



Strategic localism for an uncertain world: A postdevelopment approach to climate change adaptation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 November 2011
Received in revised form 10 January 2013
Available online 15 February 2013

Keywords:

Postdevelopment
Climate change
Adaptation
Local
Aid
Development

ABSTRACT

Adaptation to climate change is being planned and implemented across the developing world. As billions of development aid dollars are being mobilised around this new theme there are risks that adaptation efforts of the development sector will result in familiar problems. In this paper we draw upon postdevelopment perspectives that critically consider development aid and the role of the development sector to scrutinise emerging approaches to adaptation. We suggest that a postdevelopment approach to adaptation contributes a much-needed analysis of the agendas that are shaping adaptation discourses and helps us to see nascent possibilities for adaptation that are already unfolding in diverse localities.

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1. Introduction

As the development sector turns its attentions to the potential impacts of climate change in the developing world, a whole suite of new programmes are being funded under the designation of adaptation to climate change. At its best adaptation is focused upon enhancing the adaptive capacity of communities who are facing increasing uncertainties as the climate changes and their environment is transformed. At its worst, adaptation is merely the new catch phrase that is being applied to all kinds of development aid programs, whether they genuinely address climate change or not. Either way, adaptation is being rolled out across the globe. Within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), developed nations have committed to providing around 100 bn USD per year from 2020 to support climate change adaptation and mitigation in the developing world (UNFCCC, 2009, 2011). To put it in perspective, this is an amount almost equivalent to total annual flows of overseas development assistance (World Bank, 2011).

One of the problems with adaptation, however, is that little work has been done to analyse the underlying assumptions of approaches to adaptation by the development sector. We see an urgent need to question the underlying assumptions of adaptation and to investigate the ideologies and agendas that are shaping adaptation discourses. Drawing on postdevelopment perspectives

we offer an analysis of adaptation in the development sector that reveals many familiar problems. In some instances adaptation is being used to reconstitute a growth driven development agenda without stopping to consider whether these approaches are appropriate in addressing either the challenges of climate change or the needs and aspirations of local communities. In order to demonstrate this point we draw upon recent statements of the World Bank and a review of a project related to adaptation in Tajikistan.

In this paper we explore how a rethinking of emerging approaches to adaptation through a postdevelopment lens can reveal possible alternatives for how to support adaptation processes in the developing world. Many communities are already struggling to adjust to climate change impacts such as increasingly unpredictable seasonal shifts and more intense climate events such as floods, droughts and storms (IPCC, 2012). Drawing on case studies from Nepal and Bangladesh we argue that many communities are already engaged in efforts to enhance their adaptive capacity to a range of challenges including climate change, but that these may be at odds with approaches supported by the mainstream development sector.

One of the challenges that we identify is that small-scale community efforts are seldom acknowledged to have impact beyond the local level. In the examples we discuss from Nepal and Bangladesh community led responses to environmental change are characterised by collective action, social networks, experimentation and advocacy. Such small-scale examples may seem inconsequential in the face of the global challenges of climate change adaptation, but a postdevelopment perspective contributes a way of seeing and valuing how these local examples could have global

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implications. While postdevelopment has been criticised for offering nothing but a romantic and politically correct vision of ‘the local’ (Pieterse, 2010), we take a different view. Localism entails a commitment to and valuing of the things that people do in the places where they are, without relying upon an overarching framework to introduce, validate or extend such localised ‘doings’. After all, when is anything not local? As geographers we cannot help but see how any and all development aid is grounded in place – whether it is the place of the doing of development in villages, towns and cities of the ‘Third World’, or other places where policies are made, funding decisions taken, or new themes and approaches circulated amongst development professionals.

Drawing on ideas of flat ontologies (Marston et al., 2005) in this paper we wish to think along the threads that connect actors across these diverse sites. A flat ontology rejects hierarchical models of scale and provides a framework for a strategic localism that challenges the idea that in order to be effective, climate change responses must be big. We wish to explore the possibility that global impacts can be achieved by local adaptation efforts while remaining engaged with the contingencies and specificities of local contexts, concerns and capabilities. We make use of poststructural social and political theory, particularly the work of Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006, 2011), Laclau (1991, 1996, 2000) and Butler (1993, 2000), to explore the idea of a strategic localism for climate change adaptation. Drawing on the idea that social change begins in the coming into being of new subjects, we explore how a resubjectivisation of the embodied and emplaced persons doing development may be a first step towards effectively supporting local adaptation efforts.

