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Equity and climate change: Local adaptation issues and responses in the City of Lake Macquarie, Australia



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ABSTRACT

Equity in adaptation to climate change is one of the central issues in scholarly and policy debates about improving climate policy and practice. Although equity issues have now captured the attention of diversity of actors and sectors at the international level, they have received little attention in climate change adaptation which is most visible at the local community level. This paper provides a case study of the City of Lake Macquarie in Australia to investigate how different communities perceive climate change, how they are coping with the effects of climate change and how they are likely to respond to changes in the future. The paper demonstrates the predominance of individual actions over collective action, and the low-level of influence that poorer and disadvantaged groups have over climate change policies, even when they are most impacted. The paper concludes that the known institutional barriers to climate change adaptation should be extended to include equity concerns. This extension recognizes the importance of equity in hampering physical aspects of climate change adaptation as, perversely, low income people are likely to be disadvantaged by the loss of property value. Rather than simply adding another barrier, we suggest that in these situations, equity considerations should focus on procedural equity to become part of the solution. Residents in vulnerable localities saw procedural equity, particularly in the transparency of decision-making, involvement in decision-making processes and the provision of clear and accurate information by local governments on climate change, as

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being the most important steps to enhance equity in climate change adaptation practice.

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The governing of climate change at the urban scale is not taking place within a social, political, economic or material vacuum. Other processes of urbanization are shaping the conditions of possibility for acting on climate change.

[Bulkeley (2010, p. 37)]

1. Introduction

Climate change is a global problem with its impacts most visible at the local level. These impacts are physical, economic and social in character. One aspect of the impacts that has been largely overlooked in the climate change adaptation literature is equity, particularly in cities. Where equity has been considered, it is more often associated with vulnerability and the “iconography of fear”, rather than “the more mundane and chronic forms of injustice manifest in the urban environment” (Bickerstaff, et al., 2009, p. 594).

While much of the literature about equity has focused on the developed/developing country divide (Grubb, 1995; Müller, 2002; Baumert et al., 2003; Depledge, 2006; Audet, 2013), the existence of climate change vulnerability and the associated limited capacity to adapt to climate change concerns also exists within developed countries. The study is situated in a developed country, Australia. It involves the seventh largest metropolitan area (Newcastle/Lake Macquarie) in the country and the second largest metropolitan area in the state of New South Wales (NSW). The urban area has been at the forefront of climate change debates (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2003), but is also highly vulnerable in particular locations, as noted by Commonwealth of Australia (2011). Within this urban area, the Lake Macquarie City Council area is used as a case study to explore the following research questions:

1. Is equity discourse reflected in the current local, state and federal government policies of adaptation to climate change?
2. Are the collective activities that communities do to adapt to current and future climate change impacts equitable?
3. How can adaptation to climate change at the local government level be improved to generate outcomes that are more equitable?

This study contributes to strengthening the resilience of communities, particularly the disadvantaged groups, for the long-term sustainability of communities operating in a vulnerable ecosystem. The article begins with a discussion about equity and climate change adaptation, including the role of local government and community groups. The next section of the paper introduces the mixed-method approach adopted to answer the above three research questions. We then provide the context and history of Lake Macquarie City Council in relation to climate change impacts and adaptation policies. The results of implementing each research technique are presented in the following section, before an analysis of these results is undertaken using the three research questions as a structuring device for this section of the paper. The conclusion highlights the need to address equity concerns in local climate change adaptation actions, both in the procedures and in the substantive components of this adaptation.

2. Equity and climate change adaptation

Adaptation to climate change presents formidable dilemmas of justice, many of which are most visible and acute at local community levels (Paavola and Adger, 2002; Adger et al., 2003). The social,

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