

# Is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change an effective (or appropriate) institution for supporting Indigenous populations’ adaptation to climate change?



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## Background

It is now widely accepted that anthropogenic climate change is one of the most daunting challenges faced by humanity in this era. The issue is scientifically complex and politically arduous due to its transboundary and multi-scaled nature, its potential for destabilizing natural, as well as socioeconomic and cultural systems, and the relative level of uncertainty relating to tipping points and future climate trajectories. One thing is certain though, human influence on the climate system is clear, and evidence that our climate is changing rapidly is overwhelming [1-3]. Adaptation has thus emerged over the last decade as a central component of climate policy debates at all levels of governance [4].

Parallel to this work is a growing body of literature that recognize that indigenous peoples, particularly those that inhabit remote areas that are undergoing rapid change, and practice livelihoods that are closely linked to the environment, are highly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. This heightened vulnerability, like that of peoples living in developing countries found to be particularly vulnerable to climate change, is deeply tied to, and exacerbated by existing socio-economic and health disparities, and political inequality and marginalization brought on by colonial legacies [5-9].

Given the recognized heightened vulnerability of indigenous peoples to climate change, and the lack of assessment of how international structures create barriers and/or opportunities for supporting indigenous peoples’ adaptation, this study seeks to address the gaps by critically assessing how the UNFCCC’s discursive structure influences the possibilities for meaningful participation of, and the potential policy outcomes for indigenous peoples at various scales.

