

adapt!

Overview of the key scientific concepts and activities of the research project



Utrecht, April 2025

This document presents an overview of Adapt!, a ten-year interdisciplinary research project at multiple Dutch Universities, financed by the Dutch Research Council (grant 024.006.021).

This document introduces the key concepts and activities of the project. Specific details may change during the execution phase. The document is an abbreviated version of the original grant application and was written by the eight principal investigators, listed in alphabetic order below.

- Beatrice de Graaf, Universiteit Utrecht (scientific director)
- Arjen Boin, Universiteit Leiden
- Kees van den Bos, Universiteit Utrecht
- Scott Douglas, Universiteit Utrecht
- Ellen Giebels, Twente University
- Lotte Jensen, Radboud University
- Paul van Lange, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
- Rik Peels, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Introduction

Pandemics, terrorism, and climate emergencies endanger not just safety and prosperity but also the core values of open societies – values such as civil liberties, equal opportunity, open enquiry, and solidarity. The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated how quickly even rich and well-organised societies can succumb to a disruptive force coming seemingly out of nowhere.

Human societies have always faced critical episodes, but the growing frequency, magnitude, and costs of disasters and other emergencies are highly concerning. Societies have **to prepare for more crisis-prone times**. Open societies must learn to live through major disruptions without descending into dysfunctional conflicts about core values and identities. Recent crisis experiences have shown that preserving societal values in times of crisis requires more than having enough economic, technological, or medical resources. For a successful crisis response, **societies must also draw on their cultural, social, and governance capabilities**.

There is **an urgent need** for evidence-based insights that help societies to weather a crisis while protecting the core values of the open society. The Adapt! programme will **radically advance** the current state of the art with regard to knowledge, insights, tools, and strategies that boost the ability of citizens, frontline professionals, and policymakers to collectively weather crises. It will focus on three types of crises: pandemic-related crises, crises resulting from violent extremism, and natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes. Our **distinctive contribution is to focus on the societal dimension of crisis response**. This has been identified as a critical yet under-researched differentiator and a key area for understanding how communities may strengthen their ability to successfully deal with future crises.

Goals

The Adapt! programme has two goals:

- The first goal is **to identify the determinants of successful societal crisis responses**. We will focus on the time period between **1800 and the present**. This long-term perspective helps to identify a wide range of explanations for successful crisis responses. Through careful historical research and analysis of the behaviour of individuals, groups, and communities, and intensive collaborations with citizens, frontline professionals, and policymakers, we will identify, unpack, and road-test interventions that boost the cultural, social, and governance capabilities of communities to respond to a crisis. The core aim is thus to produce **contextually and historically grounded, actionable, and usable knowledge** about the way societies can respond to crises.
- The second goal is **to create a permanent, open, international, and interdisciplinary infrastructure** for studying, designing, and implementing strategies that enable social systems to respond to large disruptions. This goal will be served by the **Adapt Academy**. This research infrastructure combines knowledge from the humanities with expertise from the social sciences. It facilitates and brings together basic and applied research, theoretical and experimental research, and longitudinal intervention and evaluation programmes. Importantly, this infrastructure will provide a permanent interface for doing applied research and for co-designing research agendas with local communities, frontline

professionals, and policymakers, while directly making all the generated data available to scholars all over the world.

Main research question and focus

Our main research question is as follows:

What explains successful versus unsuccessful societal responses to a crisis, and how can these lessons be translated into adaptive strategies that societies can use to boost their capability to navigate future crises?

The Adapt! programme concentrates on three types of crises: those resulting from pandemics, violent extremism, and natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes. We focus on these three types of crises for three reasons. First, we will study a wide variety of threats: *natural* disasters (e.g., earthquakes), disasters created *by humans* (violent extremism), and complex *combinations* of these (pandemics, floods). Second, these crises regularly occur in liberal democracies (see box 1). Third, these three types of crises match the expertise that the scholars in the team bring in, thus guaranteeing that we know what we are studying and testing, aiming high, but not overstepping our expertise.

Scientific contribution

We believe our project to be academically ground-breaking in three ways:

1. The project adopts a unique focus on the role of cultural, social, and governmental capabilities of a society in the response to a crisis. Rather than focusing on economic and technical resources (which have been covered extensively), the Adapt! programme will explore how a society collectively understands and gives meaning to a crisis, facilitates collaboration between social actors, and uses its government resources to minimise crisis consequences.
2. The project is truly integrative and encompassing as it
 - a. considers responses at three different levels in societies and how they interact with one another: individual responses (the micro level), the response of social institutions (the meso level), and governmental responses (the macro level);
 - b. studies different kinds of crises, such as violent extremism, pandemics, and natural disasters, within a large number of different countries;
 - c. adopts a radically interdisciplinary approach (including, among others, history, political science, public management, (social) psychology, philosophy, religion & theology, and law), combining a variety of empirical methods (such as interviews, archival research, surveys, and laboratory and field experiments) with more normative approaches derived from various methods in ethics and epistemology.
3. The project moves beyond mere theorising and assumes a thoroughly action-oriented approach. The Adapt Academy provides a permanent infrastructure for intensively collaborating with citizens, frontline professionals, and institutions throughout the research work, co-creating knowledge that is scientifically grounded and practically usable.

