Synthesis and policy guidance summarising the findings of the Go-Adapt project (December 2012)

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The main conclusions taken from the deliverables of the Go-Adapt project (to be published in peer reviewed journals) can be summarised as follows:

- The logic of action in the adaptation policy field is in stark contrast with the logic in to climate change mitigation policy field: While most sectors have a strong self-interest in adaptation because it increases their resilience, this is often not the case for mitigation. Consequently, the difficulties encountered in the mitigation policy field are unlikely to be replicated in the adaptation policy field, given that actors are aware of climate change threats and their self-interest in tackling them.

- Although climate change adaptation is usually in the self-interest of a broad variety of actors, governments still struggle with the challenges analysed in the Go-Adapt project, in particular with the challenge of climate policy integration horizontally across sectors and vertically across levels of government, and with overcoming uncertainties (for more details see table 1).

- OECD countries tackle the governance challenges of climate change adaptation in very similar ways. Most of them have a national adaptation strategy, inter-ministerial coordination bodies, research programmes and some sort of stakeholder involvement in place. National adaptation strategies often serve as a hub for other adaptation governance initiatives.

- Although national adaptation strategies often play a central role in adaptation governance, they still focus mainly on reducing uncertainties and raising awareness for adaptation needs and options. So far, most of them did not succeed in coordinating and implementing specific adaptation policies. Thus, adaptation strategies are still communication rather than policy coordination tools.

- As an in-depth analysis of SD strategies in Europe shows, this much older type (most of them were formulated in the early 2000s) of multi-sectoral strategies was also supposed to better coordinate (environmental, economic and social) policies. Although some SD strategies worked better than others did, we conclude that none was able to actually improve the coordination of policies. If they still exist, SD strategies are low-key communication instruments. The causes for their failure in coordinating policies are manifold. Among other things, their scope was too broad, they lacked clear priorities, and they never gained ownership in non-environmental sectors. Ultimately, they failed because they were not able to change the fact that policy making follows sectoral interests and logics.

- Against this background, there is a risk that adaptation strategies will never be able to coordinate substantial adaptation policies but will continue to raise awareness for the issue. As long as adaptation is a relatively new policy field, raising awareness is a legitimate cause. Once the policy field matures, however, a stronger focus on sectoral ownership and policy making may become inevitable.

- As our comparison of the German adaptation strategy and the Dutch Delta Programme shows, there are alternatives to comprehensive, multi-sectoral national adaptation strategies. The Delta Programme is the most important adaptation governance initiative in the Netherlands and it focuses exclusively on water management and related issues (such as spatial planning). Although it is too early to tell whether the Dutch approach is more effective in delivering adaptation, it highlights at least that there are alternatives or complementary approaches to what most other countries do, i.e. formulating comprehensive adaptation strategies and action plans that may have difficulties shaping sectoral policy making.

- A rare approach of climate policy integration are regional climate change partnerships, to be found e.g. in Canada and the UK. As our case studies show, partnerships are a network-based mechanism that aims to raise awareness for adaptation issues among a broad variety of state and non-state stakeholders at and across all levels of government.

- Since adaptation to climate change is a highly context-specific challenge, governments should be cautious when they apply governance approaches (such as national adaptation strategies) in very similar ways. As experiences with SD strategies suggest (a similarly comprehensive governance tool), standardising governance routines with strategy processes is risky because it leaves little room for experimentation and learning, and because different governments will fail in very similar ways in case the standard approaches have flaws.

- Adequate governance approaches are an essential but not a sufficient condition for developing and implementing effective policies. Once governments have established an adequate governance setup, they will have to overcome numerous smaller-scale barriers (such as a lack of high-level political commitment and resource scarcity), many of which arise usually between policy formulation and implementation.

- Overall, we found that the governance of climate change adaptation is dominated by soft, often network-like approaches. This may have to do with the fact that adaptation pressures are still perceived as moderate and/or uncertain. Once this perception changes, the now dominant network mode of governance will most likely be complemented by hierarchical approaches.