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COURTING CATASTROPHE? HUMANITARIAN POLICY AND PRACTICE IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

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Introduction: Courting Catastrophe? Can Humanitarian Actions Contribute to Climate Change Adaptation?

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Abstract Climate change introduces new challenges for humanitarian aid through changing hazard patterns. The linkages between climate change and humanitarian aid are complex. While humanitarian organisations deal directly with vulnerable populations, interventions and actions also form part of global politics and development pathways that are currently generating climate change, inequities and vulnerability. This *IDS Bulletin* represents a call for increasing engagement between humanitarian aid and adaptation interventions to support deliberate transformation of development pathways. Based on studies carried out as part of the ‘Courting Catastrophe’ project, we argue that humanitarian interventions offer several entry points and opportunities for a common agenda to drive transformational adaptation. Changes in political and financial frameworks are needed to facilitate longer-term actions; additionally, transformational adaptation demands moving from a mode of delivering expert advice and solutions to vulnerable populations, to taking up multiple vulnerability knowledges and making space for contestation of current development.

Keywords: humanitarian policy and practice, climate change, adaptation, transformation.

1 Introduction

Humanitarian crises appear dramatic, overwhelming and sudden. Aid is required immediately to save lives. On the face of it, linkages to longer-term climate change and adaptation appear far-fetched. However, the causes for humanitarian crises – such as the current food shortages in Ethiopia and on the Horn of Africa – are rarely sudden. Rather, they are the result of a multitude of factors and processes that cause and compound people’s vulnerabilities, built up over time. In many cases, academic researchers, humanitarian and development organisations have been warning about the risks – and increasing likelihood – of crises for months or even years before they take place.

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Drought or flood-related crises, like most other humanitarian and refugee crises, have fundamental social, political and economic drivers.

This *IDS Bulletin* examines the link between such short-term crises – and the humanitarian responses that follow – and adaptation to climate change. The articles form part of research carried out under the project 'Courting Catastrophe? Humanitarian Policy and Practice in a Changing Climate', funded by the Norwegian Research Council.⁶ The research has been the result of joint thinking between academic and humanitarian organisations across the global North and South. Together, we have studied the practical ways in which humanitarian responses are affecting the prospects for adaptation to climate change in different geographic and policy contexts. Various types of humanitarian interventions – and the institutional and policy context in which they have taken place – were studied in seven countries across Asia and Africa (Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Pakistan, Malawi, Nepal and Zambia). The two main overarching questions that framed the case studies were: What is the level of convergence between humanitarian interventions and efforts to support adaptation to climate change? And, what lessons can we draw from current experience on the prospects for reducing the risk of climate change causing increased burdens on humanitarian interventions in the future?

We start from the premise that vulnerability to climate change is driven by multiple and diverse social processes, such as dispossession of land, conflict, and loss or lack of employment opportunities. At its core, vulnerability can be considered a failure of entitlements (Ziervogel *et al.* 2017; Eriksen, Brown and Kelly 2005; Chambers 1989), linked to fundamental rights and access to resources. To adapt to climate change, there is increasing realisation that it is therefore not enough to focus on small, incremental changes that simply tinker with current processes and systems. While such action may give short-term respite, it will do little or nothing to remove the causes for vulnerability, and is ultimately insufficient to address the challenges we are facing (Ribot 2014), ultimately reproducing or even increasing the problem (O'Brien *et al.* 2015; Pelling, O'Brien and Matyas 2015). Thus, it is increasingly clear that deeper, more fundamental and *transformative* changes in the structures and processes that drive vulnerability are also needed (O'Brien 2012; Bassett and Fogelman 2013).

Transformation has become a prominent term in climate change discourse over recent years, but used in many different ways (Feola 2014). Following O'Brien (2012) and Nelson, Adger and Brown (2007), we here distinguish between two major types: 'outcome transformation' and 'deliberate transformation'. 'Outcome transformation' refers to how current development trajectories and greenhouse gas emissions are causing systemic change, often over short time periods, which in turn influences the ability or inability of people to cope with climate-related risks. Forced resettlement by governments, or migration due to sea-level rise, exemplifies such outcome transformation.

