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Editors Alia Aghajanian
and Jeremy Allouche



Contents

Notes on Contributors	iii
Foreword Melissa Leach	ix
Introduction: Development Studies – Past, Present and Future Alia Aghajanian and Jeremy Allouche	1
From Development of the 'Other' to Global Governance for Universal and Sustainable Development Richard Jolly and Ricardo Santos	13
Agricultural Input Subsidies in Sub-Saharan Africa Tamahi Kato and Martin Greeley	33
<u>Adapting to Climate Change: Transforming Development?</u> Rachel Godfrey-Wood and Lars Otto Naess	49
Broadening Social Protection Thinking Stephen Devereux and Ana Solórzano	63
The Dialectics of Urban Form and Violence Jaideep Gupte and Hadeer Elshafie	77
Challenging the Asymmetries of Power: A Review of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Contribution Maro Pantazidou and John Gaventa	89
Gender, Sexuality and Development: Revisiting and Reflecting Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed and Jenny Edwards	105
The Evolution of Ethnicity Theory: Intersectionality, Geopolitics and Development Naysan Adlparvar and Mariz Tadros	123
Is Openness Enough? Hani Morsi and Alison Norwood	137
Glossary	149

Adapting to Climate Change: Transforming Development?

Rachel Godfrey-Wood and Lars Otto Naess

Abstract This article examines the implications of the growing discussion around transformation and adaptation for development policy and practice. While there is increasing agreement that incremental approaches are insufficient to tackle climate change, and that deeper transformative change is also necessary, the ways in which transformation is understood vary significantly, and hence how it is to be operationalised remains unclear. Tracing the emergence of transformation in adaptation debates, and linking them to the intellectual roots of the idea of transformation, we interrogate different approaches that exist towards transformation in terms of moving beyond dominant neoliberal development trajectories. The article discusses some of the conceptual and practical challenges in bringing about transformational change in international development, concluding with some suggestions for the way forward in operationalising transformation for development in line with long-term climate change adaptation goals.

1 Introduction

There is a growing realisation that the threat of climate change, primarily to the world's poor, asks profound questions of existing paradigms of development, both in causing and perpetuating vulnerability to climate-related risks, and their suitability to address future climate change (Brooks, Grist and Brown 2009; Manuel-Navarrete 2010). This has led to a proliferation of analytical approaches emphasising the need to radically change existing structures in order to successfully adapt to climate change, most notably represented by the growing literature on transformation and adaptation to climate change (O'Brien 2011; Ribot 2011; Pelling, O'Brien and Matyas 2015; Tschakert *et al.* 2013; Bahadur and Tanner 2014). Transformation has emerged in climate change debates as a response to concerns that the key terms that frame policy debates, adaptation, and increasingly, resilience, put the focus solely on incremental adjustments to an increasingly unstable climate, overlooking both the relational causes of vulnerability and the need for systemic and structural changes to address vulnerability to climate change. The increasing prominence of transformation in mainstream adaptation literature is reflected in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

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Change (IPCC) report, which distinguishes between incremental and transformational adaptation, and defining the latter as 'adaptation that changes the fundamental attributes of a system in response to climate and its effects' (Agard *et al.* 2014: 1758).

However, there is as yet little evidence or clarity on what transformation is. This article examines the implications of the discussion around transformation in adaptation for development policy and practice. The motivation is that while there is increasing agreement that transformation is needed to successfully adapt to climate change, the way in which transformation is understood varies significantly, and hence how it is to be operationalised remains unclear. While transformation may be understood as an analytical concept which has no inherent superiority over more incremental forms of adaptation or resilience building (see Béné *et al.* 2014; Matyas and Pelling 2014), it can also be used in a normative sense as part of a necessarily radical political project of deep-seated institutional change (Tschakert *et al.* 2013; Feola 2015). In this article we are primarily concerned with exploring the implications of transformation in the second sense, borne out of the need to challenge unequal systems of power and distribution of wealth.

In doing so, we will argue, along with other authors (e.g. Tschakert *et al.* 2013; Feola 2015), that the concept is necessary, and also that it needs to be accompanied by a clear definition which does not shy away from its political message. For the purposes of this article, we will understand transformation as processes which fundamentally redefine social, political or economic structures. As we will see, these should not always be assumed to be positive, and it can be argued that many past transformations have served to accentuate inequalities or generate new ones.

