

Diverse understandings of adaptation to climate change:  
the cases for and against.

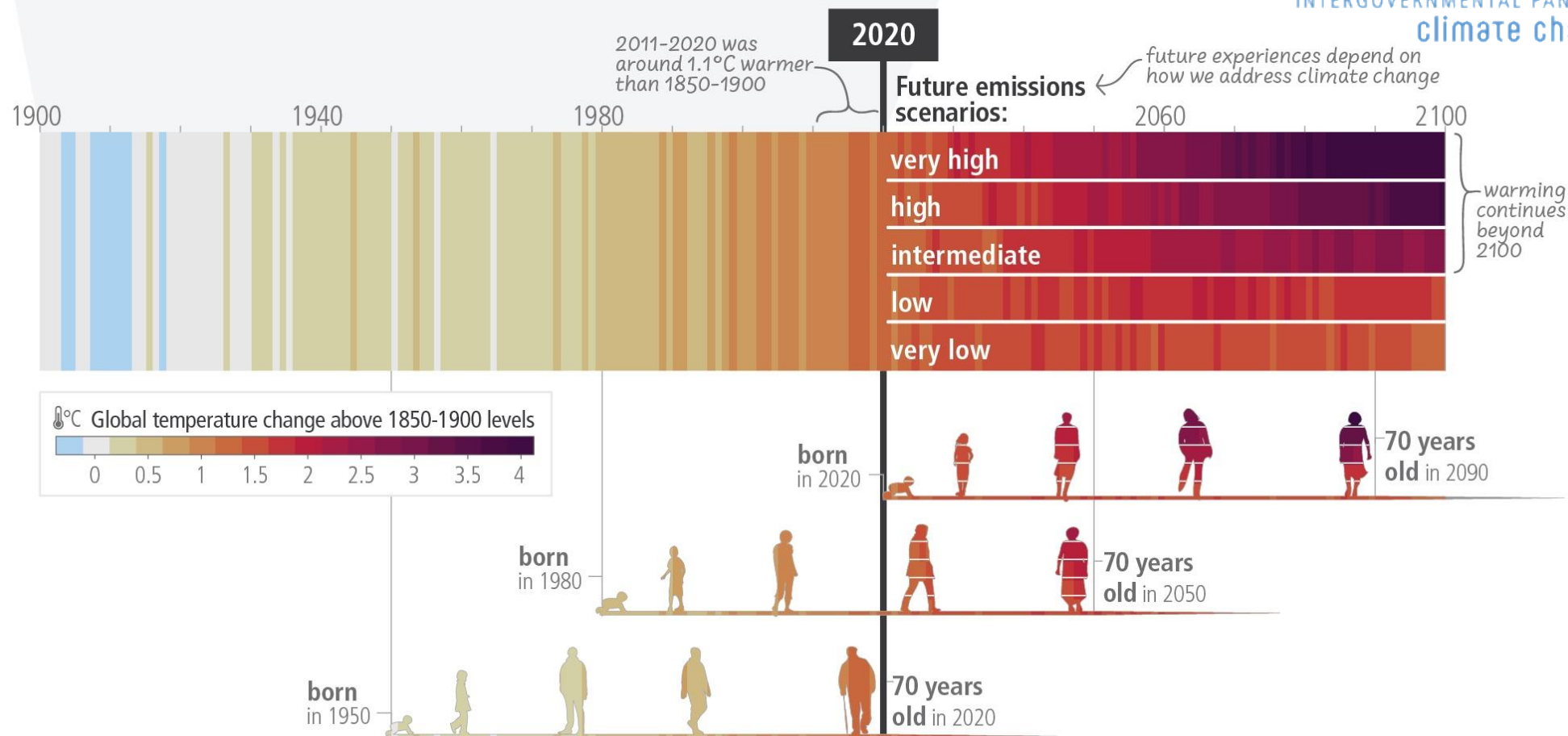
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**Ecosystem-based Adaptation for Coastal Resilience (II)**

22 April 2026

## c) The extent to which current and future generations will experience a hotter and different world depends on choices now and in the near-term



# Starting point

‘We need a common understanding of adaptation in order to be able to collaborate effectively’...