2. Climate change adaptation

There is significant international consensus that greenhouse gas emissions from humans during the past 200 years are changing the earth’s climate. In 2007 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a body formed out of the World Meteorological Organisation and United Nations Environment Program, stated that anthropogenic climate change is “unequivocal”. The rapidly increasing wealth of peer-reviewed literature on climate change has identified a range of significant changes that will unfold over the coming years and decades (Garnaut, 2008; IPCC, 2007, 2012; Richardson et al., 2011). Many of these changes have begun to occur and are having real impacts on communities around the globe.

The concern to adapt to climate change has been taken up by the development sector through a set of policies and practices that have come to be known as adaptation. Many theorists have drawn attention to the fact that there are many different definitions and conceptualisations of adaptation (Smit et al., 1999; Yamin et al., 2005; Fussler, 2007; O’Brien et al., 2008; Ireland, 2010, 2011). The most widely used definition is that of the IPCC (2001) which defines adaptation as “adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm and exploits beneficial opportunities”. The IPCC also recognises that there are different types of adaptation including, anticipatory, reactive, public, private, autonomous and planned (IPCC, 2001). The IPCC’s definition is a broad interpretation of adaptation that captures many different actions including longer term strategies such as planning for expected or predicted changes and short-term responses to extreme events which involve simply coping with impacts (Blaikie et al., 1994; Schipper, 2004). Various approaches and concepts, relevant to adaptation, are already being applied to address challenges related to climate variability.

There are a number of pre-existing terms and concepts that have been drawn upon in order to understand and implement adaptation. For example, the concept of vulnerability has been an

important feature in the development of adaptation theory and practice (for reviews of other key concepts see: Kelman and Gaillard, 2010; Gaillard, 2010). Burton et al. suggest that adaptation “refers to all those responses to climate change that may be used to reduce vulnerability” (1998, p. 5). When applied to social systems, vulnerability is broadly defined as the function of exposure and sensitivity to certain conditions. Within the adaptation literature the concept has been used to draw attention to the significance of the pre-existing context (Adger, 1999; Allen, 2006). Many communities face a range of long term challenges, such as conflict, poor governance and land degradation that pre-date or are unrelated to climate change. Drawing upon this context Ireland has explored how existing approaches to development are being considered as potential contributions to adaptation, (Ireland, 2010, 2011, 2012b; Ireland and Thomalla, 2011).

Different actors invariably focus on different aspects of adaptation and it is evident that the sheer breadth of adaptation conceptualisations is enabling vastly divergent approaches. Various development institutions are approaching adaptation in a wide range of different, and at points contradictory, ways (Ireland, 2012b). Some organisations suggest that adaptation should focus on large scale projects such as the construction of dams (Oxfam, 2011) or the climate proofing of infrastructure (Heltberg et al., 2009). Others argue that approaches to adaptation should be community based (Care International, 2012; IISD, 2011; Percy, 2011). The NGO CARE International argues for ‘community based adaptation’ which incorporates non-discrimination of marginalized and vulnerable communities; active, free and meaningful participation; and increased accountability in decision making (Percy, 2011). In this vein, a CARE employee stated at a conference on community based adaptation: “Adaptation is something that is radically new... ODA [Overseas Development Assistance] has been considered charity and not a high priority where promises have not been met... [Adaptation is] a movement of people seeking change” (CBA Conference, 28 March 2011). This perspective posits that adaptation efforts can avoid being yet another development approach predicated upon First World advisers, facilitators, and consultants helping impoverished and needy Third World subjects. For CARE adaptation lends itself to partnerships in which the “people seeking change” may come from anywhere.

3. Postdevelopment

In this paper we explore how postdevelopment perspectives could make an important contribution to the formulation of approaches to adaptation in the developing world. To date, much of the literature on climate change adaptation and development aid has reflected developmentalist paradigms. That is, the literature is often framed within a logic that situates idea of development aid (and often the development sector) as legitimate, natural and necessary. Examples include arguments to mainstream adaptation into development (Huq and Reid, 2004; Klein et al., 2007; Sietz et al., 2011) and also to integrate adaptation into disaster risk reduction (Thomalla et al., 2006; UNISDR, 2008; Venton and Trobe, 2008). Recent guidelines for the monitoring and evaluation of emerging adaptation efforts are also often framed in terms of what the development sector could do ‘better’ (Lamhugue et al., 2012; McGray and Spearman, 2011), rather than questioning problematic aspects of existing development aid frameworks. We suggest that these literatures, whilst making a contribution to adaptation theory and practice, often miss important political and ideological dimensions of development aid (Escobar, 1995a; Ferguson, 1990; Sachs, 1992). As we will explore, postdevelopment offers a unique set of perspectives on development aid that are critically mindful of dominant development discourses. These help us to scrutinise

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