The article begins with tracing the emergence of transformation in adaptation debates, and the contribution of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) to these debates (Section 2). We then link these debates to the intellectual roots of the idea of transformation, and chart some of the different approaches that exist towards transformation in terms of moving beyond dominant neoliberal – and arguably unsustainable – development trajectories (Section 3). Following this, we discuss some of the conceptual and practical challenges in bringing about transformational change in international development (Section 4). Finally, we conclude with some suggestions for the way forward in operationalising transformation for development in line with long-term climate change adaptation goals.

2 Adaptation and the emergence of transformation

While adaptation was part of the goals of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) from the outset in 1992, the global climate change research and policy debate focused almost exclusively on mitigation for most of the 1990s. At this stage, climate change policy was very much in the realm of 'environmentalist' organisations and researchers, and few if any development organisations had considered climate change in their thinking and projects. This

began to change with IPCC's Second Assessment report in 1995, which put increasing weight on adaptation, but more significantly with the 2001 Third Assessment report, which for the first time devoted a separate chapter to adaptation, sustainable development and equity (Smit *et al.* 2001). While some development agencies (government as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs)) started emphasising the importance of climate change in the late 1990s (Burton and van Aalst 1999), adaptation only gained widespread focus in the early 2000s (Klein 2001; AfDB *et al.* 2003; Eriksen and Naess 2003).

Adaptation is not a new idea, however. As a term it has its origin in evolutionary biology (Smit and Wandel 2006), and emerged in social sciences in the hazards literature (e.g. Burton, Kates and White 1978). It became a severely contested concept, particularly from political ecology scholars, who argued that adaptation theory failed to address power relations and structural inequalities as causes of vulnerability (Watts 1983). Following this, adaptation became a term 'not to be mentioned in polite society' (Burton 1994), until it was revived through IPCC and UNFCCC in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Until the early to mid-2000s, adaptation to climate change was overwhelmingly considered as a technical and managerial challenge of responding and adjusting to the impacts of climate change. Structural and social causes of vulnerability were occasionally mentioned, but often downplayed and framed in vague terminology such as 'political and institutional inefficiencies' (Bassett and Fogelman 2013; Ribot 2014). Watts (2015) argues that the current discussion of adaptation recycles much of what was wrong about the earlier theories of adaptation to environmental hazards, namely that they depended on biological metaphors that obscure unequal power relations and emphasise proximate outcomes rather than structural processes. As Ribot (2011, 2014) argues, through its focus on proximate causes and asking 'who' is vulnerable rather than 'why', adaptation runs the risk of taking attention away from the social and political causes of vulnerability, focusing on the impacts of climate change but not on the inequalities that generate vulnerability. This facilitates climate change assessments which exclude root-cause analysis, leading to ahistorical and apolitical accounts of adaptation (Ribot 2014).

Arguably, transformation has emerged in response to these concerns, as a number of scholars have over recent years advanced the concept of 'transformation' (sometimes referred to as 'transformative adaptation') as a means of highlighting the need for systemic change to the social systems generating vulnerability (Ribot 2011; O'Brien 2011; Pelling 2010), and to highlight the political nature of adaptation (e.g. Tschakert *et al.* 2013; Eriksen, Nightingale and Eakin 2015). In doing so, the development of transformation has adopted the earlier political ecology critique of the hazards literature, namely that it overlooks the fact that vulnerability is socially produced through unequal relations of power (e.g. O'Keefe, Westgate and Wisner 1976; Watts 1983; Taylor 2015).

IDS has made several key contributions in this area, both conceptually in understanding, challenging and developing the concepts of resilience and transformation and their interrelations (e.g. Bahadur, Ibrahim and Tanner 2010; Bahadur and Tanner 2012, 2014; Tanner and Bahadur 2013; Béné *et al.* 2012, 2014). Furthermore, it has provided studies which have shaped future debates on transformation, for example by highlighting the importance of power relations in processes of change (e.g. Gaventa 2006), and the perils of top-down approaches to conservation (Leach and Mearns 1996). Over recent years, the University of Sussex–IDS STEPS Centre has played a central role investigating alternative pathways to transformation (e.g. Leach, Scoones and Stirling 2010; Smith 2014; Smith and Ely 2015).

The fact that transformation has moved into the mainstream of the adaptation research and policy debate over the past two to three years could in some ways be interpreted as a tilt back in the favour of political ecology-influenced interpretations of structural vulnerability and the need for radical change. However, as Feola (2015) argues, 'transformation' is often used as a vague metaphor to convey the idea of a 'radical' but poorly defined change of a given system. Its uses vary from psycho-social processes whereby humans commit to changing their behaviour, new technological or social innovations, or the use of participatory methods during NGO project interventions (Tanner and Bahadur 2013). While all these can be seen as important changes, it is unclear whether they reflect fundamentally different approaches, or whether they represent serious structural change, creating the possibility that the term could be used in rather non-transformative ways. While as noted above the IPCC has started using the term 'transformative adaptation', this has not significantly altered its conceptual approach to adaptation overall, which continues to be viewed as adjustments to climate stimuli (Bassett and Fogelman 2013; Watts 2015). As with resilience, one might argue that transformation allows researchers of different disciplines to find common ground, but without necessarily acknowledging the different ways in which it is understood. In turn, this creates significant challenges for how to operationalise transformation as a normative goal to support adaptation and development goals.