**Argument For:** Many misunderstandings occur because of different understandings of adaptation – we need a common understanding to ensure that everyone has the same starting point

**Argument Against:** A common understanding will likely eliminate local nuances, contexts and knowledges – we need a relational definition instead.

# Key Questions

Whose voices are influencing the knowledge that makes its way to decision makers and influences policy?

Is the fact that we are almost at 1.5C partly a result of epistemic coloniality in the climate change knowledge production?

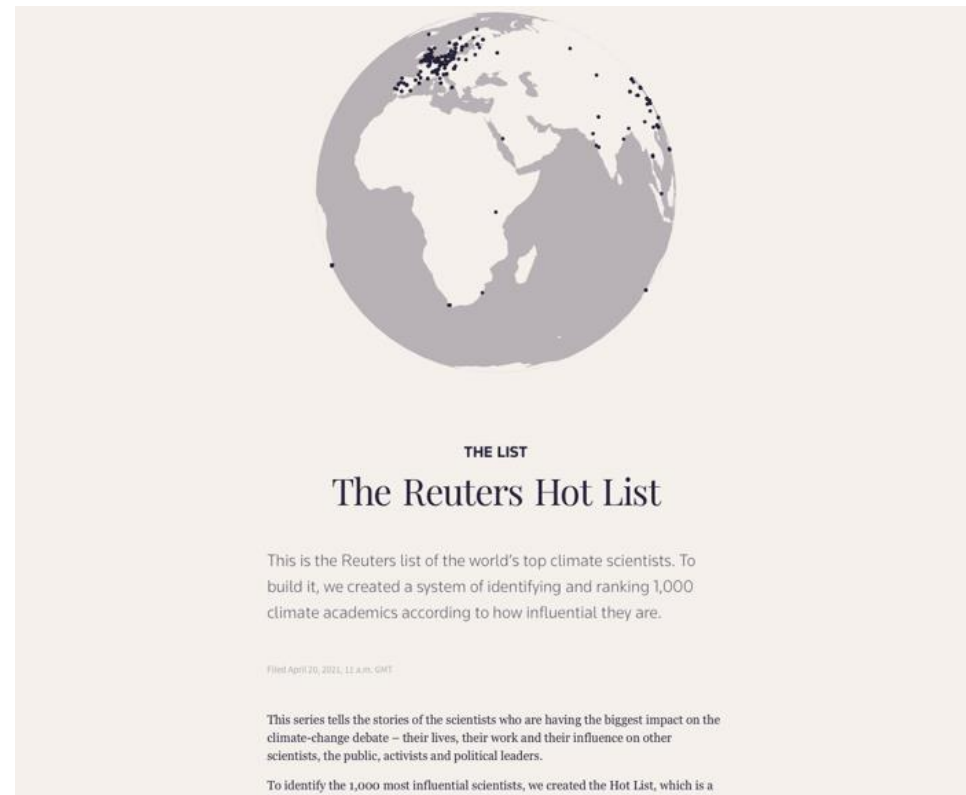
‘Reflexivity demands a dismantling of artificial walls between science, technology and public policy...

‘The sociology and politics of science, themselves domains of robust scientific inquiry, tell us otherwise.

‘Built into the very processes of knowledge-making are disparate social and cultural judgments that inevitably shape policy: judgments about what is worth knowing (and what is not); whose knowledge counts (and whose does not); which facts deserve contestation (and which ones do not); whose questions should be taken seriously (and whose should not).’

Jasanoff, S. (2018) ‘Just transitions: A humble approach to global energy futures’ Energy Research and Social Sciences, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.11.025> [I want to acknowledge the accusations of sexual and emotional abuse by Shiela Jasanoff]

