



Adaptation as a political arena: Interrogating sedentarization as climate change adaptation in Central Vietnam

Lily Salloum Lindegaard¹

Danish Institute for International Studies, Østbanegade 117, 2100 KBH Ø, Denmark



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Climate change adaptation
Problematics of government
Governance
Sedentarization
Resettlement
Vietnam

ABSTRACT

Framings of climate change adaptation are increasingly being contested with implications for how adaptation is understood and carried out. Global framings are seen as producing a universalizing, technocratic domain, and an increasing body of literature de-frames these, highlighting their inherent assumptions and biases and arguing for better situating adaptation within particular historical and power dynamics. This article takes the logical next step, proposing a reframing of climate change adaptation as a political arena, and finds that particular framings determine the scope, targets and tools of adaptation. It uses a problematics of government approach, illustrated through the case of mandatory sedentarization of boat dwellers in Vietnam, which government officials present as climate change adaptation. This reframing historicizes and politicizes current adaptation, demonstrates how vulnerability is produced by political interventions and identifies how emic, rather than global, political rationalities heavily frame current adaptation initiatives. By contrasting it with accounts of the same sedentarizations that cleave more closely to dominant adaptation framings, the article illustrates how reframing adaptation as a political arena provides a more accurate basis upon which to engage with adaptation as an impetus and as intervention. These findings caution against drawing uncritically on dominant framings of climate change adaptation.

1. Introduction

Global climate change has been gaining attention for years. More recently, climate change adaptation – responding to impacts of climate change – has had a rising profile in fora from international institutions and negotiations to local governance to national policy and planning. Yet predominant global framings, linked to authoritative institutions such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and World Bank, are increasingly criticized as depoliticizing and universalizing (Pelling, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2013; Taylor, 2015). They present adaptation as “adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities” (IPCC, 2007).

Critical responses fall roughly within two camps: ‘reformist adaptation’ which works within existing political and economic systems and ‘transformational adaptation’ which fundamentally challenges the premises of adaptation. According to a literature review of key climate change journals, the first amounts to 27% of adaptation literature. When including mainstream biophysical framings to adaptation, the percentage of adaptation approaches working within existing systems skyrockets to 97%. Such framings are necessarily limiting (Bassett and

Fogelman, 2013). This article follows in the steps of transformational, much more critical responses – the remaining 3%. Authors working along these lines attempt to de-frame the dominant narrative of adaptation, arguing that the endeavor of adaptation is not self-evident. Rather, dominant framings of adaptation are built on particular ontologies closely tied to neoliberal and modernist thought which inherently shape approaches to adaptation.

This article takes the logical next step, proposing an approach to reframing climate change adaptation in continuation of emerging scholarship in this vein (Eriksen et al., 2015). Specifically, I propose viewing adaptation as a political arena, building on recent work grounded in adaptation practice (Artur and Hilhorst, 2012; Funder et al., 2018) and theory (Eguavoen et al., 2013). To operationalize this, I draw on a ‘problematics of government’ approach (Rose and Miller, 1992), which seeks to “diagnose an array of lines of thought, of will, of intervention” (Rose, 1999, p. 21) that frame spheres of government, including that of climate change adaptation. ‘Government’ in this account encompasses the actions by authorities of various sorts to order and regulate. It brings attention to the specific rationales that frame adaptation as a field for intervention, taking this not as a pre-given and universal field, but one framed by particular epistemological and moral

E-mail address: lili@diis.dk.

¹ Present address: University of Copenhagen, Department of Food and Resource Economics, Rolighedsvej 25, DK-1958 Frederiksberg C, Denmark.

imperatives. The scope, targets and tools of adaptation are demarcated through this framing. Examining its construction and origins is thus crucial for understanding what adaptation is and how it is carried out.

In the following pages, I offer further discussion on current adaptation literature and my approach to adaptation as a political arena. I then illustrate my approach through the case of the sedentarizations of Sampan dwellers – those living on flat-bottomed Sampan boats – in Vietnam, an intervention presented as adaptation by local authorities. I focus on the role of government officials in developing and implementing these interventions to understand how powerful global actors and political authorities frame adaptation. I initially present the case through a dominant adaptation framing and subsequently expound on the case through a problematic of government approach, excavating the political and historical antecedents of current adaptation. Finally, I offer a discussion on these disparate perspectives, drawing also on other accounts of the sedentarizations to illustrate the implications of particular adaptation framings.

I propose using the problematic of government approach to address multiple fundamental critiques of dominant adaptation framings. I find that, first, it historicizes and politicizes current programs of adaptation and the contexts into which they enter. Second, by examining how current conditions are fashioned over time, it demonstrates how vulnerability is produced by particular political interventions. Third, it identifies how emic political rationalities frame current adaptation initiatives, rather than assuming that global approaches inform adaptation practice. More broadly, it shifts our view of adaptation, allowing us to see framing as an act and the scope, targets and tools of adaptation as produced rather than self-evident. This exercise illustrates how activities labelled as adaptation can in practice be populated by a range of interests and ideas that have very little to do with either climate change or adaptation to it. By reframing adaptation, we are able to view these tendencies, examine the actual dynamics of adaptation implementation and imagine adaptation differently. Finally, the case suggests that utilizing ‘climate change adaptation’ uncritically as an academic concept is a mistake. To do so ignores that it is a produced concept with particular ontological underpinnings, resulting in narrow visions of and possibilities for adaptation in policy and practice.

