



Responding to climate variability and change in dryland Kenya: The role of illicit coping strategies in the politics of adaptation



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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the role of 'illicit' activities in shaping vulnerability dynamics and exemplifies the role of subjectivities and authority in the politics of adaptation. Through drawing on data from several areas in Kitui County in Kenya, the article shows how people are able to use illicit strategies very differently, with differential outcomes on their vulnerability. We suggest that this dynamic has important political dimensions in terms of how authority, legitimacy, subjectivity and social status are reproduced or challenged through the daily practice of how individuals and households within a village engage in strategies to manage shocks and change. We use the term 'illicit' here to emphasize that some activities carried out to cope with shocks and change in the study area, namely bush-meat hunting, home-brewing, charcoal production, prostitution, forest uses and theft, are actually subject to legal or social sanctions and repercussions because they are counter to statutory and/or customary law and moral codes. What is seen as socially acceptable locally (and by whom) however, and what sanctions can be expected, is malleable as a result of a dynamic interplay between statutory and customary law and social norms, subjectivity and environmental conditions, which do not always coincide. People may use this to their advantage differentially. Engaging in illicit activities can alter subjectivity and authority, as people are ascribed roles characterized as 'immoral' or 'criminal', which in turn may affect their social standing and authority in the community. Illicit strategies are, however, also in part an arena where people assume authority and control over their own circumstances and resist rules of what is socially acceptable or not. Longer-term implications of the illicit coping strategies identified in this article were found to be contradictory and unpredictable, multifaceted and complex, particularly in terms of social differentiation and vulnerability. Coping strategies that might make a person or household less vulnerable on one time scale, might make them more vulnerable on another, thereby illustrating that adaptation is not a linear nor static process.

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1. Introduction

The way that local inequity, vulnerability and poverty traps are generated is a central concern in recent climate change literature, as reflected in the latest IPCC report (Olsson et al., 2014). In this paper, we argue that the politics of adaptation are key to explaining the mechanisms through which such local differentiation occurs as part of adaptation processes. We investigate the politics surrounding 'illicit coping strategies' in a dryland area in Kenya, in terms of how, during recurrent droughts, some people are pushed into activities that are contrary to statutory and/or customary law and social norms, with longer term impacts on vulnerability.

Our focus is on the role strategies employed by individuals and households to manage shocks and change play in the adaptation process, in particular how people are able to engage in illicit strategies in different ways, with differential outcomes on their vulnerability. We view adaptation as a social and political process of how people manage multiple socio-environmental changes, including climate variability and change. This process forms part of the vulnerability context, altering the social distribution of vulnerability conditions as well as the social and environmental drivers of vulnerability (Eriksen, 2013; Eriksen et al., 2015; O'Brien et al., 2007). 'Coping strategies', here defined as particular responses or activities employed by individuals or households during periods of stress, form an important part of the longer-term adaptation process of adjusting to changing conditions (Adger et al., 2003, 2009; Eriksen et al., 2005; Zheng et al., 2014; Ziervogel et al., 2006). Such strategies are not only restricted to periods of

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stress, such as during drought, but they are often intensified in such instances (Eriksen et al., 2005).

The social dynamics around who comes to engage in particular activities have important political dimensions in terms of how authority, legitimacy, subjectivity and social status are reproduced or challenged through daily practice. Recognising that rich, influential or less vulnerable people may also engage in illicit activities, sometimes to great economic benefit and escaping sanction, our interest here is in the dynamics of how the more vulnerable people in a community may be further marginalised or alternatively may reduce their vulnerability in some respects through engaging in particular activities. This provides an entry point for understanding how social differentiation and relations between households affect adaptation processes within a community and how vulnerability patterns can be both entrenched and altered. Rather than seeking to measure the outcome on vulnerability distribution per se at any point in space and time, we focus on discerning the processes through which households end up in particular trajectories that may either entrench, or reduce, their vulnerability over time.

Vulnerability can be seen as emerging from the interaction between contextual conditions and processes within which climate variability and change are experienced, as well as the different strategies people use to manage change and build their lives (Gallopín, 2006; Hinkel, 2011; Klein, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2007). In particular, inequality in access to resources, decision-making processes, and effective coping strategies make outcomes of crises highly uneven (Eriksen et al., 2008; Liverman, 2001; Ribot et al., 2009; Tol et al., 2004). It has been argued that populations that are struggling to cope effectively with current climate variability are also facing the greatest task of coping with and adapting to future climatic challenges (Cooper et al., 2008). Hazards and stress induced by climate change manifest themselves in two major ways for rural households: by reducing existing livelihood options, and by inducing greater volatility and unpredictability in streams of livelihood benefits (Agrawal and Perrin, 2009). Inability to rebuild assets in the face of successive shocks, such as drought in conjunction with other socio-environmental stressors, may lead many households on a downward livelihood trajectory (Carter et al., 2007; Olsson et al., 2014; Pelling, 2011). At the same time, other groups may in fact capitalize on and benefit from a crisis or repeated crises driven by converging social and environmental stressors, creating diverging livelihood trajectories (Eriksen and Silva, 2009; Olsson et al., 2014).