3 Radical transformations to address climate change

The argument about the need for radical transformations to tackle climate change begins from the starting point that the current status quo is itself an outcome of a series of historical transformations. Polanyi (2001: 138) used the term 'transformation' to refer to a project to drive towards a disembedded market which would be unregulated by the rest of society. Although this project was ultimately utopian due to the impossibility of a genuinely disembedded market, it nonetheless profoundly destabilised the existing pre-industrial society, generating counter-movements and pushes towards social protection by actors 'affected by the deleterious action of the market'. Colonialism accentuated this by bringing transformations to the developing world, in the process undermining existing social orders and generating new

forms of vulnerability, in many cases causing devastating famines as documented by Watts (1983) and Davis (2002), among others. This is not to deny the gains made through development. Rather, it points to the fact that it is the very success of the capitalist transformation which has generated the social and ecological challenges we face today, improving material standards tremendously but at the same time locking human development into unsustainable consumption patterns (Schmitz and Scoones 2015). Concurrently, it is also clear that capitalism in its current neoliberal form has created huge inequalities of wealth. Stiglitz (2012) shows how this enables global elites to exert decisive influence over political systems, in turn undermining democracy and destabilising the global economy through rent-seeking practices. While recent decades have seen important improvements in living standards, these have not been caused by financialised globalisation *per se*, but rather by longer-term processes of scientific and technological change, suggesting there is no trade-off between higher living standards and equity (Smith 2016).

All of this points towards the inadequacy of the existing paradigm to address climate change in an equitable way, an idea popularised recently by Klein (2014). The author argues that key neoliberal policies such as privatisation, corporate deregulation and low taxes all reduce the capacity of the state to bring about the necessary transformations in society and rather subordinate it to the interests of the private sector. Similarly, Sterling (2014) argues that unless unequal power relations are challenged, and alternative pathways are identified, there is a real danger that the pressure for 'transformation' will lead to approaches that further concentrate power, for example through nuclear energy, carbon trading and geoengineering. This raises the question of which types of transformations will be necessary if human development is to generate sustainable and equitable wellbeing for the world's inhabitants. Schmitz and Scoones (2015) identify four narratives for transformation: market-led, technology-led, state-led and citizen-led. Market-led approaches, exemplified by carbon trading, are closely aligned with the existing status quo, and are more likely to accentuate existing injustices than bring about the types of changes that are required (e.g. Lohmann 2012). Academics and activists have also increasingly debated the possibility that land and resources could be appropriated for environmental ends, in a phenomenon dubbed as 'green grabbing' (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones 2012). This argument is rooted in the understanding that conventional approaches to environmental conservation have historically accentuated the marginalisation of particular groups and closed down democratic spaces in the name of environmental sustainability (e.g. Brockington 2002; Hutton, Adams and Murombedzi 2005; Ribot 2006; Li 2007). The danger therefore is not simply that market-led 'solutions' could prove ineffective, but that they could generate new risks and distract from the radical transformations necessary to tackle climate change.

Klein (2014), in the time-honoured tradition of many radical environmentalists, places much of her faith in social movements, in what

might be termed a 'citizen-led' narrative. She argues that environmentalist movements, particularly ones led by indigenous people, are leading the way by opposing fossil-fuel extraction, thus raising environmental awareness and forcing the rest of society into changing course. This strategy, however, relies heavily on a rather simplistic and romanticised view of indigenous people as the final moral reserves of humanity (see Ramos 1998 for a critique of the approach of environmentalists towards indigenous people), and fails to seriously address the need for massive state-led investments in a new energy system in order for the world to transition away from fossil fuels (Hoexter 2014). A more sophisticated approach to citizen-led transformation is to combine it with a technology-led approach, emphasising the potential of new technologies to decentralise power and promote green technology at the same time (Fressoli *et al.* 2014; Smith and Ely 2015). A particularly ambitious version of a technology-plus-citizen approach to transformation argues that new technology is bringing the cost of reproducing information to zero, thus undermining the pricing mechanisms inherent to capitalism, and facilitating new forms of decentralised, citizen-led initiatives which can progressively move towards a 'postcapitalist' society (Mason 2015). A paradigmatic example of a citizen-plus-technology-led initiative is that of the Lucas Plan of the 1970s in the UK, which was devised by workers facing the threat of job losses, and who proposed redirecting public funding from arms production to socially useful production including renewable energy (Smith 2014). Crucially, such initiatives are likely to require nurturing from the state if they are to be both transformative and also operate at scale.¹