Intended legacy

Adapt! is designed to have a lasting impact. The Adapt Academy will become **an international centre for the study of societal adaptation** in the academic domain, drawing in talent and peer collaborations from around the world through joint studies, fellowships, and conferences. We will build upon our expertise in **policy-relevant engagement** to tie international, national, and local governments and large non-governmental organisations to the programme.

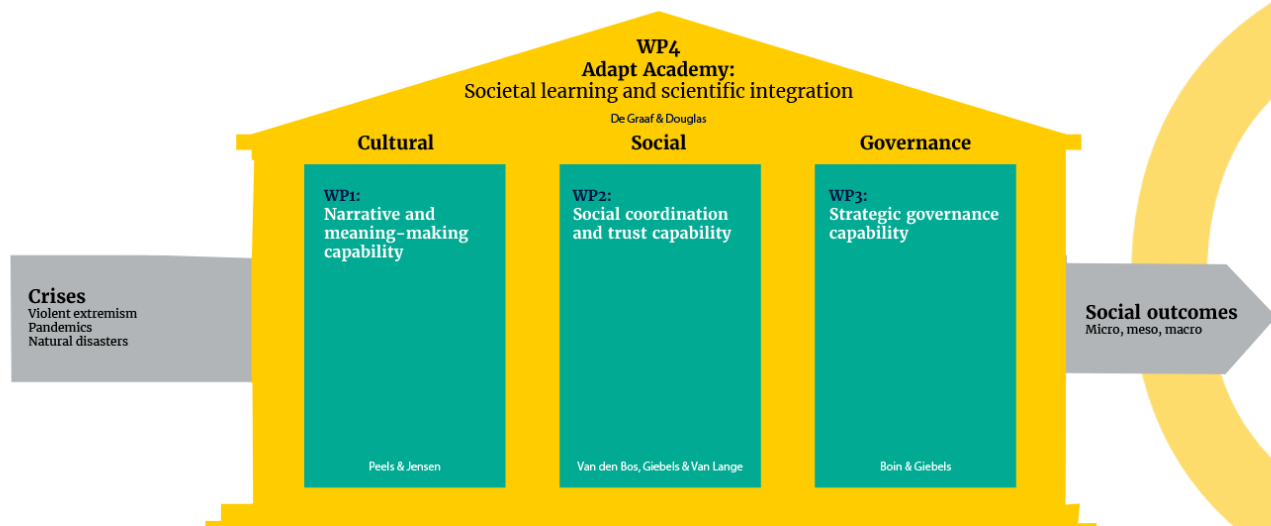
We will identify and nurture **a new generation of practice-oriented scholars**. We will train them to conduct peer-to-peer and science-to-society research and interventions, which will allow them to bridge the perennial gap between academic research and the world of practice. We will build a stable base for lasting institutional development, positioning Adapt! in the heart of the crisis field and closely aligning it with European and non-European centres of excellence.

The permanent infrastructure for research and **impact in and between the academic, institutional, and community domains** will enable the co-production of knowledge that is so urgently needed by social systems to adapt smartly, effectively, and legitimately in the face of emerging disruptions. This infrastructure combines knowledge from the humanities with knowledge from the social and behavioural sciences. It facilitates basic and applied research, theoretical and experimental research, and longitudinal, intervention, and evaluation programmes.

On the whole, Adapt! will provide a permanent interface for doing research together with local communities, frontline professionals, and policymakers, while constantly making all the generated data available to scholars all over the world.

Structure and work packages

The structure and four work packages of Adapt! Can be displayed as follows. Below, we explain what each of the work packages amounts to.



WP1 Narrative and meaning-making capability

This WP explores how a society can leverage its cultural capabilities to generate and communicate shared ideas of what challenges a crisis poses to open societies and what responses are appropriate. This WP will investigate crisis narratives from 1800 to the present day, on (trans)national and local levels, in various situations and crisis events. We seek to understand what narratives emerge in the face of different events, at different points in time, and among different groups, and how these separately and jointly affect societal outcomes through their cognitive and affective dimensions.