We are here mainly concerned with how the exercise of power influences this dynamic, and in particular how illicit strategies become an arena for both reproducing and challenging authority and subjectivity. Past studies have documented how access to response strategies depends on an intersection of factors such as gender, age, health status, access to resources, power, social and economic capital, skills and social networks (Agrawal and Perrin, 2009; Goulden et al., 2009; Harvey et al., 2014; Ziervogel et al., 2006). Importantly, culture, such as gender regimes, is found to have an important role in determining the types of response strategies employed by groups, households or individuals in a community (Ensor and Berger, 2009; Gabrielsson, 2015; Heyd and Brooks, 2009; IFRC, 2014). A focus on authority and subjectivity allows us to understand how such social characteristics, when translated into social position in the local community and authority to make decisions – and hence ability to access viable coping strategies in future – may be reproduced or challenged when individuals engage in activities that risk social or legal sanctions.

Authority captures the operation of power in competition for influence and legitimacy in decision-making (Eriksen et al., 2015).

Authority is continuously re-asserted and challenged in practical actions, and power is exercised both as 'power over' and 'empowerment'. Subjectivities, such as class, gender and ethnic background serve to order society into hierarchies, and hence also drive inequalities and determine rights and whose voices are heard (Nightingale and Ojha, 2013). Such subjectivities are imposed by others as part of efforts to gain authority, but equally there is an internal side of people either complying with, contesting, or assuming different subjectivities. We suggest that the interlinked processes of how people claim and are assigned social positions in the local community – such as by gender, socio-economic status, education, ethnic background or clan membership – are important both in determining which strategies they have access to and with what authority they can legitimise those practices as 'acceptable'. These practices in turn come to subject people as, for example, 'good farmers', 'poor' or 'immoral', affecting their social position and long-term vulnerability.

Our approach allows us to explore how human populations are not passive victims of climate change, but active agents who employ a variety of strategies to secure their wellbeing in the face of social, economic, political or climatic challenges. Through these strategies, many people are successful in buffering negative effects on their livelihoods, retain influence over their own circumstances, and challenge existing authority and power relations. However, marginalized people may also re-assert their position in society by employing coping strategies that, although offering short-term gains, may lead to sanctions, erosion of their social status and/or harm to the environment, which in turn might exacerbate longer term vulnerability both at individual and community level (Adger et al., 2009; Barnett and O'Neill, 2010; Carr, 2008; Eriksen and Lind, 2009; Goulden et al., 2009; Olsson et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2014).

We use the term 'illicit' here to emphasize that some activities carried out to cope with shocks and change are actually subject to legal or social sanctions and repercussions because they are counter to statutory and/or customary law and moral codes. Our focus is hence broader than what is 'illegal' according to statutory or criminal law. It also includes that which is forbidden by customary law, rules or norms, recognising that at the local level, moral codes and customary rules may be at least as strictly enforced and be as important as statutory laws in terms of repercussions on people's livelihoods and social status. Importantly, 'illicit' is closely linked to what is 'socially acceptable', though the two do not coincide exactly. Rather than denoting that which is *forbidden* by customary and statutory law, 'socially acceptable' here refers to that which is considered to be appropriate or acceptable by the great majority of a population. This distinction is essential for understanding the social dynamics explored in this study. Illicit activities may or may not be socially acceptable in the context of particular circumstances (i.e. drought), which in turn influence the social repercussions of being involved in these.

In a livelihoods context, the concept 'illicit coping strategies' has previously been used in an UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Unit report on refugee livelihoods, where the illicit activities referred to are crime, violence, illegal collection of natural resources such as firewood, theft of crops, cattle and other assets and selling sexual services (De Vriese, 2006). The potentially adverse effects of coping strategies and climate change adaptation, commonly referred to as 'maladaptation' (Barnett and O'Neill, 2010), have also been discussed in recent literature, and illegal activities such as poaching, trafficking of wildlife, drugs or humans, corruption and illegal fishing, have been investigated in a number of disciplines such as law, criminology, psychology, social anthropology, political science and so on (e.g. Akyeampong, 2005; Kuperan and Sutinen, 1998; Leeson and Sobel, 2008; Lindsey et al., 2013; Wato et al., 2006; Watson et al., 2013). Yet, the role of illicit

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