## Study area

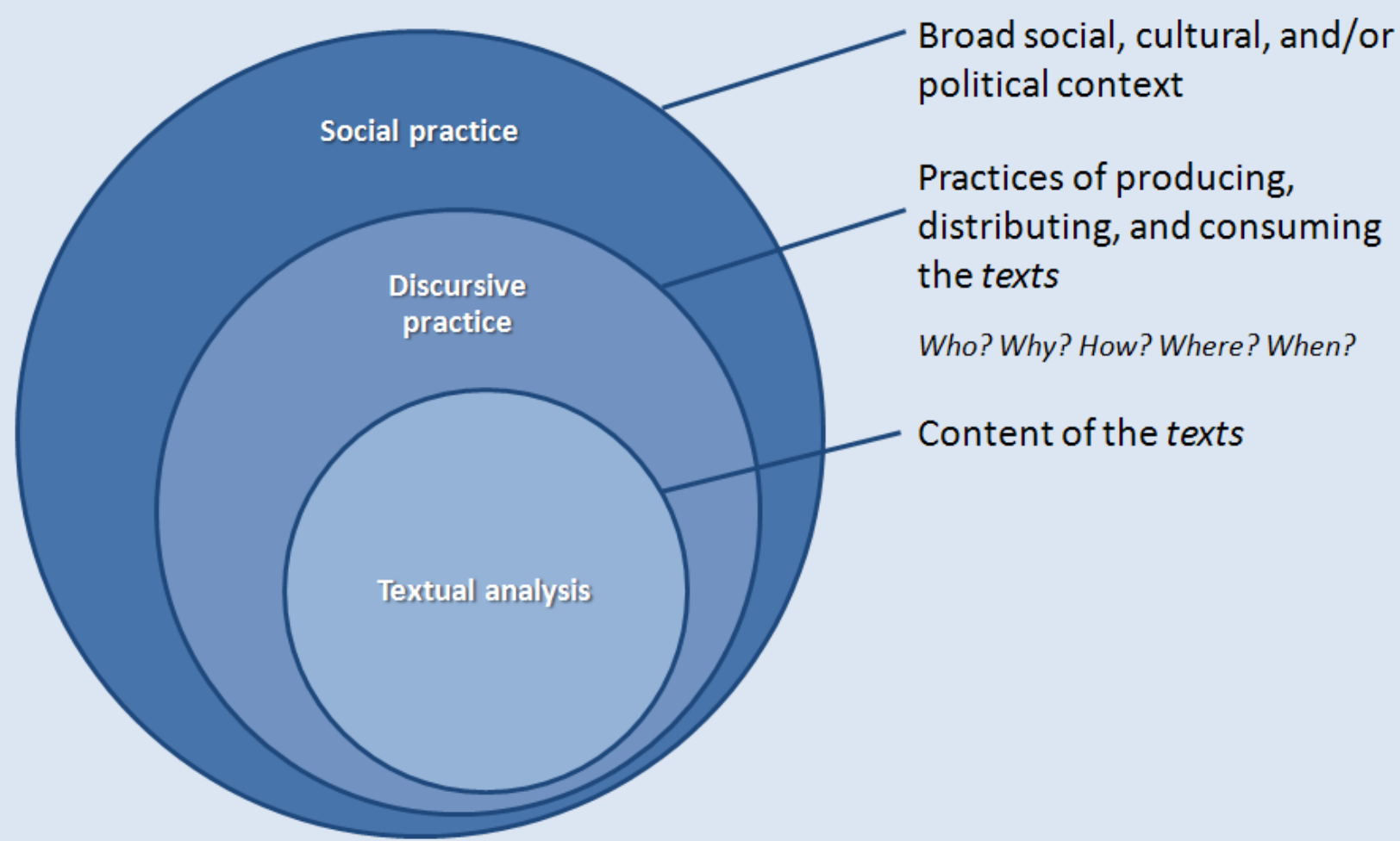


## Research aims and objectives

This thesis asks first and foremost, **is the UNFCCC an appropriate institution for supporting indigenous populations’ adaptation to climate change?** This is assessed through the three following sub-questions: **(a)** what is the official discourse on climate change adaptation in the UNFCCC based on the decisions rendered at its Conferences of the Parties (CP); **(b)** what does the discourse imply for indigenous populations at the national, regional and international levels; and **(c)** it is possible for indigenous people to access adaptation support and/or exert influence onto the discourse, and if so, to what extent?

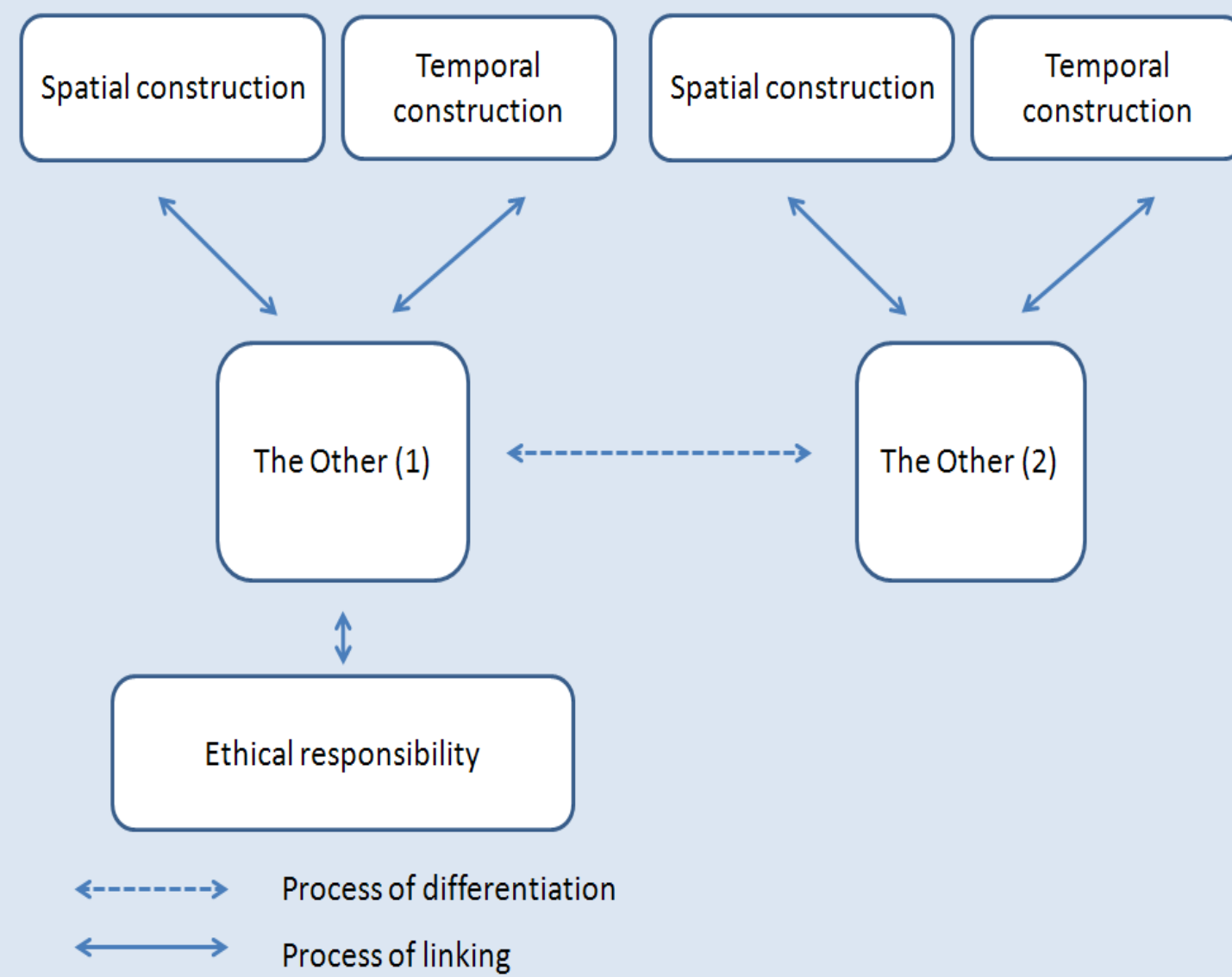
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## Study Design



