



# Power and politics in climate change adaptation efforts: Struggles over authority and recognition in the context of political instability



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## ABSTRACT

Throughout the world, climate change adaptation policies supported by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have provided significant sources of funding and technical support to developing countries. Yet often the adaptation responses proposed belie complex political realities, particularly in politically unstable contexts, where power and politics shape adaptation outcomes. In this paper, the concepts of authority and recognition are used to capture power and politics as they play out in struggles over governing changing resources. The case study in Nepal shows how adaptation policy formation and implementation becomes a platform in which actors seek to claim authority and assert more generic rights as political and cultural citizens. Focusing on authority and recognition helps illuminate how resource governance struggles often have very little to do with the resources themselves. Foundational to the argument is how projects which seek to empower actors to manage their resources, produce realignments of power and knowledge that then shape who is invested in what manner in adaptation. The analysis adds to calls for reframing ‘adaptation’ to encompass the socio-natural processes that shape vulnerability by contributing theoretical depth to questions of power and politics.

## 1. Introduction

Adaptation programs have been developed around the world to create institutions and infrastructure for guiding responses to climate change. In developing countries, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has provided funding for National Adaptation Plans of Action (NAPAs) that sketch out priorities for individual countries to cope with (or capitalise upon) changing biophysical resources (Eakin and Lemos, 2010). These plans generally follow a UNFCCC template and begin with vulnerability assessments to chart existing biophysical hazards, and then evaluate who is most at risk from them (Ayers and Forsyth, 2009; Denton et al., 2014; FAO, 2007). Once vulnerabilities are known, the focus shifts to technical measures (i.e. infrastructure) and institutional design, including new national and regional level coordination bodies, and community based environmental management groups (Biagini et al., 2014; Eakin and Patt, 2011). As such, these internationally initiated and guided adaptation programs are fundamentally underpinned by the assumptions that one, biophysical change combined with marginalisation creates vulnerability to climate change, and two, the best way to adapt is through a variety of technical and institution building measures.

These two assumptions, while not inherently wrong, are somewhat misplaced given the political realities of many contexts on the front line of adaptation to climate change. The long tradition of political ecology and vulnerability studies has already thoroughly undermined the first assumption by showing that biophysical change is always mediated through a variety of social and political mechanisms (Forsyth, 2014; Ribot, 1995; Swyngedouw, 2010; Taylor, 2015; Watts, 1983). This work points to the socio-natural character of vulnerability and the need for international programs to focus more explicitly on how people seek to gain access to and control over changing resources. The second assumption about the merits of institution building has also been questioned by political ecologists (Cleave and Franks, 2005), but nevertheless remains an overwhelming priority in climate change adaptation circles (Adger et al., 2009; Agrawal and Perrin, 2009; Noble et al., 2014; Olsson et al., 2014). Adaptation projects attempt to bring stakeholders at different levels into cooperative arrangements (institutions) to govern resources that cross current jurisdictional boundaries (Agrawal and Perrin, 2009; Bulkeley, 2015; Eakin and Lemos, 2010; Striple and Bulkeley, 2013), underpinned by Ostrom’s work on design principles that show how good institutional design can promote successful management of collective environmental resources (Agrawal,

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2007; Ostrom et al., 1999). While the promotion of cooperative arrangements sounds perfectly reasonable, in many contexts, it is precisely these institutional rules and relationships that are hotly contested. Whether institutions succeed or fail has less to do with design principles (although they are also important (Forsyth, 2005)), and more to do with how social-political struggles play out within them. In the case study of Nepal presented below, I show how institution building alone cannot adequately guarantee adaptation outcomes and is an insufficient response to pressing adaptation needs.

I therefore argue for the need to refocus the premise of ‘adaptation’ to capture the intertwined biophysical and political processes that together shape adaptation needs.<sup>1</sup> Rather than efforts at responding to biophysical change, adaptation is profoundly a socio-natural process that shapes vulnerability and *which* changes adaptation efforts target (Nightingale, 2015b; Ribot, 2011, 2014; Taylor, 2015). If power and politics reshape the purpose of adaptation efforts, then adaptation becomes about adjusting to entangled socio-political contestations, biophysical change, livelihood desires, struggles for authority to govern change, and desires for social and political recognition by both those promoting programs and recipients of them. In this paper, I focus primarily on power and politics by developing a conceptualisation of the exercise of power based on struggles over authority and recognition. The analysis adds theoretical depth and empirical evidence to a small, but growing number of critiques that are attempting to reframe adaptation as both an intellectual and development project (Eriksen et al., 2015; Inderberg et al., 2014; Manuel-Navarrete and Pelling, 2015; O’Brien, 2012; Tschakert et al., 2013b).

