



Micropolitics in collective learning spaces for adaptive decision making



Petra Tschakert^{a,b,e,*}, Partha Jyoti Das^c, Neera Shrestha Pradhan^d, Mario Machado^a, Armando Lamadrid^e, Mandira Buragohain^c, Masfique Alam Hazarika^c

^a Department of Geography, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA

^b School of Earth and Environment and School of Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of Western Australia, 35 Sterling Highway, Crawley 6009 WA, Australia

^c Aaranyak, 13 Tayab Ali Byelane, Bishnu Rabha Path, Beltola Tinali-Bhetapara Link Road, PO: Beltola, Guwahati 781 028, Assam, India

^d International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Khumaltar, Lalitpur, G.P.O. Box 3226, Kathmandu, Nepal

^e Center for International Climate and Environmental Research (CICERO), Gaustadalléen 21, 0349 Oslo, Norway

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 April 2016

Received in revised form 28 June 2016

Accepted 14 July 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Power

Politics of adaptation

Co-learning

Flood management

Participatory scenarios

Assam

ABSTRACT

Recent advances on power, politics, and pathways in climate change adaptation aim to re-frame decision-making processes from development-as-usual to openings for transformational adaptation. This paper offers empirical insights regarding decision-making politics in the context of collective learning through participatory scenario building and flexible flood management and planning in the Eastern Brahmaputra Basin of Assam, India. By foregrounding intergroup and intragroup power dynamics in such collective learning spaces and how they intersect with existing micropolitics of adaptation on the ground, we examine opportunities for and limitations to challenging entrenched authority and subjectivities. Our results suggest that emancipatory agency can indeed emerge but is likely to be fluid and multifaceted. Community actors who are best positioned to resist higher-level domination may well be imbricated in oppression at home. While participatory co-learning as embraced here might open some spaces for transformation, others close down or remain shut.

© 2016 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Successful adaptation to climate change does not only depend on reliable and accessible scientific and technical information but also on tools, processes, and practices that support the generation and exchange of knowledge and facilitate decision making. The chapter on foundations for decision making (Jones et al., 2014) of the Fifth Assessment Report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stresses the critical role of processes for ‘good adaptive decision making’. Evolving work on adaptation pathways (e.g. Wise et al., 2014; Barnett et al., 2014; Wyborn et al., 2016) calls for incorporating the knowledges, aspirations, and preferences of multiple actors into collectively desirable pathways of social-ecological changes. In such a pathways approach,

adaptation decision making is understood as a ‘series of adaptive learning decision cycles over time’, an ongoing process of learning, acting, and reflecting, in a context of complexity, uncertainty, and looming thresholds (Wise et al., 2014: 324). Such a process-oriented pathway approach will still fall short of its full potential, however, unless it explicitly acknowledges the influence of power relations and politics within such processes. Recent work on the politics of adaptation has begun to address this challenge, offering theoretical (see Eriksen et al., 2015) and empirical (e.g., Yates, 2012; Manuel-Navarrete and Pelling, 2015; Nagoda, 2015) contributions.

These advances re-frame adaptive decision-making processes from development-as-usual pathways to openings for transformational adaptation. They draw explicit attention to fields of unequal power relations that exist across social actors at all scales. Eriksen et al. (2015) highlight three contours of power in decision making – authority, knowledge(s) and subjectivity – each of which is mediated with the others through political tension. Theorizing the political dimensions of social change in the context of pathway thinking is urgently needed, including processes that perpetuate and exacerbate vulnerabilities. This entails conceptualizing the political in adaptation as dynamic, contested, embedded in

* Corresponding author at: School of Earth and Environment and School of Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of Western Australia, 35 Sterling Highway, Crawley, 6009 WA, Australia.

E-mail addresses: petra.tschakert@uwa.edu.au (P. Tschakert), partha@aaranyak.org (P.J. Das), Neera.Pradhan@icimod.org (N. Shrestha Pradhan), mrm5236@psu.edu (M. Machado), armando.lamadrid@gmail.com (A. Lamadrid), mandiraburagohain@yahoo.in (M. Buragohain), masfiq.assam@gmail.com (M.A. Hazarika).

processes of prioritization and exclusion, and attentive to the ways “politics may open up or close down spaces for transformational adaptation” (Eriksen et al., 2015: p. 530). Yet, nuanced constellations of power in the decision processes in which social actors negotiate, accept, or contest what may become adaptive action remain grossly understudied. In fact, a close examination of power relations that underline how knowledge sharing evolves and how policy processes unfold often remains regarded as “too controversial” (Nagoda, 2015).

This paper offers empirical evidence of decision-making politics in the context of collective learning for climate change adaptation in the Eastern Brahmaputra Basin of Assam, India. It first provides an overview of the intersecting conceptual domains of 1) the politics of adaptation, 2) social learning and participatory scenario building to challenge uneven power structures, and 3) emancipatory agency and deliberate social transformation. The paper then proposes a conceptual framework to more closely examine power dynamics or what we call ‘micropolitics’ of adaptation, borrowing from Horowitz (2011). Next, we introduce our case study in Assam and then examine participatory learning spaces between rural communities, researchers, NGO members, and district-level disaster risk managers as part of a larger research project entitled HICAP (Himalayan Climate Change Adaptation Programme).¹ We end with methodological recommendations and conclusions.