**Figure 1. Methodological Framework**  
**Critical Discourse Analysis**

CDA is a three-layered approach characterized by a textual analysis, supported by two levels of contextualization. The textual analysis should give particular attention to the constitutive effects of discursive and linguistic elements such as narratives, wording, tone, framing, and themes and be receptive to inconsistencies and discursive frames that privilege some approaches, groups, or forms of knowledge over others. Context should be provided on the production, distribution, and consumption of the texts under consideration, as well as the broader social, cultural and political systems in which it occurs [12-13].



**Figure 2. Analytical Framework**  
**Policy identities and perceived ethical responsibilities**

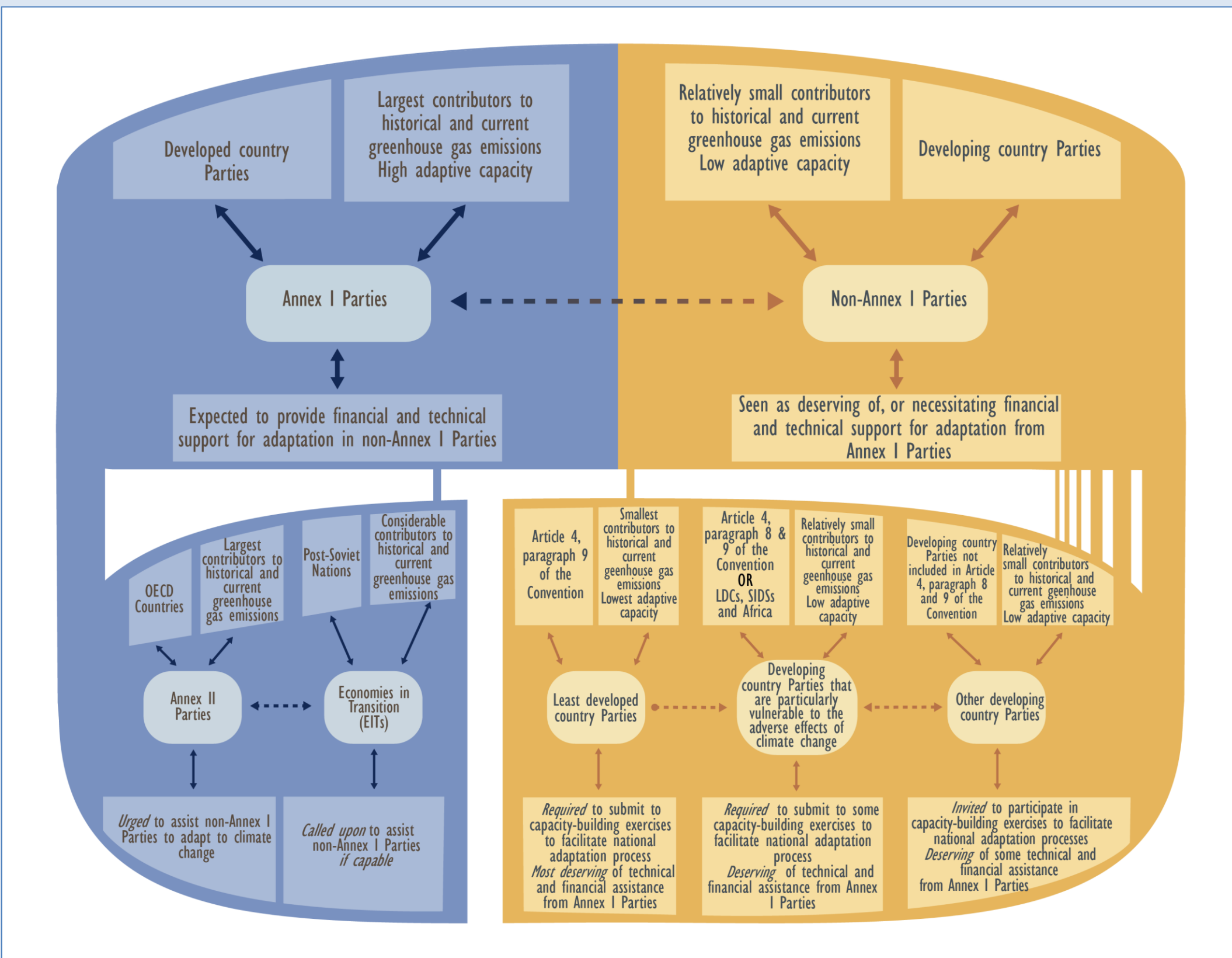
Identity is assumed to be relational; stemming from discursive juxtapositions, through processes of linking and differentiation of the self to others. Accordingly, identities are (re)constructed and prioritized in policy discourses, helping to characterize what constitutes legitimate actions or responses to address the problems formulated. This construction of identities and their effects can be assessed by extracting the spatial, temporal and ethical elements that constitute them, displaying them, and mapping their inter-connectedness [14].

