

Changing focus? How to take adaptive capacity seriously

Evidence from Africa shows that development interventions could do more

Key points

- Adaptation to climate change should not be addressed in isolation: climate change should be part of forward-looking planning
- Development interventions could be designed and implemented to build people's capacity to adapt to any change – including climate change
- A shift is needed from technology transfer to a focus on people and their agency – which must include better analysis of power and institutions

Change is a constant in the lives of rural people in Africa. They have had to cope with both sudden shocks such as war, rain failures and food price spikes and with long-term stresses such as increasing population pressure on land, declines in their terms of trade, and the degradation of land and water. They will have to cope with these pressures in the future, coupled with the growing impact of climate change.

People need the ability to maintain (and even improve) their well-being in the face of change – whatever that change may be. This is what we call adaptive capacity.

Drawing on evidence from the Africa Climate Change Resilience Alliance (ACCRA) project (2010-11) – a research and advocacy consortium in Ethiopia, Mozambique and Uganda – this Briefing Paper aims to understand better how different kinds of development interventions affect the characteristics of adaptive capacity. Do interventions take it seriously enough? Are they having a positive effect? How could any positive impact be maximised? Given that ultimately it is people's adaptive capacity that determines the sustainability of all interventions, it is ACCRA's contention that these are critical questions for all development interventions.

Why adaptive capacity matters

The current climate models agree that there will be change, and it will vary greatly from place to place. However, it is rarely possible to know for certain exactly what that change will be at the local level. Climate change affects people both directly (e.g. through rainfall and temperature), and indirectly, by exacerbating other changes such as world and local prices for crops and livestock, changing migration patterns and pos-



People need the ability to deal with change and explore new opportunities – this is what we call adaptive capacity.

sible conflicts over resources. These challenges are also shifting constantly, magnifying the uncertainty of the effects of climate change.

All development interventions aim to bring about sustainable impacts at the local level. Since change is a constant factor of life, sustainability can only be achieved if people are able to adapt the fruits of development interventions to new circumstances. But their ability to adapt to a changing context depends both on what they can do for themselves, and the context in which they make their living.

It is recognised that livelihood strategies and outcomes do not only depend on the assets that people have. The institutional environment governs their entitlement to assets and influences the uses to which they can put them and what they can get out of them. The institutional environment also influences their interactions and decision-making, including how they innovate, how they use information, and how they plan collectively for the future. These same characteristics (Figure 1, overleaf) are vital to shape how people respond and adapt their

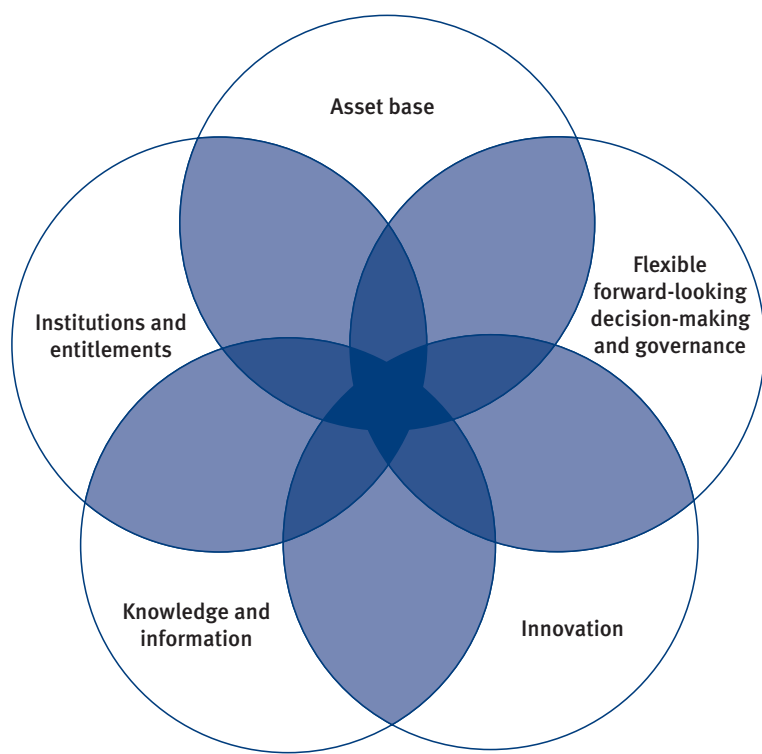
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Figure 1: The ACCRA Framework for thinking about local adaptive capacity



Source: Jones et al. (2010).

livelihood strategies in the face of change; this is their adaptive capacity (Jones et al., 2010).