# Whose knowledge counts?

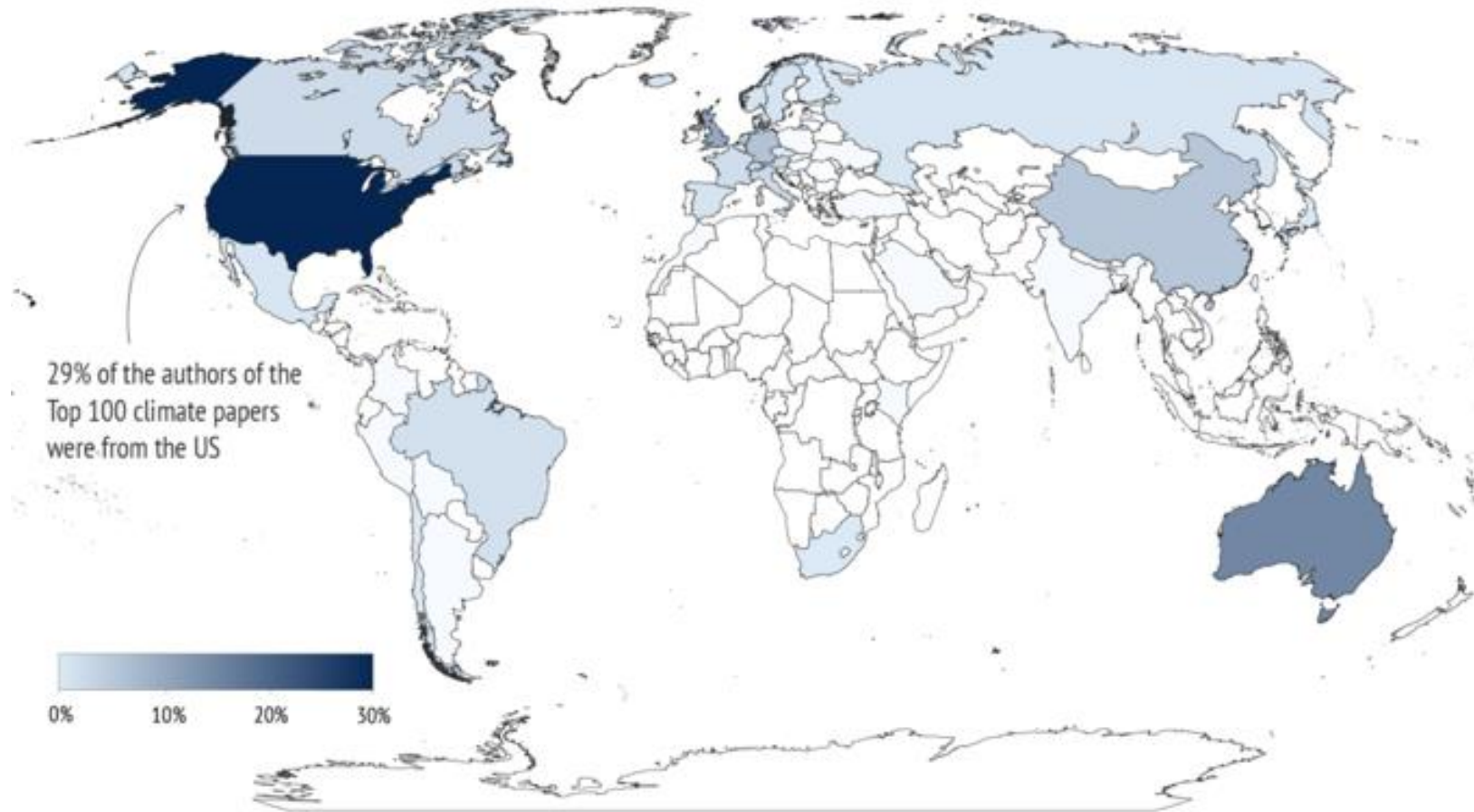


<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/climate-change-scientists-list/>

# 1 000 'climate influencers'

- 122 women
- 111 in Global South (88 from China)
- No one at an African institution outside of South Africa – and there only 4 (all of them men)

## Authors of the Top 100 climate papers by nationality



Source: <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-the-lack-of-diversity-in-climate-science-research>

