

## Climate Change Responses: Mitigation and Adaptation for Whom?

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### Introduction

This brief summarises some recent critiques of our responses to climate change and highlights the ways in which the global poor, who will suffer the most from climate change, are being further marginalised as a result of mitigation and adaptation responses, through hierarchies and social stratification at all scales. Understanding and responding to these resulting “insults and injuries of intervention” (Marino & Ribot, 2012, p. 327) is an important new component in achieving sustainable development in a climate-changed world, along with the ongoing need to understand root causes of vulnerability (Ribot, 2014), double exposure to climate change and globalisation (O’Brien & Leichenko, 2000) and the social basis of disasters (Sen, 1981; Wisner et al, 2004).

### Mitigation

What we see, repeatedly, is that the negative externalities of projects that are targeted to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions fall on the most vulnerable groups in society. For example, the benefits of Clean Development Mechanisms such as REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) and REDD+ tend to accrue to outside interests, not local users, or lead to increased centralisation of entitlements (Corbera et al, 2007; Beymer-

Farris & Bassett, 2012) with many users excluded from forestry resources critical for their livelihood (Lyons & Westoby, 2014). The poorest groups are often displaced by renewable energy projects (de Sherbinin et al, 2011), and in both rich and poor countries the geographically and politically marginalised are disproportionately exposed to the risks of radioactive waste from nuclear power generation (Shrader-Frechette, 1994), often promoted as a form of clean energy. Similar issues may arise with the proliferation of carbon capture and storage.

### Adaptation

In an attempt to recognise the often marginalised yet resilient role of communities, donors have supported the implementation of adaptation projects, to protect wellbeing and livelihoods under climate change at the local level (McNamara, 2013). Community-based adaptation is an established field, with recent publications focusing on ‘scaling-up’ the lessons learned from such practices (Schipper et al, 2014).

However, this is without any critical analysis of the long term success of such interventions. Reflections on best practices and effective monitoring and evaluation of adaptation projects are still in their infancy (e.g. Conway & Mustelin, 2014; Lamhauge et al, 2012). Meanwhile, studies that extend back to the 1950s in sociology have shown emphasising community is flawed from the outset, unless there is critical understanding of, and action to reverse, the social context and dynamics, governance structures and power relations that impact on vulnerability. For example,

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community-based adaptation projects often ignore unequal access to livelihood resources and land tenure, particularly in parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America (Cannon, 2008), inequitable participation in decision-making processes (McDermott et al, 2013), and political disenfranchisement and elite capture (Dutta, 2009). As such, these projects often favour local elites, create community rifts, deepen social differentiation and exclusion, and result in maladaptation (Ensor & Berger, 2009). Further ignored is the dark side of the social capital that enables community adaptation: downward levelling norms, exclusion, and excessive obligations and restrictions (Portes, 1998).

### **For Whom?**

At a theoretical level, climate change responses at all scales are playing into, and reinforcing, ideas of the 'Other' (Said, 1978), allowing certain people to be more deserving of suffering: "humanity is thrust into pigeonholes, by which 'we' are human, and 'they' are not" (Bhabha, 1984, p. 93 quoted in Childs & Williams, 1997, p. 240). We, as residents in western nations with high adaptive capacity, tend to take for granted that certain populations are vulnerable and exposed, rather than acknowledge our role in uneven global systems of trade that produce these conditions (Ribot, 2014). Instead, governments are increasingly making exposed and vulnerable communities responsible for their safety and wellbeing, using resilience ideas to justify neoliberal policies and agendas (Cretney, 2014). Even more insidious and dangerous, is that these response to climate change can normalise conditions of poverty and exploitative power relations by having the goal of maintaining the status quo (Ribot, 2014). That is, while these responses attempt to prevent the negative impacts of climate change, they do not touch upon the negative impacts of social and geopolitical structures that came before and still exist.

Incorporating concepts such as building back better, adaptation deficit and resilience addresses some of these problems. However, until the aspirations and well-being of the poor and marginalised are placed centre stage, deeply-entrenched colonial legacies and top-down hierarchies will mean the most marginalised continue to suffer not only from climate change but also its questionable solutions. This raises the question of: mitigation and adaptation for whom? There is a desperate need for mitigation and adaptation interventions with the specific goal of improving the distribution of, and access to, power and livelihood resources. Anything else is scratching the surface at best, and at worse, deepening and endorsing pre-existing and damaging inequalities.

### **Recommendations**

We make the following four recommendations to policy-makers and practitioners:

1. *Recognise* that all climate change mitigation projects are not inherently positive, and *find ways* to urgently improve the equity aspects between and within countries;
2. *Work to* critically understand, and *respond to*, community-level power dynamics when designing and implementing adaptation projects;
3. *Recognise* that any development intervention takes a normative stance, and as such *ensure* that we work more explicitly to tease apart inequitable power relations that worsen poverty under climate change; and
4. *Explicitly recognise* that the impacts of climate change, and our responses to such, will lead to a redistribution of access to rights and resources, and thus *actively fight* for an equitable redistribution of entitlements, not their further concentration in the hands of the already powerful.

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