State-led narratives emphasise the possibility of coordinated public action to undertake environmental planning, based on the compelling evidence that technological transformations have historically been driven by the state (Mazzucato 2013). If combined with serious efforts to redistribute wealth and power, such an approach could address both climate change and inequality simultaneously. However, the potential of actors to enact the required progressive change through the state raises age-old questions about the difficulty of reorienting state institutions which have been established and fine-tuned to achieve fundamentally different objectives, and which are manned by actors (i.e. the civil service) who are hostile to transformative change (Miliband 2009). Even well-intentioned governments may be too structurally dependent on the interests of capital and too electorally dependent on the support of the groups who either already have, or aspire to, high consumption and fossil fuel-dependent lifestyles (Sayer 2009). Moreover, while there is clearly a growing global constituency in favour of breaking with the status quo, be that in the form of neoliberal austerity in Western Europe or authoritarianism in the Middle East, these demands are occurring at the same time that options for political and economic alternatives appear more restricted than ever. In 2015 even the Syriza-led Greek government's demand for a shift towards greater public investment and social safety nets was deemed to be unacceptable by Europe's elite, who exercised their control over the country's liquidity to force them into implementing the very policies they had previously criticised. Meanwhile, the Arab Spring has been largely overwhelmed by a combination of reactionary Islamist movements and authoritarianism. These events

demonstrate that regardless of the approach taken towards transformation, unequal power relations can prevent any transformative change, regardless of the undoubted strengths of the movements concerned.

4 Challenges for radical transformation of development to support adaptation

The difficulties of achieving radical transformation through changes of governments and social movements are mirrored, albeit on a smaller scale, by the problems facing researchers and NGOs interested in transformation in the development sector. The need for radical transformation to tackle climate change and its impacts in developed countries is mirrored by researchers working on climate change in developing countries, who agree that the issue demands a radical break with existing models of development (e.g. Brooks *et al.* 2009). There is a growing literature emphasising the roles of inequality and power relations in generating and perpetuating vulnerability to climate change (e.g. Eriksen and O'Brien 2007; Pelling 2010; Eriksen *et al.* 2015; Brown 2015). This realisation is linked to a broader scepticism of adaptation which depends solely on technological interventions, for failing to take into account the social relations and structures which drive inequality, and which in turn could be subject to elite capture and increase vulnerability for the poorest. A notable historical example of this is the Bangladesh Flood Action Plan, critiqued by Blaikie *et al.* (1994) as being top-down and ultimately benefiting non-poor groups disproportionately, and making the poorest more vulnerable. More recently, political ecology scholars (e.g. Peet, Robbins and Watts 2011; Taylor 2013) call for close attention to the precise mechanisms of 'adverse inclusion' which link the security of some to the vulnerability of others. In a case study of Andhra Pradesh, Taylor (2013) shows how, in the context of agrarian liberalisation, exploitative debt and credit relationships combined with the over-exploitation of groundwater reserves harmed human security, and ultimately manifested in a spate of farmer suicides. Addressing this seriously, he emphasises, requires a fundamental challenge to the balance of power in the region, which would require implementing not only the existing social protection scheme (the MGNREGA), but also a range of policy changes including redistributive land reform, protection of agriculture from imports, and guaranteed prices for crops.

However, in spite of the fact that there is a growing number of researchers and development professionals who agree on the need for radical transformation to tackle climate change, this understanding has not yet translated into change on the ground in adaptation projects and programmes. In practice, most adaptation projects preserve rather than challenge existing structures and relationships. This is unlikely to be the result of an intellectual failure among the climate change and development community, but rather more deep-rooted structures in how adaptation is conceived and carried out. Many government agencies or development organisations invested with climate policy will often have a stake in maintaining the status quo rather than changing it (Pelling *et al.* 2015). Radical and political 'policy recommendations' that researchers

might make are simply not what donors want to hear, akin to what Ferguson (1990) reports as the response to his recommendation of boycotting the apartheid regime in South Africa to help reduce poverty in Lesotho. This draws attention to the political agendas of the research process itself (Crane 2014). In the field, NGOs, development and government agencies are under pressure to come up with 'practical' policy recommendations and solutions which, as Taylor acknowledges, tend to become confused once the deeper structural issues are analysed (Taylor 2013). Moreover, even in the cases where development professionals and researchers come to the conclusion that 'radical' solutions are necessary, they are often in a poor position to advocate for these, particularly when operating in a different political context. Even with radical intentions, there are tactical questions about how much can be achieved if indeed the poor are structurally dependent on elites, requiring a more nuanced approach (e.g. Wong 2010), and legitimate ethical questions about how far foreign or foreign-backed organisations should go in attempting to 'transform' power relations in developing countries.