'Deliberate transformation' is about contesting rather than accommodating structural change, by striving to deliberately alter development pathways away from those that are fossil-fuel intensive, amassing wealth in the hands of the few, while producing inequity, poverty, disempowerment and environmental degradation (O'Brien *et al.* 2015). This *IDS Bulletin* calls for deliberate transformation as an approach to making humanitarian action and adaptation more closely aligned in tackling short- and long-term challenges brought about by a changing climate. This means going beyond current humanitarian efforts to strengthen coping or protect livelihoods, while focusing adaptation attention on addressing underlying root causes of vulnerability.

Our focus places us at the centre of a long-standing debate over reform of the humanitarian sector, and specifically on whether or not humanitarian aid should remain focused on its core mandate – saving lives in the time of crises – or also engage in longer-term concerns, including climate change (Bennett, Foley and Pantuliano 2016). Concerns have been raised that a widening remit for humanitarian aid may entail humanitarian organisations risking over-stretching funding and capacity, thereby diluting and weakening their core mandate. Others are pointing to the fact that unless broader concerns are addressed, humanitarian organisations will fail in their core mandate. The latter view is reinforced by substantial evidence of how humanitarian responses may be part of the problem, reinforcing or increasing vulnerability to climate-related and other hazards (Wisner 2001; OCHA 2009; Red Cross 2009). Over recent years, a number of humanitarian organisations have been shifting into longer-term activities, notably through extensive (if underfunded) work on disaster risk reduction (DRR), and more recently, a growing focus on strengthening resilience to climate change as a cross-cutting goal among various humanitarian actors (OCHA 2009; Red Cross 2009; Sphere Project 2011). While there is an increasing acknowledgement of the need to make such linkages, it is also clear that there are cultural, institutional and financial obstacles for making this work in practice. Our argument here is thus that there is a need to reinforce current efforts, while also going one step further. A focus on deliberate transformation is necessary because the 'perfect storm' of climate change and other large-scale changes means an increasing risk of being trapped in a disaster response mode and of being held 'hostage' to outcome transformations.

Adaptation policy and practice has a lot to learn from humanitarian practice. Humanitarian actors have decades of experience working directly with vulnerable populations in complex settings, which forms a good entry point for a deep understanding of the types of changes in social and political relations that deliberate transformation would require. At the same time, humanitarian aid, like any aid, inherently forms part of development pathways generating (or reducing) vulnerability. Critical here is that the form of transformation we envisage is about tacit political dimensions of empowerment, giving space to the voices of the most vulnerable. It is not about using crises

to push through top-down decision-making such as resettlement, land privatisation or decisions that forcibly shift people out of particular livelihoods. What is required is increased understanding of the way that humanitarian actions form part of development agendas, and in turn the opportunities for fundamental shifts to address root causes of vulnerability. Generating such transformative change is no small task. The articles in this *IDS Bulletin* intend to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities of linking humanitarian aid with and supporting change towards sustainable and transformative pathways. Taken together, the articles show that the linkages between climate change adaptation and humanitarian aid are complex, context-specific and challenging.

The remainder of this introduction is structured as follows. Section 2 unpacks the intersections between climate change and humanitarian assistance, and the ways in which they overlap or differ in their responses to these twin challenges. Section 3 follows with a discussion of the types of transformations that may be needed, linked to experiences from case study countries. Section 4 concludes by highlighting the potential for, and elements of, a common agenda for change.

2 Articulating linkages between humanitarian assistance and adaptation to climate change

What are the connections between climate change adaptation and humanitarian assistance? While humanitarian assistance is intuitively focused on the short term, the definition offered by Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) also refers to the longer-term aspects of strengthening preparedness for disasters: the aid and action designed to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain and protect human dignity during and in the aftermath of man-made crises and natural disasters, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence of such situations (GHD 2003). Humanitarian assistance in this way overlaps with adaptation, which is commonly defined as 'the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects' (Agard and Schipper 2014: 1758).