2. Contexts for adaptive decision making

2.1. The politics of adaptation

A focus on decision-making politics requires not only broad understanding of the various causes of multidimensional vulnerabilities, but also a keen eye for processes that reproduce vulnerabilities across scale (e.g., Ribot, 2014; Olsson et al., 2014; Schipper et al., 2014). According to Eriksen et al. (2015), these practices are best observed through three distinct lenses: knowledge(s), authority, and subjectivities. There is growing consensus in the academic and practitioner communities highlighting the value of incorporating different types of *knowledge* into adaptation planning and decision making. Local knowledge and lay understandings, including embodied experiences of altered environments, often deviate significantly from the ‘expert,’ scientific knowledge of practitioners in the fields of disaster risk management, urban planning, or rural and urban development. Collective learning and co-production of knowledge aim to bridge the gap between different fields of knowledge, values, and experiences (e.g. Fazey et al., 2010; Manuel-Navarrete, 2013; Tschakert et al., 2013, 2014). *Authority* refers to how power is operationalized through various actors exerting agendas and influencing outcomes in adaptation decision making. Finally, *subjectivities* demonstrate how individuals and entire populations are viewed, labeled, and positioned vis-à-vis programs and policies, through the exercise of power and disciplining practices, discourses, and cultural norms (Butler, 1997; Nightingale and Ojha, 2013). In the context of climate change, the notion of subjectivities typically emerges when vulnerable populations are cast as passive and ignorant victims, or even villains.

Despite recognition of these three dimensions, the politics of adaptive decision making and how they play out in practice remain poorly understood. One explanation is that power, embedded in and exercised through everyday social relations and mediated by culture and history, generates dynamics that are typically not captured in snapshot vulnerability and adaptation studies (Tschakert et al., 2013). Easily overlooked are dynamics that entail

the production of distinct subjects and subjectivities, and processes of subjection that determine whose voice, knowledge, and claims are prioritized and whose are excluded (e.g. Cote and Nightingale, 2012; Mosberg and Eriksen, 2015). Moreover, most adaptation programs and projects remain entrenched in technocratic, apolitical adaptation and development discourses and practices that are ill-equipped to reveal how power is challenged, often because of donor pressure to produce clear results to feed into policy recommendations and solutions (Godfrey- Wood and Naess, 2016). Yet, closer attention to when, how, and by whom subjectivities, authorities, and elite control are contested (Nagoda, 2015; Manuel-Navarrete and Pelling, 2015) and outside and expert framings of risk are resisted (Barnett et al., 2014) would provide better insight into how politics shape adaptation successes and failures. Deep-seated local power dynamics not only control the space in which some actors exercise more power than others but also inform as to who aligns with dominant framings and for whose benefit. For instance, in her work on adaptation policies in Nepal, Nagoda (2015) found that better-off households tended to favor technological solutions to climatic changes while poorer and low caste farmers, and also often women, wished for reduced social inequalities and oppression, yet were largely excluded from decision-making processes.

2.2. Learning and visioning for climate change adaptation

Empirical and contextual studies on the politics of adaptation require nuanced methodological approaches that reveal and question power dynamics, such as elite capture. This includes methodologies that explicitly address structural inequalities (Tschakert et al., 2013). However, scholarship on climate change adaptation has only recently begun to embrace participation and incorporate vital lessons from related, yet often untapped fields, particularly development studies, with long traditions in examining entrenched power differentials. Most valuable insights stem from participatory development and participatory research methodologies that explicitly acknowledge complex power relations while attempting to identify openings in social relations that allow for shifts in these relations to occur (e.g. Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Kesby, 2005; Kindon et al., 2007; Askins and Pain, 2011). Participatory performance, in particular, has explored embodied and new subjectivities, injustices, and participatory politics of co-learning, for instance through theatre (e.g., Boal, 1985; Franks 2015).

Lessons from development studies have inspired social and collective learning approaches in natural resource management and adaptation efforts, particularly in the global South; they encourage the co-production of knowledge between local social actors (i.e. marginalized and vulnerable groups), scholars, and practitioners and can challenge uneven power structures (e.g., Rist et al., 2006; Fazey et al., 2010; Reed et al., 2010; Cundill, 2010; Lebel et al., 2010; Tschakert et al., 2014). Eriksen et al. (2015) attribute great potential to such social learning processes to resist domination and open up spaces for social transformation. Similarly, Gillard et al. (2016) recommend social learning and reflexivity in climate change responses, stressing social fields within which power and politics are enacted. Core aspects of learning-centered approaches relevant for climate change studies are: processes of shared sense making of complex social-environmental changes, iterative cycles of learning and reflection, attention to social differentiation, inequitable power relations, authority, diverse tools and methods, skilled facilitation, and clear visions for future change (Ensor and Harvey, 2015).

Most promising for developing visions for future change are engagements with possible future realities that are locally grounded and hence allow for ‘situated learning’. In the context

¹ See acknowledgements.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7469275>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7469275>

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