## Report by numbers



270 Authors



41 % Women / 59 % Men



More than  
34,000 scientific papers



67 Countries



675 Contributing authors

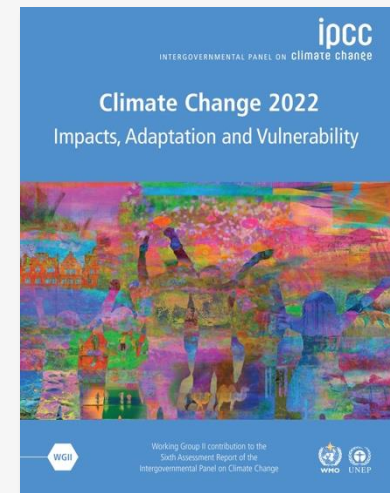


62,418  
Review comments

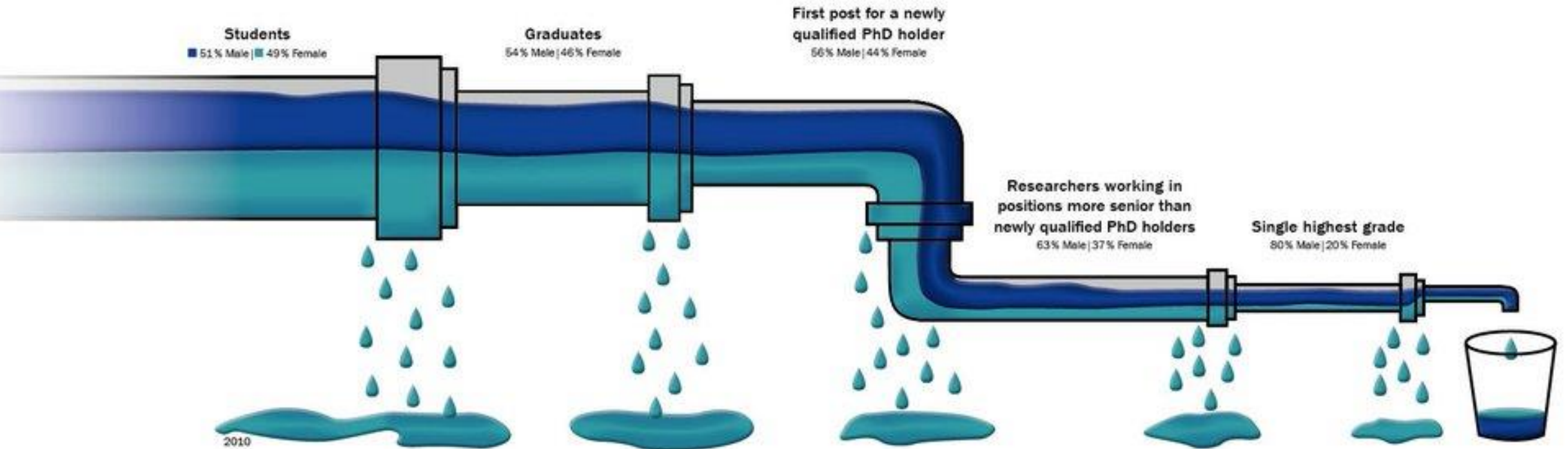


43 % Developing countries  
57 % Developed countries

**Growing scientific  
knowledge gives us our  
best understanding yet**



# Whose knowledge counts (2)?



# Which knowledge counts?

- Natural sciences receive 770% more research funding on climate change than social sciences (Overland & Sovacool, 2020)
- Non-experts think natural science is more robust – why?
- Non-experts do not understand that social science is, indeed, science, nor how the methods work.
- Social science methods are equally robust, verifiable and replicable within a specific context.

# Why a problem?

- Those closest to the frontlines of climate change impacts will have a different understanding
- Context is mostly complicated, solutions mostly difficult – lack of diversity in perspectives won't offer the full spread of knowledge
- In academia: 'feminist' or 'decolonial' lens → refers to a way to understand problems/solutions that recognise, eg structural injustices
- How we study influences what we study influences what we find

# This is not accidental!

- Creation of epistemic hierarchies is based on systemic barriers: Rooted in lack of equity, inclusion, diversity in the knowledge production process
- Resulting epistemic injustice intersects with knowledge singularity to create incomplete, wrong, unjust and explicitly biased knowledge

In sum

Voices of Global South not heard

Voices of social scientists and humanities scholars not heard

Equality, diversity and inclusion dimensions in research funding are poorly accounted for

Academic biases interfere with ability to undertake equitable and impactful research on climate and development challenges.