Adaptation similarly has a short- and long-term aspect. While ultimately focusing on the long term, adaptation processes typically start with identifying current vulnerabilities and ways of reducing those, increasing the options and flexibility for responding to new and changing climate patterns. Managing climate risk, including changes in variability as well as longer-term shifts in climatic conditions, has been argued to be a necessary part of climate change adaptation (IPCC 2012). In particular, it is increasingly argued that adaptation is a process of managing interacting climatic and non-climatic stressors and changes, and that adaptation must target the social, political and economic conditions and processes that drive vulnerability (O'Brien *et al.* 2007). Often vulnerability to climate change is manifested in suffering and loss of livelihoods when faced with climate variability and events.

The *first* key intersection between humanitarian assistance and climate change adaptation is thus grounded in the fact that many disasters are climate-related. Climate change will act as a 'risk multiplier'. For example, there is concern that climate change will lead to an increase in humanitarian crises linked to extreme events such as cyclones, droughts and floods (Challinor *et al.* 2016). There are particular concerns around migration, although the exact linkages are contested. Nevertheless, this intersection highlights that changes in variability and changes in extreme events will expose more people to hazards, leading to increased need for humanitarian aid. Any such aid must ensure that short-term measures do not undermine longer-term vulnerability reduction to climatic events.

Second, people are not only affected by disasters, but also how the disasters are responded to. How a disaster is handled is critical for how vulnerable a community may be to future climatic events. As pointed out by Wisner (2001), a climatic event that comes on top of or after a disaster, such as an earthquake or conflict, often intensifies a humanitarian crisis. For example, the earthquake in Nepal in 2015 killed around 9,000 people and destroyed several hundred thousand buildings (Reuters 2015). According to the Red Cross, 4 million people were still living in sub-standard temporary shelters a year after the disaster, making them very vulnerable to climatic events (IFRC 2016).

Third, climate change may contribute to social changes such as patterns of poverty that influence the nature of humanitarian crises. The fifth IPCC assessment report described how climate change, through undermining livelihoods and destroying physical and social infrastructure, may reinforce poverty traps and send transient poor groups into chronic poverty, as well as create new vulnerable groups, also in non-poor countries (Olsson *et al.* 2014). Such poverty and inequity often increases social vulnerability to any type of disaster, whether climate-related or not. This implies that humanitarian aid will often have to operate in an altered vulnerability landscape, such as in terms of new poverty and migration patterns in part driven by climate change.

Fourth, there is increasing recognition that climate change is a fundamental development problem because it is generated by development pathways that simultaneously produce greenhouse gas emissions, inequity and vulnerability. These same development pathways also drive humanitarian crises. Many argue that what is required is to move towards more climate-resilient development pathways, or development trajectories that combine mitigation of emissions, equitable development and reduced vulnerability (O'Brien *et al.* 2015; Pelling *et al.* 2015). There is a need to turn the policy focus to the underlying causes of vulnerability and risk, but also the development pathways themselves that create these risks. This highlights in turn that humanitarian aid is shaped by particular development paradigms, but also that actions contribute to particular development pathways, either reinforcing particular developments or supporting climate-resilient pathways.

While humanitarian actions often have the short-term saving of lives as a goal, and are intended to be 'politically neutral' in nature, not favouring any party, they inherently contribute to particular development trajectories by reinforcing or altering practices, social structures and norms. For example, the way that a humanitarian action such as food aid or DRR is implemented may either support local elite power relations or create alternatives through empowering marginalised groups in decision-making. Efforts to build resilient livelihoods may, for example, promote particular agricultural practices and support the sedentarisation of pastoralists, or it may create alternatives to such a development trajectory through supporting livestock and livelihood recovery. This has implications both for the social vulnerability of a population and for emissions in the longer term.

These issues have implications for how individual actions are carried out, but they also raise questions about whether changes are required to the way in which the humanitarian system operates. The normative principles of sustainable adaptation (Eriksen *et al.* 2011; Eriksen and Marin 2015) formed a backdrop for the various case studies described in this issue and their assessment of the extent to which the investigated actions and approaches contributed towards longer-term vulnerability reduction and more sustainable development pathways. These principles include: (1) recognise the context for vulnerability, including multiple stressors; (2) acknowledge that differing values and interests affect adaptation outcomes; (3) integrate local knowledge into adaptation responses; (4) consider potential feedback between local and global processes; and (5) empower the most vulnerable groups in development decision-making. Each of the studies used different methods relevant to the particular context and intervention that they were following, however. Together, they inform our understanding of the potential for humanitarian actions to contribute to adaptation that is transformational rather than incremental.