## Results

**Table 2. Adaptation work stream mandates**

| Steps                                      | Text Stream  | Coding   | Journaling   |
|--|--|--|--|
| <b>KEY STEPS: Familiarization</b>          | All KEY STEP decision texts (both CP and CMP)  | Skim through all decisions. Only code those paragraphs that directly reference adaptation and/or indigenous peoples. Look for elements that constitute identities, and consider the themes and topics addressed. | Keep track of general impressions and thoughts on the texts (reflective exercise), and keep notes on coding strategy development.            |
| <b>KEY STEPS: Second read-through</b>      | KEY STEP decisions (CP only)   | Perfect the coding strategy by eliminating repetitive codes and incorporating new codes as needed. Only code those paragraphs that directly reference adaptation and/or indigenous peoples.                      | Keep track of general impressions and thoughts on the texts (reflective exercise), and keep notes on coding strategy development.            |
| <b>WORK STREAMS: In depth read-through</b> | KEY STEPS (the Convention and Kyoto Protocol only) & All adaptation work stream decision texts | Review of coding in the Convention and Kyoto Protocol texts, and code through all adaptation work stream decisions. Give particular attention to language, identities, themes, trends, and topics.               | In a second research journal, take detailed notes on the relevant elements in decision texts with regards to the thesis aims and objectives. |

Data was then reviewed for two analogous purposes: **(1)** to extract the identities created by the discourse on adaptation in CP decisions, and map out the relationships between them; and **(2)** to present a visual depiction of the trends apparent in the adaptation discourse over time in the form of a storyboard/timeline.



**Figure 3. Adaptation discourse, identities and perceived ethical responsibilities in UNFCCC CP decisions**

These groups, or identities, are for the most part formalized in Article 4 of the Convention. Specific responsibilities, obligations, and commitments, and expected transactions between the groups are then negotiated over time within the bounds of what these identities, and what the principles that guide them allow. These principles, listed in Article 3 of the Convention, are deeply rooted in the politics of contemporary international relations and global environmental governance. Implicit principles governing the Convention include the polluter pays principle, and the principle of sovereign equality of states.