→ Broader acknowledgement of epistemic coloniality

# To return to the two arguments...

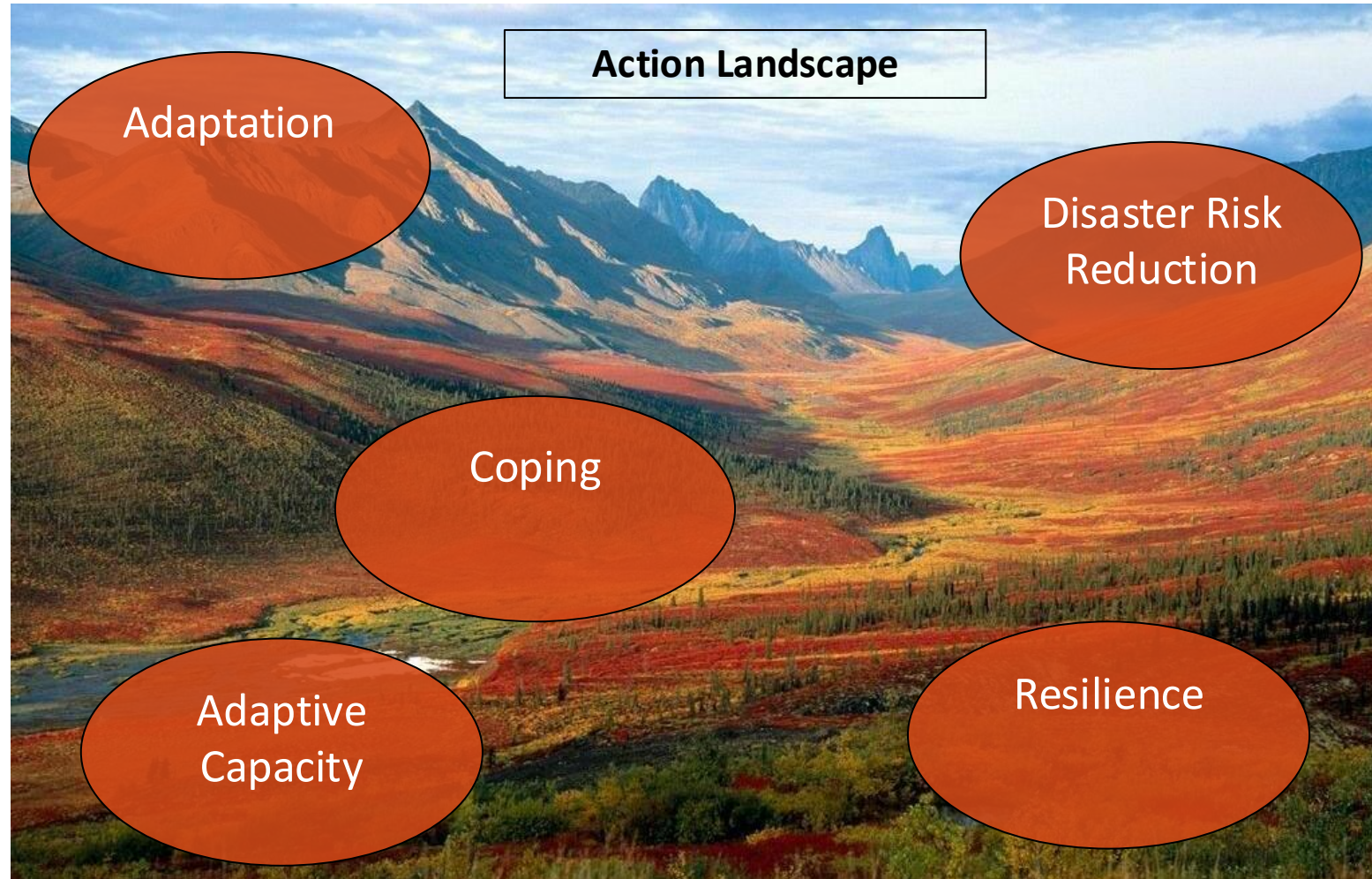
- Sustainable and equitable partnerships require trust
- Acknowledging epistemic (knowledge) diversity is part of this
- Removing divergent ways of understanding the world may leave everyone dissatisfied – and may mean adaptation
- Attempting a single definition can be epistemically unjust
- A relational approach is needed
- But there need to be limits – the action lands must be clear and shared



