



# Emerging meta-organisations and adaptation to global climate change: Evidence from implementing adaptation in Nepal, Pakistan and Ghana



Abrar S. Chaudhury<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Marc J. Ventresca<sup>c</sup>, Thomas F. Thornton<sup>a</sup>, Ariella Helfgott<sup>a,b</sup>, Chase Sova<sup>a,b</sup>, Prajwal Baral<sup>d</sup>, Tahir Rasheed<sup>e</sup>, Jasper Ligthart<sup>f</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford, South Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3QY, UK

<sup>b</sup> CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS), University of Copenhagen Faculty of Science, Department of Plant and Environmental Sciences, Rolighedsvej 21, DK-1958 Frederiksberg C, Denmark

<sup>c</sup> Saïd Business School and Wolfson College, University of Oxford, Park End St., Oxford OX1 1HP, UK

<sup>d</sup> The Global Climate Change Policy Team (GCCPT), The World Bank, Washington, D.C., USA

<sup>e</sup> Leadership for Environment and Development (LEAD), LEAD House, F-7 Markaz, Islamabad, Pakistan

<sup>f</sup> University of Humanistic Studies, Universiteit voor Humanistiek, Postbus 797, 3500 AT Utrecht, The Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

As developing countries move from policy to implementing adaptation to climate change, formal operational structures are emerging that exceed the expertise of any one actor. We refer to these arrangements as 'meta-organisations' that comprise many autonomous component organisations tackling adaptation. The meta-organisations set standards, define purposes, and specify appropriate means-ends criteria for delivering adaptation. Using empirical data from the three cases, Nepal, Pakistan and Ghana, the study identifies and analyses six attributes of the meta and component organisational structures. We argue that organisational structures are crucial to understanding adaptation, specifying policy and implementation. Our analysis demonstrates that while each country promotes similar objectives, the emerging structures are quite distinct, shaped by country-specific attributes and issues that lead to different outcomes. Nepal's priority for a formal process has come at the cost of delayed implementation. Pakistan's devolved approach lacks legitimacy to scale up the process nationally. Ghana's use of existing decentralised structures and budgets relegates adaptation below other development priorities. These divergent structures arise from the different needs for legitimacy and accountability, and the relative priority attached to adaptation against other needs.

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## 1. Introduction

Significant progress has been made since the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 in expanding our understanding of the adverse effects of climate change and the links between human and ecological systems (Adger, 2006; Berkes and Folke, 1998; Folke, 2006; IPCC, 2013). As policy moves from theory and diagnosis to implementation in developing countries, solutions that have been negotiated globally are unlikely to work well unless they are owned locally (Adger et al., 2005; Ostrom, 2010). Developing countries now have the added responsibility of designing effective national and local adaptation strategies consonant with local institutions and environments as well as meeting their substantial development deficits (Adger et al., 2003; Conway and Mustelin, 2014; Meyer and

Rowan, 1977; Soysal, 1994). This responsibility is important and urgent because direct funding from international agencies, such as the Green Climate Fund, place developing countries in the driving seat for identifying and implementing solutions.

The adaptation response of developing countries is emerging slowly through a variety of formal and informal initiatives. Many of the least developed countries (LDCs) have formulated a National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) under the guidelines of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to meet their most urgent and immediate needs (UNFCCC, 2015). Some countries are taking longer term approaches by prioritising adaptation within existing development programmes (FAO, 2013; Mitchell and Maxwell, 2010) or by developing National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) exemplified by Bangladesh and Kenya. Others focus on stand alone, donor-funded projects that target specific problems.

Despite variation across countries, a characteristic common to all the adaptation initiatives is the uncertainty and complexity of

\* Corresponding author at: Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford, South Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3QY, UK.

E-mail address: [abrarchaudhury@gmail.com](mailto:abrarchaudhury@gmail.com) (A.S. Chaudhury).

climate change, which exceeds the expertise and capability of any one organisation, discipline, or policy authority. Tackling this ‘wicked’ challenge (Rittel and Webber, 1973) requires active participation from many diverse and autonomous actors, such as policy makers, government, private sector, international/local non-governmental organisations (I/NGOs), donors, local communities and researchers. To manage these actors along with their complex relationships, and to seek legitimacy for climate action amongst competing priorities, authorities are inclined to establish formal goal-driven implementation structures (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). These structures have many of the features that characterise formal organisations, such as aims, rules, reporting systems, monitoring and evaluation procedures, to align all their activities. Yet they rely on autonomous actors (typically other organisations) to implement these initiatives while each has a different organisational scope, agenda, measures of success, language, and approach. This paper refers to this operational arrangement as a ‘meta-organisation’ comprised of autonomous components.