2. Adaptation framings

Dominant global framings of climate change adaptation, such as the authoritative IPCC definition provided above, have been criticized as universalizing and technocratic (Swyngedouw, 2013; Taylor, 2015). They draw heavily on natural hazards literature of the 1970s and 1980s and contribute to a framework of adaptation as an external environmental shock to a separate, closed society (Bassett and Fogelman, 2013). They generally ignore the coproduction of social and environmental spheres, neatly excluding the production of vulnerability, the determinacy of human activity to how climate change impacts an area and indeed the production of climate change as an anthropogenic phenomenon at all (Taylor, 2015). This simultaneously “forestalls the articulation of divergent, conflicting, and alternative trajectories of future environmental possibilities and assemblages” (Swyngedouw, 2013, p. 5). In short, dominant global framings of adaptation largely ignore how current political and economic systems contribute to climate change and its impacts and thereby precludes fundamental challenges to these systems.

Instead, it proceeds from the managerial imperative to “establish clear boundaries upon which to stabilize policy recommendations” (Taylor, 2015, p. 65), which is at once terribly banal and politically potent. It emphasizes agency over structure and is generally technocratic and top-down. These characteristics lead to a conservative policy approach appealing to authorities of all stripes and depoliticization of hazards and their impacts (Bassett and Fogelman, 2013). Its culmination is the production of a field of governance that engages with topical questions of the technologies and timings of adaptation initiatives

(Swyngedouw, 2013), shoring up existing political and economic systems “in the face of supposedly exogenous threats” (Taylor, 2014, p. 63).

Critical perspectives respond by seeking to politicize, situate and historicize. Social vulnerability perspectives examine the socio-political and economic circumstances shaping people’s vulnerability, or exposure to climate change impacts (Marino and Ribot, 2012; Ribot, 2010), and how this is produced, reinforced and sometimes challenged (Eriksen et al., 2015). Others seek to historicize and politicize particular programs of adaptation and their impacts. Among these are those focusing particularly on resettlement, illustrating how resettlement as an adaptation solution can exacerbate households’ vulnerability to climate change (Rogers and Xue, 2015) reproduce existing social differentiation (Artur and Hilhorst, 2012) and provide an arena for institutional struggles over authority (Funder et al., 2018). Yet even while leveling critique, the vast majority of current literature works within the dominant framework presented above (Bassett and Fogelman, 2013). Few call into question the premise of adaptation, the “disarmingly simple” concept that “in the face of external environmental stimuli such as climatic change, everything and everyone must adapt, materially and culturally, or face unpalatable consequences” (Taylor, 2015, p. 56). One analysis suggests that only 3% of articles on climate change adaptation envision adaptation as requiring transformative socio-economic change (Bassett and Fogelman, 2013). Many critical voices thus seek reflexivity within the bounds of the concept they attempt to challenge. This necessarily limits their critique and the prospects for other visions and understandings of adaptation in literature and practice.

Therefore, I put forward a ‘problematic of government’ approach (Rose and Miller, 1992) to re-frame climate change adaptation from a “techno-managerial” (Taylor, 2015, p. 64) field to a political arena. Political in this sense refers to the task of governing and its inherent exercise of power. This follows in the footsteps of emerging literature that describes adaptation as a political or social arena (Artur and Hilhorst, 2012; Eguavoen et al., 2013; Funder et al., 2018), acknowledging that adjusting to and managing climate change impacts involves exercising authority over people, societies and economies as well as environments, and is thus inherently political (Eriksen et al., 2015). This consideration of adaptation as part of the activity of governance is supported by emerging findings that broader governance strategies and goals are expressed in adaptation efforts (Arnall, 2014; Funder et al., 2018). The problematic of government approach, drawing on the work of Foucault (Foucault, 1991), examines the intentionality of governing and the spheres which are constituted through these intentions, for example, the ‘will to improve’ and the resulting conservation/development nexus as described by Li (2007). It allows us to consider how a particular arena of government is delineated, whom or what this includes or disregards, and which types and tools of intervention it entails. By politicizing and historicizing, it shares commonalities with a social vulnerability approach. Yet rather than examining how climate change impacts are felt through “social and political-economic drivers of vulnerability” (Ribot, 2010, p. 48), the article seeks to understand how processes similar to those shaping vulnerability also delineate adaptation as a field for intervention. That is, it interrogates how political authorities frame adaptation and ensuing approaches to and types of adaptation interventions. This enables us to get at the fundamental questions driving debates on climate change adaptation, such as “What should we adapt to? Who or what should adapt? And how should adaptation occur?” (Pelling, 2011, p. 13).

Analyses of the exercise of political power in the problematic of government approach consider the rationales, programs and techniques of governing. In this article I focus on the rationales of governing, or political rationalities, which allow us to view the framing of the political arena of climate change adaptation. Political rationalities are the regularities which emerge in political discourse. Among other things, they describe the “ideals or principles to which government should be directed” (Rose and Miller, 1992, p. 179) and “fitting powers and

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7469020>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7469020>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)