Because climate change and its indirect effects are just part of a wider context, it makes little practical sense to talk about how anyone adapts to climate change in isolation. People need to adapt to changing circumstances overall, not to one particular cause of change. Supporting local adaptive capacity cannot therefore be seen in isolation as ‘climate change programming’. It is an intrinsic part of all development interventions, since all interventions impact in some way on the key characteristics of adaptive capacity.

The evidence

The ACCRA fieldwork took place in eight sites across Ethiopia, Uganda and Mozambique. A range of interventions were studied, including support to irrigation infrastructure, women’s savings groups, agricultural extension, income diversification, the provision of assets (e.g. improved seeds, credits, social infrastructure) and training.

Despite such diversity, common features can be discerned. Typically, interventions focused on technology dissemination, addressing immediate needs raised in a ‘participatory’ process by the community, delivered through groups formed by the project and often including direct asset provi-

sion. In general, they aimed to increase income by providing, strengthening and diversifying livelihoods and assets, and capacity-building of village-level organisations. Few rural communities received isolated single projects: they received support from both government and non-governmental actors that included both discrete ‘projects’ and state services, such as agricultural extension and safety nets.

Most interventions focused on the provision of assets, ranging from infrastructure to new technologies (where interventions often delivered both inputs and training). An intervention such as the provision of seeds, tools and technical information for a vegetable farming group rests on the assumptions that the group can turn these into a sustainable income stream. This in turn rests on implicit assumptions that:

- the people the project wants to help have the labour, literacy and land required to engage in this activity
- they are able to continue to work harmoniously in the future without, for example, elite capture or corruption, and carry out all functions as envisaged
- the technical information and seeds provided are the right ones for the specific land in that specific village and appropriate to the individual needs and constraints of each group member
- that their appropriateness will continue, despite changes in prices, demand, weather and climate, population pressure and land degradation.

These assumptions were proved wrong in some cases: for example where the new technology demanded more labour without providing significantly greater income. Even so, many respondents to the ACCRA research reported that such interventions contributed to their household income in the short term and that this made them more resilient to (future) shocks and stresses, echoing the logic of the project implementers. However few, if any, of the interventions researched by ACCRA set out explicitly to support households and communities to respond to future change in development and climate pressures. If assets are considered as part of wider adaptive capacity, quite different project decisions might have been made.

For example, if we consider that the assets and technologies people use will need to change with changing circumstances, then projects, instead of providing specific assets and technology, could put people in touch with sources of a range of technologies – and with sources of information that would help them to choose the most appropriate technology for their specific and changing circumstances. In other words, instead of handing out, for example, new seeds, projects could support linkages between farmers and seed suppliers and sources of new varieties such as research stations and other farming communities, so that they can choose their own seeds in future. Similar

arguments can be made about projects handing out other kinds of assets, including those aimed at livelihoods diversification.

What makes assets come alive?

Assets do not, of course, exist in isolation. Building irrigation infrastructure only delivers water to people if there are institutions that ensure this. Women complained to ACCRA researchers that they did not receive their fair share of water, because they lacked both money to pay the necessary bribes and the social status to make claims effectively.

We found three ways in which institutions were at the heart of the lack of sustainability of interventions. First, some institutions were subject to elite capture and corruption. Second, sometimes new institutions were established but they did not survive because they had no social roots. One example was establishing savings groups where the rules did not conform to existing norms about group membership and created different power relations to those in existing local institutions. A third problem arose where interventions were introduced as new technical practices without considering required institutional arrangements, such as introducing changes to natural resource management on common property.

Including change in the analysis

Whether or not a culture supports people to innovate can also be seen as an institutional question. In practice, ACCRA's research found that innovation was rarely considered by interventions. If it was considered at all, it was assumed that forming groups to reduce risk would be sufficient to make innovation happen. In some villages, innovation was clearly constrained by a dominant culture that frowned on doing things differently. This culture is not challenged, indeed it can even be seen as being supported, by the introduction of an 'approved' innovation by external authorities.

Opportunities are being missed to find out where, how and by whom local innovation is happening, what forces constrain people from innovating, and seeing how these could be addressed and innovation supported. Those implementing projects, and often researchers too, confused the provision of a new technology (an innovation) with supporting innovation as part of adaptive capacity. Indeed, the dominant culture demanding conformity to top-down norms applies as much to the ways in which non-governmental organisations and government departments work as it does to rural communities.