We will first map and conceptualise several *types* of narratives (WP1.1). We will then explore the *cognitive* dimension of these narratives by identifying and explaining *underlying belief policies* informing these narratives (WP1.2). Moreover, we will investigate the *affective* dimension of these narratives by unpacking their *emotional effects* and the ways in which they help people to cope and be solidary, and we will explore how we can put to use the dominant affective frames of fear, alarmism, and hope (WP1.3; see also **WP2.1** and **WP2.3** with the focus on trust). Subsequently, we will carry out an intervention by testing narratives in teaching materials on how to deal with crises, thereby building on, expanding, and deepening the existing platform TerInfo (see WP1.4). Making use of the database developed with CASA (see **WP4**) and enriched in WP1.1, we will conclude by analysing narratives geared towards *shaping the future* via both the cognitive and the affective axes (WP1.5).

WP1 Narrative and meaning-making capability
WP1.1: Mapping and understanding crisis narratives: Building a historical and analytic repository
WP1.2: Dealing with uncertainty and devising belief policies: Epistemic dimensions of crises
WP1.3: Coping with fear and generating solidarity: Affective dimensions of crises
WP1.4: 4 How history can help: Applying historical narrative in times of disruption
WP1.5: Making sense of future crises: Narratives, scenarios, and focused imagination in crisis governance

WP2 Social coordination and trust capability

This WP explores how a society can foster collaboration between individuals, groups, and institutions. Specifically, the WP focuses on how individuals, groups, and institutions rely on judgments of trust when coordinating actions and surveying what others have been doing, are doing, and probably will be doing in the future.

WP2.1 focuses on the issues of social coordination and trust, and notes that people often coordinate their actions in times of crisis under conditions of uncertainty (see WP1.2) as to whether they can trust other parties in the crisis at hand. In these situations, we assume that people rely on perceptions of how fair the other parties behave to get an indication of the amount of trust they can put in the other parties (Van den Bos et al., 1998). WP2.2 examines another cornerstone of social coordination, namely, social cohesion, and focuses on how the sanctioning of non-collective tendencies may help to overcome individualistic responses in times of crisis (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Van Lange, 2015). WP2.3 concentrates on what can be done to restore trust and social cohesion by strengthening perceptions of institutional integrity in situations of

social strife and fragmentation (Van den Bos et al., in press). Finally, WP2.4 examines the implications of the analyses put forward and focuses on how to work through escalated crisis encounters (Giebels et al., 2017; Giebels & Taylor, 2009; Oostinga et al., 2018).

WP2 Social coordination and trust
WP2.1: Individuals forming judgments of trust, relying on perceptions of fairness
WP2.2: Mobilising prosocial behaviour in trying times
WP2.3: The role of social institutions
WP2.4: Working through escalated crisis encounters

WP3 Strategic governance capability

This WP explores how governments and public institutions coordinate the use of governmental resources by key partners in the response network in order to minimise the consequences of a crisis.

Crisis scholars categorise these actions in terms of critical tasks (Boin et al., 2017, 2021). First, it is important to recognise a crisis in its earliest stages when it may still be relatively easy to deal with the crisis (WP3.1). Second, government organisations need to employ and align their problem-solving capacities (addressing shortages, coordinating available means) in cooperation with other parties involved (WP3.2). Third, political and administrative crisis management teams must make critical decisions under conditions of uncertainty and stress (WP3.3). Fourth, it is important that government leaders adhere to ethical standards in times of crisis and effectively negotiate moral dilemmas (WP3.4).

WP3 Strategic governance capability
WP3.1: Towards robust crisis detection and response practices in public organisations and networks
WP3.2: Towards high-performing crisis response networks
WP3.3: Enhancing effective crisis decision-making
WP3.4: Moral dilemmas and ethics of crisis leadership

WP4 Adapt Academy: Societal learning and scientific integration

WP4 presents the Adapt Academy, a truly groundbreaking, institutionally innovative *research infrastructure*. The Academy provides the clearing house for integrating the different foundational insights (WP4.1, WP4.2, WP4.3) and for collecting and sharing the wealth of data generated by Adapt! (WP4.4). The Adapt Academy also provides a platform for the development of action-oriented research that fosters the *co-production of knowledge between researchers, policy-makers, and citizens*, with longitudinal action research projects (WP4.5, WP4.6, WP4.7), forums for engaging with the public and the scientific community (WP4.8, WP4.9), and

development opportunities for a new generation of action-oriented scholars. Figure 4 illustrates the various building blocks of the Adapt Academy.

WP4A Scientific integration of findings
WP4.1: Ensuring scientific integration, connect the findings
WP4.2: Examining the interaction between crises
WP4.3: Summarising and testing core research findings
WP4.4: Connecting and sharing data about societal responses
WP4B Societal learning about adaptation strategies
WP4.5: Local living labs to study the complexities of practices through longitudinal, action-oriented fieldwork
WP4.6: Strategy feasibility probes in different sets of countries
WP4.7: Societal Crisis Response Challenge
WP4.8: Societal engagement and dialogue
WP4.9: Scientific engagement and dialogue