3 What transformations are required, and where

To draw out the challenges and identify areas for more joined-up thinking around humanitarian aid and adaptation to climate change, we consider here the implications of recent changes in the humanitarian system. Over recent years, the humanitarian sector has been subject to wide-ranging debates over fundamental changes and reforms (Bennett *et al.* 2016). Marin and Naess (this *IDS Bulletin*) describe some of the shifts that have happened of relevance to adaptation, including an increased focus on building resilient livelihoods, DRR and early warning. Such shifts are taking place within a global context of multiple and increasingly complex uncertainties around climate change, social inequality, political instability, migration and refugees as well as a general disillusion with globalisation. Recent increases in the need for humanitarian assistance, with funding unable to keep pace with demand, have contributed towards renewed attention both on the question of efficiency of humanitarian interventions and of the future of the humanitarian system as a whole.

From the above, the question is whether these shifts ensure that humanitarian actions contribute to reducing, rather than exacerbating, longer-term social vulnerability and open up space for more sustainable development pathways. Talbot and Barder (2016) discuss to what degree the humanitarian system is not only 'broke' but also 'broken'. If the problem is that the system is broken, as opposed to just 'broke', there is a need for a fundamental reform. Evidence for the latter is in the fact that while humanitarian organisations are good at saving lives, there are persistent challenges in saving livelihoods. According to Talbot and Barder (2016), most of the humanitarian aid is spent on long-lasting, protracted crises rather than short-term emergencies, and humanitarian aid is not successful in having people graduate from being aid receivers to moving on to safer and more productive lives. Similarly, Marin and Naess (this *IDS Bulletin*) find that, among others, inertia of organisational cultures and financial models hamper humanitarian efforts in achieving their full climate change adaptation potential.

Thus, it is increasingly clear that adaptation to climate change requires a rethink, where adaptation is not treated as a benign exercise that can benefit all, or simply an extension of the humanitarian principles of non-partisanship (Marin and Naess, this *IDS Bulletin*), but as a process that benefits different people very differently, creating winners and losers in the process (Eriksen *et al.* 2011). There are many suggestions for how humanitarian policy and practice may be altered in ways that would coincide with the need for transformational adaptation. Clarke and Dercon (2016) recommend pre-agreed, pre-financed, rules-based emergency preparedness plans that are implemented immediately after a disaster. According to their view, such a standby financing model could be quicker, less expensive, better coordinated and probably contribute more towards longer-term resilience. This kind of pre-financed preparedness plan is not a new concept, but the timing and context, given climate change and other challenges, might now be more conducive for scaling up the idea of upfront preparedness planning accompanied by funding commitments. Costella *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) describe how a forecast-based financing mechanism, which triggers pre-defined actions when an extreme event is likely to happen, enables anticipatory capacity at the scale of national strategies and planning.

Another potentially important measure in humanitarian interventions is social protection, which has been increasingly linked to adaptation and resilience (Béné 2011; Davies *et al.* 2009, 2013). Social protection programmes include a whole range of different activities such as cash transfers, food relief, public works programmes, input subsidies, food subsidies, school-feeding programmes, crop and livestock insurance and grain reserves (HLPE 2012). A study by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) of 200 social protection programmes found that cash transfers in general give good results on many livelihood security indicators (Bastagli *et al.* 2016). Haug and Wold (this *IDS Bulletin*) argue that to reduce the future need for humanitarian assistance in Malawi, lessons learned from their social protection programme in the form of

input subsidies can prove useful in relation to multiple efforts towards achieving sustainable climate change adaptation.

