatic conditions has been part and parcel of human existence. Many cultures and communities have gone through a process of climate adaptation spanning thousands of years. The resilience to survive by means of adjusting to changes is strongly embedded in the culture of local communities. Resilience is built on historical experiences and knowledge practices that are passed on in the form of cultural heritage, traditions and customs.

It is important to take this element of experience into account. For example, dealing with water problems is not new to the Netherlands – there are centuries of experience and knowledge to fall back on. While this practical knowledge often has not found its way into the scientific discourse, it helps local communities to co-exist with their local habitats. In the light of climate action, it is of vital importance to study what ways have been used in the past to enable people to live surrounded by water.

Knowledge pluralism

In order to solve the climate crisis, we need knowledge that takes into account local practice and experience in addition to scientific and technical knowledge. The claim of objectivity and exclusiveness often made by scientific knowledge may undermine the recognition of other forms of knowledge. Knowledge pluralism is of great value to climate adaptation.

The complexity of the climate crisis demands a pluralistic way of dealing with knowledge. Academic studies primarily pay attention to the role of culture and local knowledge in non-Western countries.⁶ However, local and traditional knowledge is not just something specific to countries in the ‘Global South’. In the Netherlands as well, the value of local, practical or non-scientific forms of knowledge, often packaged as culture or heritage, deserves more recognition.

Local knowledge, participation and identity

Not only do experience and ‘intimate’ forms of knowledge – historical, local and practical knowledge used and safeguarded by local communities – contribute by means of their *content* to dealing with societal challenges such as climate adaptation. They are also *instrumental* towards creating local support for climate action.



The use of heritage and culture as carriers of intimate knowledge can help increase citizen involvement in climate adaptation, and make decision-making based more on citizen participation. In particular, local governments, as the governmental level closest to the people, could make more use of heritage and culture to shape participatory climate policymaking and policy implementation. In their mapping of the cultural dimensions of climate adaptation, science philosopher Thomas Heyd and climatologist Nick Brooks point out the importance of locality: applying local customs, traditions and knowledge will increase citizen support for action and allow citizens to better identify with the climate challenge.⁷ This is a necessary precondition for the much needed collective change in mindset mentioned earlier in this paper.

Using heritage, culture and local knowledge as assets for climate adaptation is therefore not just important for allowing specific local conditions of the human habitat to be taken into account. It is also relevant to the democratization of policy processes, making citizens become more actively involved. A more inclusive approach will lead to stronger citizen support for climate action and a societal acceptance of climate solutions – which at times demand citizens to make sacrifices – that eventually will lead to more successful policy implementation.⁸

Culture-based solutions to local climate adaptation

The Netherlands Commission for Unesco emphasizes that climate adaptation be viewed as a *human* process, taking placing in a cultural context, and requiring a change in mindset. In the words of Unesco: ‘change minds, not the climate’. The use of historical knowledge, heritage and customs and the involvement of local communities need to become better integrated in climate policy and action.



⁵ Andrea Déri, Janardhanan Sundaesan *Diverse epistemic traditions in transformative climate change research and adaptation, heritage and legacy* (2015).

⁶ Andreas Neef, Lucy Bengé, Bryan Boruff, Natasha Pauli, Eberhard Weber, Renata Varea *Climate adaptation strategies in Fiji: The role of social norms and cultural values* (2018).

⁷ Thomas Heyd, Nick Brooks *Exploring cultural dimensions of adaptation to climate change* (2009).

⁸ W. Neil Adger, Jon Barnett, Katrina Brown, Nadine Marshall and Karen O'Brien, *Cultural dimensions of climate change impacts and adaptation* (2013).

In this background paper, the Commission states that there is a need to move away from the dualist worldview that has been common in modern Western thought. Nature and culture should not be considered separate domains. It is important to recognize that the human struggle with a changing climate and the fight against water or the lack of it is not just something that is happening in the present. The knowledge and experience built up over centuries needs to be made more easily available for climate action: knowledge that is based on experience, on practical skills, trial and error. Knowledge that has been collected thanks to continuous adjustment to an ever-changing environment and climate. Knowledge that is stored in our traditions, our culture and history, our customs and heritage.



How can the Commission use this vision of a heritage-inclusive approach to local climate adaptation, centred on the concept of mētis, to contribute to facing the climate challenge? This question will be the basis of a multiannual programme that kicks off at the beginning of 2021. Some aims will be:

- Inspire policy makers.

Taking mētis – locality, experience and pluriform knowledge – as a departure point opens up a broad range of new local policy options. Policy decisions that are rooted in heritage, culture and traditions will be less likely to face civic resistance and will increase social acceptance of climate action.

- Improve the knowledge base.

The Commission's vision, as illustrated in this background paper, has been developed on the basis of evidence derived from four practical examples from the Kingdom of the Netherlands that demonstrate the added value of the use of heritage and culture in local climate action. We will strengthen the knowledge base with additional best practice studies, and we will continue building knowledge alliances with professionals and researchers.



- Call for inclusive climate action.

The Commission emphasizes the need for more inclusive climate action that is closer to citizens, aided by heritage and culture. Climate adaptation is not just a challenge to be met by world leaders and heads of state, but also by (political) communities at the local level, such as municipalities. The use of heritage and culture can enhance the engagement of citizens and as such helps 'democratize' climate action: here, innovation is not imposed in a top-down manner, but is actively shaped by and within communities.

The Netherlands Commission for Unesco calls for a greater recognition of the power of culture, heritage and local knowledge in the search for climate adaptation solutions. We need the experiences from the past to tackle the climate challenges of today and tomorrow. The human dimension is key in this respect.

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