This usage of meta-organisation starts from the premise that states are complex organisations (Evans et al., 1985), to emphasise that the intentions of national governments and their agencies are realised with difficulty through early prototype policy initiatives such as versions of NAPAs and NAPs. Our use of the meta-organisation concept in this paper, adapted from previously published work, displaces national government from the conventional starting point used most commonly. The meta-organisations often work by setting standards, defining purposes, and specifying appropriate means-ends criteria for inter-organisational and community design (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2005, 2011; Gulati et al., 2012). They seek effectiveness by encouraging the component actors to adapt to their objectives, structure and relations, whilst also striving for legitimacy with international and national agencies (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

Gulati et al. (2012) suggest that these meta-organisations may be more formally and tightly-coupled through hierarchies and incentives. We argue that the meta-organisation is a looser arrangement of diverse organisational actors, often convened by a national government authority but extending beyond that authority. The meta-organisation is also a source of complexity because its overarching objectives may conflict with the usual internal goals and criteria of each component actor (Donaldson, 2001) and so provide both opportunities and incentives for actors to resist, co-opt the initiatives, or implement in ways that serve other agenda and that have unintended consequences (Selznick, 1949). For example, government agencies faced with budgetary concerns often prioritise programmes that meet short-term goals at the expense of better long-term initiatives. Sharing information is also time consuming and costly for many private sector actors, which may cause conflict. Country and project managers often fail to recognise these operational arrangements as organisations let alone meta-organisations. This lack of recognition further increases the difficulties of managing adaptation initiatives across agencies. This framework has important implications for policy and implementation as the meta-organisations invariably extend their influence to actors and activities well beyond those identified in any formal design (Scott, 2013).

This wider influence of meta-organisations may produce unforeseen responses and effects that are important when viewed in the large. These emergent patterns of behaviour are complex. Emergent in this sense means that they cannot be predicted by simply studying the individual parts of the system (Cilliers and Spurrett, 1999). Furthermore these patterns can arise without intent or overview. Analysing adaptation initiatives, without attending to the role and influence of the component actors limits the view of the implementation challenges. In many respects

designing effective implementation presents a classic collective action problem (Imperial, 1999; Olson, 1965) and is well suited to analysis under the organisational lens.

### 1.1. Research gap

We have some research-based knowledge about the intend and aspirations of national initiatives (Conway and Mustelin, 2014). Despite the importance of such initiatives, there is little research on how emerging organisational structures in climate adaptation evolve and function, which is why we have integrated theory with empirical evidence against the background of published work. This includes the way diverse actors interact within a common framework, innovate, manage interdependency and information flow that produce capacity, develop aims and objectives, and recognise pivotal points (Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003; Scott, 2013). Contemporary literature characterises arrangements of actors much as we define meta-organisation; for example, loosely-coupled systems, networks, regimes, communities, ecosystem, co-management, clusters, ecologies and constellations (Agrawal, 2010; Berkes, 2009; Campbell, 1998; Folke et al., 2005; Haas, 1989; Moore, 1996; O’Riordan and Jordan, 1999; Ostrom, 2005; Scott and Carrington, 2011; Slater and Narver, 1995). Empirical research on these actor arrangements, however, is still preliminary, with scant systematic study from which to extract practical lessons (Gulati et al., 2012). At best the lessons learned, recommendations and advice offered from current adaptation practice and the development of national programmes are rudimentary (Conway and Mustelin, 2014; UNFCCC, 2014). Even where initiatives have been formally designed, their effectiveness is unknown because they are new (Huntjens et al., 2012) and need prolonged follow-up to allow considered responses (Pierson, 2004).

The meta-organisation represents a stronger structure than informal networks that have no hierarchy or organisational element (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011) but not so strongly unified as to become a formal institution. They are the ‘solutions’ to new commitments and strategies for climate change interventions and hence are novel. Our attention on assemblies of active actors as an organisation or partial organisation (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011) allows us to make use of the structural features of meta-organisations in a systematic way using established analytical methods. The research focus on these meta-organisations is also relevant and timely because their designs and impacts on implementation are still at an early stage. The structures tend to be ad hoc and contingent on complex contextual conditions, hence provide little data on their effectiveness.

In addition to the paucity of research, there is little consensus on what adaptation can or should mean, which highlights the complexity involved (Smit and Pilifosova, 2003; Smithers and Smit, 1997). This ambiguity about basic definitions, indicators, and ‘what will count’ as effective is common in complex policy fields (Haas, 1989; Young, 2002). However, as this process matures through repetition and iteration, a recognised field for adaptation is likely to emerge (Fligstein and Mcadam, 2012), leading to strong norms and conventions, to guide implementation strategies and outcomes (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983; Giddens, 1979). The meta-organisations are the site and focus for these developments. These early solutions and settlements have implications for a tipping point, when global norms and conventions for climate change adaptation are likely to consolidate and become widely adopted (Suárez and Utterback, 1995) without necessarily offering improved performance (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) or the best fit with the local institutions (Ostrom, 2005). However, once established the momentum of such policy conventions often persists, the modern equivalent of Weber’s (1978) ‘iron cage’: Structures of

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