Worldwide, better emergency preparedness is another topic of huge and increasing interest. The UN-negotiated Sendai Framework for DRR (2015–2030) provides a guide as to how countries can address disaster risk, emergency preparedness and recovery. This framework emphasises the need to understand disaster risk, the need to strengthen disaster governance, the need for investing in DRR for resilience and the need for enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and recovery (UNISDR 2015). Creativity and action are needed in relation to ensuring that the humanitarian system has the capacity and capability to perform well in accordance with its mandate area. According to Talbot and Barder (2016), in the humanitarian field, there is little rigorous evidence about what works, few independent assessments and little information about what happened to the money as compared to long-term development assistance. Multiple institutions and organisations, with their related policies, strategies and action plans, often have different vulnerability understandings and priorities, as described in Pakistan (Nyborg and Nawab, this *IDS Bulletin*). It is often unclear how government institutions and policies prioritise their short- and long-term focus and how they coordinate with humanitarian and development organisations, and what the outcomes are for vulnerability reduction.

Hence, we can see that the humanitarian sector includes a diversity of approaches that can contribute to longer-term vulnerability reduction, but there is less understanding about how they may contribute to deliberate transformative adaptation. The studies in this issue highlight that there is a need for not only integrating longer-term approaches such as preparedness, resilience building and social protection, but that there is also a need to alter the way that any measure is carried out, with a clear view of their differential effects on groups and their contribution to transformative change. The studies in this *IDS Bulletin* illustrate that spaces exist within current humanitarian operations to increase consciousness of the effects of these operations on vulnerability contexts and development pathways. Widening the scope of existing vulnerability assessments is one such opportunity. There is rich knowledge of the drivers of vulnerability at the local level, but this information is not systematically incorporated into the decision-making processes of government, humanitarian and development organisations when designing adaptation activities. Most responses to disaster focus on the physical risk and pay little attention to the social drivers of vulnerability (Nyborg and Nawab, this *IDS Bulletin*).

It is critical that space is given, within each action and programme, for identifying the assumptions about what is good development that underlie an action (and which alternative views of development are ruled out). An important part of such reflection is questioning how 'vulnerable groups' are identified, including the assumptions about the most important factors that make people vulnerable in that specific context. Several studies in this issue suggest that distinguishing whose

authority is legitimised and which power relations are reinforced or challenged through an intervention is important in designing humanitarian actions. Mosberg *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) question whether increased funding and focus on climate at county level in Kenya will necessarily help support adaptation; while humanitarian approaches in Isiolo County are changing in part due to climate change concerns, there is a lack of emphasis on differential vulnerability.

Benefiting from humanitarian and adaptation interventions is dependent on having access to networks of actors operating within both formal and informal channels of authority. Nagoda (this *IDS Bulletin*) similarly observed for the case of Nepal that food aid and accompanying development programmes tended to legitimise unequal power relations at the village level and dependence of the food insecure households on the wealthier households. Both Mosberg *et al.* and Nagoda (this *IDS Bulletin*) highlight that there is an urgent need, in adaptation and humanitarian actions alike, for a deeper understanding of the socio-political context in which these actions are deployed, else they risk entrenching power structures and the processes creating vulnerability in the first place. Practical ways to enhance such understanding is to give space within planning and implementation for multiple vulnerability knowledges and understandings of the problem to emerge. Furthermore, the influence of vulnerable groups in decision-making processes can be strengthened, such as ensuring participation at the village level of people of diverse social, economic and ethnic backgrounds, such as in committees administering food aid, in local DRR groups and in the governing of preparedness and anticipatory actions.

4 Towards a common agenda for deliberate transformation?

We have seen that the humanitarian sector shares many concerns and challenges with the adaptation and development communities in tackling climate-related hazards and risks: namely, a lack of attention to social drivers of vulnerability and multiple vulnerability knowledges; little (albeit growing) consideration of the socio-political context in which they are implemented; and a lack of explicit thinking about how interventions affect – and are affected by – power relations and development trajectories. It is clear from the project case studies that lasting solutions to humanitarian crises require that the root causes of vulnerability are identified and addressed, and that power relations – such as along gender, caste, and ethnicity dimensions – are vital drivers of vulnerability, and shape policy processes and outcomes. The studies also reiterate that without considering climate change, humanitarian interventions risk enhancing vulnerability rather than reducing it (Nagoda *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*).