## Discussion

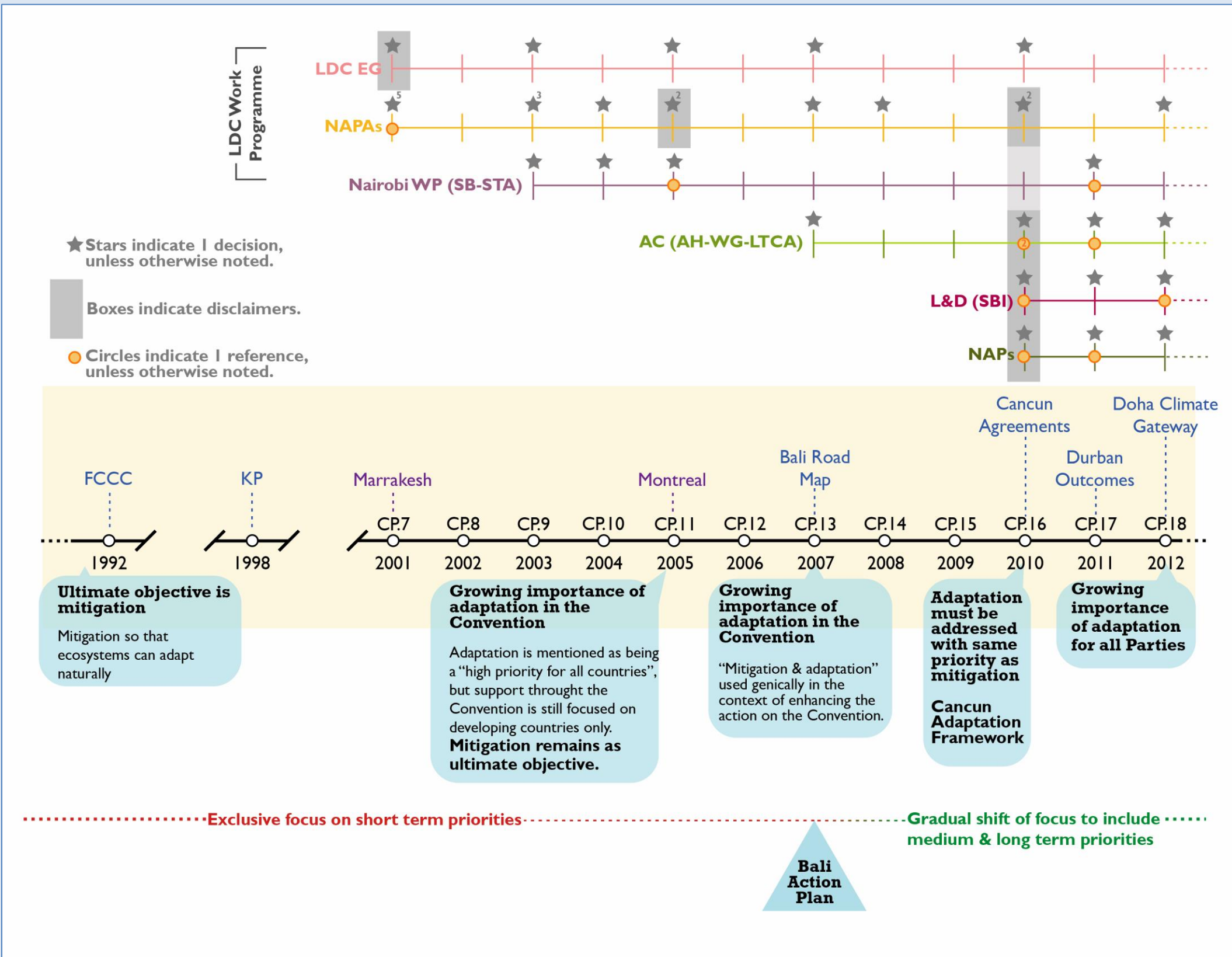
The increasingly explicit recognition that approaches to adaptation should be sensitive to, and inclusive of, traditional and indigenous peoples, knowledge and practices in CP decisions has normative effects that can contribute to capacity-building. This creates opportunities for meaningful consideration of indigenous peoples in the institutions’ committees and work programmes, that then make recommendations to the Parties to the Convention. It also engages countries to report on these issues domestically in the National Communications, NAPAs, and NAPs. The extent to which these exercises actually translate into action at the lower levels however, is largely dependant on external factors (such as domestic politics). **Adaptation funding remains exclusively aimed at non-Annex I Parties, meaning that access to adaptation support through the UNFCCC is not possible for indigenous peoples in Annex I Parties.**

## Methods

The texts examined in this thesis are all publicly available on the UNFCCC’s website in electronic format. The data examined here is made up of two streams of texts. The first consists of **all the decisions, from both the CPs and the CMPs, listed under the KEY STEPS** tab on the UNFCCC website’s main page on October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013. The second consists of **all the specific adaptation-related decisions listed under the PROCESS / Adaptation / Decisions & Conclusions** tabs on the UNFCCC website’s main page on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 2013.

**Table 1. Coding and journaling strategy**

| Steps                                      | Text Stream  | Coding   | Journaling   |
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**Figure 4. Adaptation discourse in UNFCCC CP decisions timeline**  
Stars indicate the frequency of ratification of adaptation work stream specific decisions at CP meetings over time; **Grey boxes** situate the three legal disclaimers found in the texts examined relative to their respective adaptation work streams; **Orange circles** indicate the frequency of references to traditional and/or indigenous peoples, practices, and knowledge made in the texts examined, but only those that relate explicitly to adaptation work streams (this does not include references made in the context of mitigation, or the implementation of the Convention in general).

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