Innovation is not only constrained by institutions such as culture. Barriers also include the lack of ability to take financial risks, lack of confidence, and limited access to information and new ideas. All of these could be analysed and addressed by

development actors with the people concerned if they were thinking in terms of adaptive capacity.

The treatment of information by governments and projects was confined largely to providing technical packages. Also, the assumption is that whatever technical information is provided is 'correct' and appropriate, as defined by technologies maximising yield or income for a standard set of circumstances. Seeing information and knowledge as key components of adaptive capacity would encourage us to put far more emphasis on giving people a much wider range of information, appropriate to a much wider range of circumstances.

Information is needed to deal with the process of change as well as to inform decisions about adapting to future circumstances. This information should cover both shorter- and longer-term futures, and recognise the associated uncertainties involved. Crucially, this means turning information into knowledge – supporting people's ability to use the information for decision-making, which is particularly difficult when future conditions are highly uncertain.

Forward-looking decision-making?

ACCRA research found risks of maladaptation, i.e. addressing short-term needs in ways that may increase long-term vulnerability. Many interventions are planned and implemented without considering any evidence about longer-term climatic or socio-economic changes. An obvious example was the rapid promotion of irrigation schemes for crop farming in semi-arid areas. It is impossible to know whether these interventions represent successful adaptation to climate change or maladaptation without much more information, such as the scale of irrigation, the long-term availability of water, the economic and institutional feasibility, and wider environmental impacts. Even with this information, there will be winners and losers, and any judgement on the success of adaptation is open to debate. The research did not find that this information was being sought or these wider questions discussed.

This highlights the need not only to have and use information, but for decision-making that is forward-looking. Given that the future is uncertain, both in terms of future climate and development, rigid and centralised planning runs high risks of either failing to respond to changing circumstances or even leading to maladaptation.

ACCRA's research suggests two problems with decision-making and planning. First, planning does not incorporate either available knowledge of climate or consider other developments such as world food prices or demographic changes. It is primarily reactive and focused on addressing immediate needs. In part this stems from current modalities of 'participation' (asking 'communities' what they want), and from short-term funding modalities and a project approach to development, working from



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ISSN 0140-8682



plans but in the absence of coherent long-term strategies. Second, there is still a reliance on top-down planning that does not support local flexible decision-making and agency.

Conclusions and recommendations

First, the ‘agency’ of local people – their ability to make informed decisions and respond to changing circumstances – is central to all of the above issues and without it there is no adaptive capacity. Development actors must analyse their interventions against their impact on agency. In principle, agency is already considered in all development interventions, either directly or indirectly. In practice, it is not a concept that is much used during the design or implementation of interventions. We found little evidence that development interventions increased people’s agency.

Second, development means supporting people for a changing and uncertain future. This does not negate the need for good planning, but it cannot be achieved through central planning on its own, because no-one knows how climate will change locally, and because the impacts of climate change on people’s lives are influenced and felt through a host of other unpredictable changes. People need to be able to deal with an unpredictable future. Adaptation is not only about physical structures: enhanced adaptive capacity is needed.

Third, a significant and profound change in thinking is needed to bring this about, requiring changes in everything from the skills needed by programme designers and implementers to changes in relations between local authorities and central ministries, and between implementing agencies and donors. Participation must get back to the original inten-

tion of ‘participatory rural appraisal’ and become a joint analysis, design and evaluation process with individuals and communities, rather than a process of collecting ‘needs’. The required time and skills commitment must be resourced.

Finally, analysis of problems and solutions aimed at strengthening adaptive capacity must be based on the following:

- analysis of the longer-term future and its uncertainty
- developing innovation (instead of introducing specific changes)
- understanding institutions – the social, cultural, political and economic context
- analysing power. All change is about winners and losers: there are always reasons why the status quo is as it is
- understanding knowledge – and how information is translated into knowledge.

These ideas are not new, but their relevance is given a new urgency by climate change. We need to understand why so little progress has been made in integrating these old ideas into the basic paradigms of development. Only when that question is answered can real progress start on supporting adaptive capacity and preparing the most vulnerable for the impacts of climate change.

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For more details about ACCRA see: <http://community.eldis.org/accra/> and <http://bit.ly/odi-accra>

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