The question is then, where are the opportunities for humanitarian action to contribute to deliberate transformation in order to support adaptation? Transformation means that in addition to change in practices, changes must take place to the way that decisions are made, and in world views, beliefs and understanding of the challenges that

drive decisions. Hence, identifying the opportunities for transformation demands reflexivity about 'the natural order of things' and the questioning of assumptions. For example, how do humanitarian actions reinforce or challenge ideas about who is considered 'vulnerable' or 'capable' in a society, and what is considered 'good development'? How can humanitarian actions contribute to or support the authority and legitimacy of the interests of particular actors while ignoring others? Are 'vulnerable populations' seen as helpless recipients of outside help and expertise, or do their understandings of the causes of vulnerability form the basis of humanitarian actions and real involvement in development decision-making?

We have argued that shifts within the humanitarian sector give new opportunities for long-term, joined-up approaches to support climate change adaptation. However, a change is needed in the political and financial frameworks within which humanitarian actors work, so that longer-term actions are possible. Rigid funding mechanisms tend to reinforce sector-wide approaches to vulnerability reduction. Donors often focus on measurable results from certain sectors, each with their own priorities and reporting requirements. The focus on measurable results also tends to favour technology-type and short-term 'measurable' actions rather than longer-term vulnerability reduction.

Beyond such a shift, however, a shift in thinking within organisations involved in both humanitarian and adaptation actions is required, from viewing adaptation as merely being 'longer-term', and to recognise vulnerability reduction measures – whether short-term or long-term in nature – as contested, political and with highly differentiated effects. Critical here is a recognition in the design and implementation of all actions that local vulnerability is highly socially differentiated, as are the causes of that vulnerability. There are no blueprint solutions as to how to 'do humanitarian aid' to support climate change adaptation. We need to go beyond thinking about a particular practical action – to thinking about the process behind that particular action; in particular, whose values, ideas, knowledge and decision-making power contributed to that action. Humanitarian interventions land in a context of what is politically possible, in terms of prevailing ideas of who is vulnerable and why, and what constitutes 'good and desirable development'. The actions are also shaped by conflicting ideas, priorities and interests of government, donor and civil society organisations with which they interact.

Transformative adaptation demands moving from a mode of delivering expert advice and solutions to vulnerable populations, to taking up multiple vulnerability knowledges and making space for contestation of current development. The case studies presented in this issue illustrate some ways in which humanitarian actions can do this. If successful in instituting such changes, the humanitarian system could be a driving force in creating transformative adaptation, showcasing to the development and climate change communities what adaptation that lets vulnerable groups participate actively in defining more

sustainable futures looks like, i.e. an emancipatory process as proposed by Manuel-Navarrete (2010) and Tschakert *et al.* (2016). The alternative to such proactive and deliberative vulnerability reduction is the risk that local adaptation is reduced to reactive measures to changing climatic conditions driven by rising emissions among wealthier populations.

Nevertheless, humanitarian action – even if effective in local vulnerability reduction – does not on its own constitute adaptation. It is only one of several types of actions in many spheres of societal development that make up adaptation. It is not our argument that humanitarian aid could or should ‘take over’ responsibility for climate change adaptation, but rather that humanitarian interventions inevitably contribute to affecting the prospects for transformational change, whether intentional or not. Actions either support or undermine climate-resilient development pathways. This does not mean that humanitarian aid necessarily has to be part of formal adaptation programmes, although that may be appropriate in some contexts. In many cases, in particular in sensitive conflict settings, humanitarian aid must remain politically neutral and distinct from government actions. There is also a danger that a focus on humanitarian actions and their interaction with adaptation places responsibility for responding to climate change on the most vulnerable groups. A delinking of adaptation from mitigation and the way that high emission and inequitable development pathways emerge both locally and globally easily leads to a bolstering – rather than a transformation – of the existing development pathways that can contribute to vulnerability and climate change. It is by illustrating alternative pathways locally and practical ways to support such alternatives, and the critical debates around them, that humanitarian actions can most usefully contribute to transformation.

Notes

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