Foundational to my argument is that projects which seek to empower actors to manage their resources, produce realignments of power and knowledge that then shape who is invested in what manner in those projects. Adaptation projects, no matter how technical or apolitical, cannot avoid such realignments. And it is precisely this dimension that institutional design fails to adequately regulate. The promotion of particular decentralised organizations and participatory user-groups to manage changing resources are technologies of governing that both reflect and promote these social and political realignments (Korf, 2010; Li, 2007). The success of well-designed adaptation and mitigation programs is contingent upon whether people will support and abide by new projects and programs; questions of power and politics that cannot be managed away through institutional design (see also Tschakert et al., 2016, 2013a). Perhaps most importantly, authority and recognition help illuminate how resource governance struggles often have very little to do with the resources themselves. Rather, gaining authority to govern a new resource user-group can be a goal in itself as a means for having one’s authority legitimated, as opposed to a desire to control resources for their own sake (Peluso and Lund, 2011; Vandekerckhove, 2011). Or, membership in a new adaptation program signals status and a sense that the state is supporting people in society, as opposed to the program bringing significant material benefits (Nightingale and Ojha, 2013).

The Nepal case is globally illustrative; it is a country targeted as high risk from climate change biophysical impacts, with poor infrastructure, a so-called under developed economy, and rapid rate social, economic and political change.<sup>2</sup> Many other countries in the Global

<sup>1</sup> In this paper I explicitly want to speak to the global community of climate change scholars and development practitioners and therefore I retain the nomenclature of ‘adaptation’. Others have persuasively argued for the problematic nature of the concept (Bassett and Fogelman, 2013; Ribot, 2011; Watts, 2015), but here my purpose is to engage with programs which bill themselves as ‘adaptation’ and therefore it is useful to probe what precisely people are ‘adapting’ to, and under what circumstances, within those programs.

<sup>2</sup> The 2015 earthquakes highlighted the inadequacies of the state’s disaster response capabilities and added another layer of vulnerability in Districts already deemed highly vulnerable to climate change. As this article is going to press, Nepal has just held local elections for the first time in nearly 20 years. The elections will radically reshape the institutional structure of local governance and therefore will have significant implications

South share similar challenges. Nepal’s adaptation programs are noteworthy in the extent to which every step has engaged some form of multi-stakeholder and participatory process, including bottom-up consultation exercises for the NAPA and the Local Adaptation Plans of Action (LAPA) (Dixit, 2010; GON/MoE, 2011a). The NAPA triggered the development of new organizations at all levels based upon institutional design principles intended both to foster wide-spread participation in adaptation activities (the LAPA is one such outcome), and to help link across scales of governance (Ayers and Forsyth, 2009; Ojha et al., 2015; Rutt and Lund, 2014). Yet these dimensions of good institutional design are unable to ensure that programs unfold as intended. Instead, adaptation programs tend to co-opt well established development efforts (both programs and their specific interventions) and in the process, fail to promote transformative change. Most importantly, power and politics are embroiled in all aspects of adaptation programs, including in their inception and design, making power constitutive of adaptation rather than an externality that requires post-implementation management.

In what follows, I first develop a theorization for understanding socio-political processes in adaptation programs based on struggles over authority and recognition. The subsequent section traces Nepal’s LAPA process (Local Adaptation Plans of Action) across scales from global geopolitics, through national processes, to adaptation programs at the grassroots. The case study shows how the urgency promoted by international donors to “get the institutions right” operates on the ground, becoming embroiled in international, national, and local tensions over what challenges are most pressing, which biophysical threats are most relevant and most importantly, who ought to make such decisions and carry out plans; tensions which can sabotage the best of institutional designs. While the empirical specificities will be different around the world, the Nepal case illustrates the importance of more theoretical and empirical attention to the influence of power and politics in not only shaping adaptation outcomes, but also how they are embedded within the institutions proposed, the measures adopted, and who is considered to require adaptation support or capable of guiding and managing environmental change (see also Shove, 2010). The analysis contributes theoretical depth to questions of power and politics and helps add to a reframing of ‘adaptation’ that can take seriously the socio-natural processes<sup>3</sup> that shape vulnerability.

## 2. Understanding power and politics in adaptation programs

The analysis in this article is limited to ‘adaptation’ as policy-specific projects aimed at helping people adjust to climate change.<sup>4</sup> Institutions I use in the sense most often adopted by other scholars of the commons and environmental governance: regularized patterns of behavior that derive from underlying rules and norms (Leach et al., 1999; Ostrom, 1990). These are usually codified into formal institutional forms such as community user-groups, but they should not be conflated with organizations (District Forest Offices, specific community user-groups) wherein institutional forms shape the functioning of these formal offices or groups. In other words, institutions shape the operation of organizations, but the two are not the same conceptually.

The ways that institutions are infused with power and politics is potentially a very large terrain of governance (see Eriksen et al., 2015). In internationally sponsored climate change adaptation contexts,

(footnote continued)

for adaptation programs. Nevertheless, attention to authority and recognition will be crucial to understand how governance is reconfigured post state restructuring.

<sup>3</sup> This paper focuses specifically on authority and recognition but is underpinned by an understanding of adaptation as a socio-natural process (Nightingale, 2015a, 2015b).

<sup>4</sup> More generally, adaptation refers to the actions and responses taken by individuals and collectives to environmental variability over time and space (Olsson et al., 2014), as opposed to something specific to climate change. For a good review of the literature on adaptation, its limitations, and its relationship to wider processes of change, see (Eriksen et al., 2015)

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