Many researchers advocating more transformative approaches to adaptation call for the inclusion of the voices of the poorest and most vulnerable actors (e.g. Eriksen and Marin 2014). However, ensuring that vulnerable people have a 'voice' cannot necessarily be equated with transformative outcomes, and may have little effect unless they are accompanied by changes in structures for representation and power. External actors may lack the necessary understanding of existing patterns of resource use or access, obscuring the reality that most people's livelihoods span across different places and scales and leading to poorly thought-out attempts to form local institutions (Leach *et al.* 2010; Scoones 2015).

Even when local institutions are responsive to local concerns, it does not necessarily mean that there will be transformative outcomes, or transformative outcomes that benefit the poorest and most vulnerable groups. Pelling *et al.* (2015: 12) argue that in participatory methodologies 'there is a tendency for communities to prioritize immediate risks (such as road traffic accidents) and discount the importance of future risks'. Ultimately, such approaches may lead to solutions which delay transformation and increase long-term risk (Matyas and Pelling 2014). Meanwhile, there is by now significant evidence of elite capture of participatory projects by particular stakeholders, while the most vulnerable groups are often excluded and cannot exercise the same levels of influence, challenging the assumption that participatory approaches are necessarily transformative (Cleaver 2007; Mansuri and Rao 2012).

5 Conclusion

In this article we have interrogated the term 'transformation' in relation to adaptation to climate change, and its implications for development policy and practice. The article traced the origins of current discussions concerning the issue of transformation, charting their roots back to the political ecology critique of the 'hazard' paradigm in the late 1970s. The resurgence of this in the critique of the mainstream approach

to climate change adaptation, until recently overlooking structural inequalities and power relations driving vulnerability, is undoubtedly necessary, particularly during a period of history when there is growing questioning of the dominant paradigm of neoliberal capitalism.

Nevertheless, we see two key challenges to take this forward and ensure that transformation is useful in supporting adaptation to climate change among the poorest and most vulnerable. The first is the need to demand a minimum degree of ideological clarity about what transformation means. This means going beyond references to ‘systemic change’, and to be more explicit in what is required in order to support its aims, notably bringing about redistribution of power and wealth. Second, as proponents of what we term radical transformation, there is a need to go beyond the critiquing of mainstream approaches to adaptation, to better understand how transformation happens, for whose benefit. Both these are obviously challenging given that, as we have argued, there are fundamental limits to what can be achieved from within the development sector.

However, there are different approaches which could lead the way to better understanding transformational adaptation to climate change, many of which have roots in existing development practice. One of these is described by Ribot (2014), who calls for, among other things, a redirection towards emancipatory approaches addressing rights and representation of citizens to address the root causes of vulnerability, focusing on the poor and climate-vulnerable and their organisations. Examples here may be groups of smallholders and slum-dwellers, or trade unions, a sector often overlooked by development organisations but who are unquestionably crucial actors in any strategy aiming to bring about fairer distributions of wealth and power. For the reasons outlined in the previous section, this is not a ‘silver bullet’ for radical change, but could help in the building up of representative organisations and ownership with the potential to affect long-term change, while avoiding the pitfalls of external dictation of policies to support the poor.

Notes

- 1 Indeed the Lucas Plan itself benefited from the support shown to it briefly by the Ministry of Industry in 1974–5 under the Labour government.
- 2 Full list of authors: African Development Bank (AfDB); Asian Development Bank (ADB); Department for International Development (DFID); Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS); European Commission (EC); Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and World Bank.
- 3 Full list of authors: Agard, J.; Schipper, E.L.F.; Birkmann, J.; Campos, M.; Dubeux, C.; Nojiri, Y.; Olsson, L.; Osman-Elasha, B.; Pelling, M.; Prather, M.J.; Rivera-Ferre, M.G.; Ruppel, O.C.; Sallenger, A.; Smith, K.R.; St. Clair, A.L.; Mach, K.J.; Mastrandrea, M.D and Eren Bilir, T.

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