**Adaptation:**  
**Is a Single Definition Necessary?**

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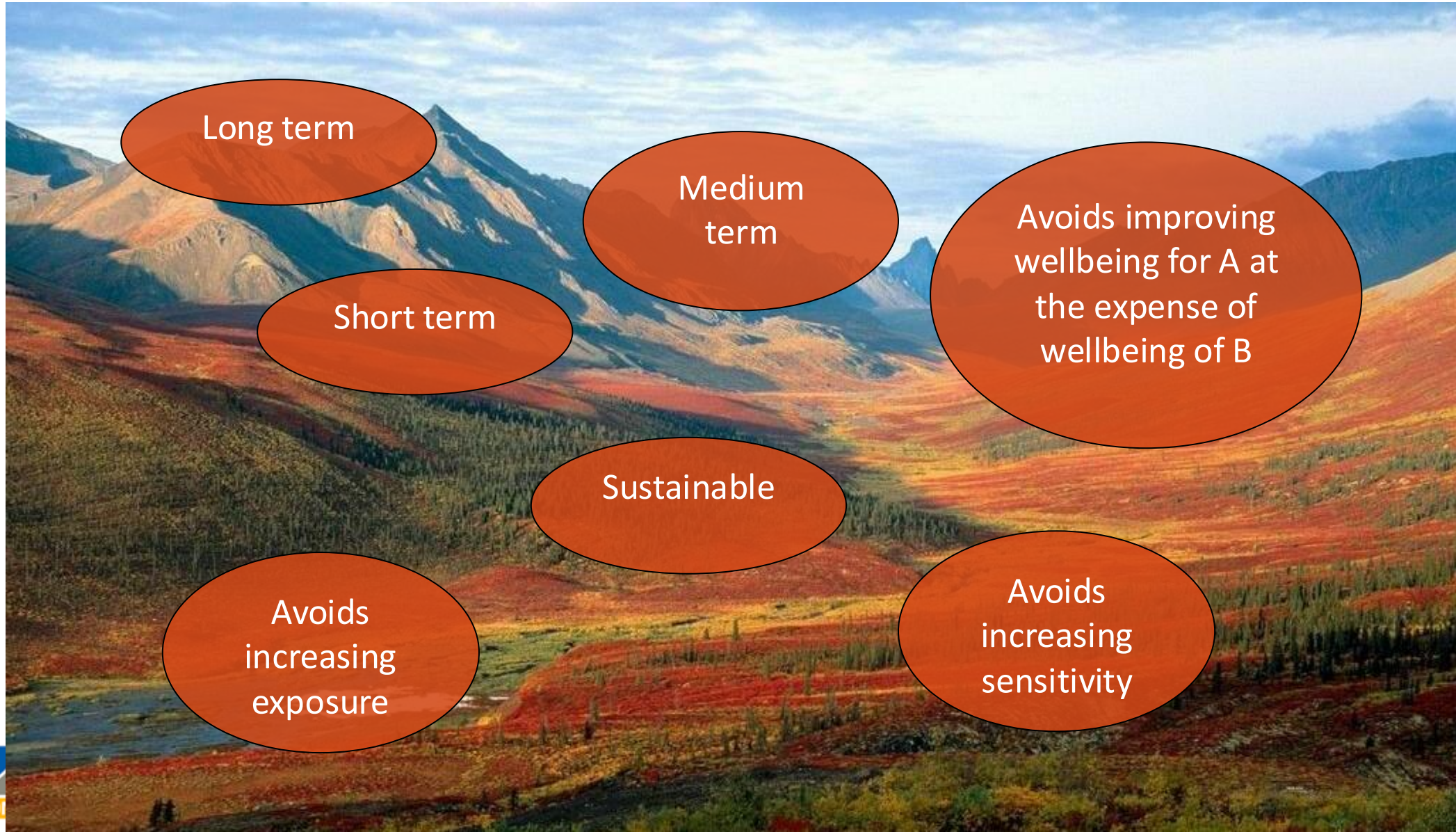
# Need to share the same understanding of the landscape of action



Maladaptation

Maladaptation

# The Action Landscape



Thank you



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