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# Indo-Pacific Governance Research Centre

## Policy Brief

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# Climate change policy, conflict and transformative governance.

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### Key Points:

- Climate change governance could productively utilise conflict as a transformative agent for decision making, rather than try and avoid it, or 'solve it' by embedding conflict resolution mechanisms within governance frameworks.
- Climate governance frameworks should enable the conflict to become the conflict resolution process itself. This means identifying likely conflicts up front and then using them as the basis on which decisions about the most appropriate policies and planning are made, ensuring that such decisions are cognisant of and provide forums for effective ways around conflict in implementation.
- This process might take longer to negotiate, but will mean less likelihood of climate related policies stalling in implementation due to intractable conflict.
- One way of operationalising this model is to employ a three-dimensional local adaptive conflict governance framework comprising: (i) adaptive management (which includes anticipatory adaptation/foresight), (ii) communications, and (iii) reflexive practice.

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## Introduction

Climate change is the behemoth of our age. It defies description, is too large to comprehend, and what we do understand about it is often terrifying. This is for many, a good reason to stop thinking about it or, like Scarlett O'Hara, decide to "think about it tomorrow". Thinking about the role of conflict in climate change policy is an even more challenging exercise, but one that this paper tries to address<sup>1</sup>. Briefly I propose that climate change governance could productively utilise conflict as a transformative agent for decision making, rather than try and avoid it, or 'solve it' by embedding conflict resolution mechanisms within those governance frameworks.

There are many points at which governance and climate change intersect, there are multiple entry and exit points, and policies need embedding from local to international levels to work. At the heart of the problem however is conflict: between states and territories, between cultures, between the ideas of rights and responsibility and between the environment and economics. But as with Scarlett O'Hara, our society is fundamentally incapable of dealing with conflict. We seek answers based on win-win solutions, and ways of engaging with each other that are diplomatic, and politically correct.

Conflict as such, is feared as the blunt stone that will bludgeon and ruin negotiations and damage already fragile egos, societies and potential environmental outcomes. When societies cannot or will not change, or when the changes required necessitate unacceptable cultural compromise, disjuncture between them can develop into forums of conflict. Conflicts arising are partly explained by the fact that worldviews, perceptions of the problem, and ideas about solutions differ.

I argue for the transformative potential of conflict to facilitate adaptive governance and policy around climate change and climate change adaptation. Conflict situations have already been shown to act as a catalyst for the development of effective co-management collaborations (Buckles 1999). Managing conflict was an integral part of sustainable development programs in the Laguna Merin basin of Uruguay (Arrate and Scarlato 1999) and Castro and Nielson (2001) argue that co-management can "emerge as a response to conflict or be generated by a crisis" (Castro and Nielson 2001, p.232), a response they call 'crisis based co-management'. Thus, there is a beneficial side to conflict if it generates positive or dynamic change:

Conflict is an intense experience in communication and interaction with transformative potential. For marginal groups seeking to redress injustices or extreme inequities in resource distribution, conflict is an inherent feature of their struggle for change (Buckles and Rusnack 1999, p. 4-5).

Nonetheless, there are a number of challenges to enabling the productive resolution of conflict in climate governance situations. A key conflict discourse revolves around considerations of (often violent) conflict as deriving *from* resource scarcity and the impacts of people movements resulting from displacement caused by climate change (Stark et al. 2009). As such, the idea of conflict resolution is discursively placed within the metaphorical space of war, and any correlative examination of conflict therein is dominated by security issues (Barnett and Adger 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper I define conflict as: "the result of two or more parties (individuals or groups) having or perceiving to have, incompatible goals and interests" (Hammill et al 2009, 2).

‘Conflict as such, is feared as the blunt stone that will bludgeon and ruin negotiations and damage already fragile egos, societies and potential environmental outcomes. When societies cannot or will not change, or when the changes required necessitate unacceptable cultural compromise, disjuncture between them can develop into forums of conflict. Conflicts arising are partly explained by the fact that worldviews, perceptions of the problem, and ideas about solutions differ’.

Other studies focus on the role conflict resolution plays in stakeholder engagement as part of environmental decision making, including decision making about climate change. Arnold et al. (2012) for instance, argue that conflict in resource management is partly driven by the interdependencies between and contradictory needs of social and ecological systems. Managing power dynamics and stakeholder diversity is a key feature of conflict in climate governance situations and as such stakeholder diversity while offering opportunities for innovation and learning “can also create conflict and intensify struggles over power, especially with regard to controversial issues” (Arnold et al. 2012, 19). Conflict situations may engender stakeholder polarisation around an issue along certain discourse lines, and confront local understandings of identity and legitimacy. In such situations, those with the dominant power may end up dominating the discourse and agreed solutions to problems.

The relationship between scale and conflict is another important avenue for reflection; climate change impacts occur at global and local levels, as does conflict about it, so working out how to marry multi-level and scale governance systems in this context an important part of management negotiations.

Uncertainty is another influential parameter in climate change governance, both causing but offering potential also to resolve conflict situations. Walkerden (2006) argues that current science derived governance systems either privilege management of uncertainty, or of conflict, but rarely both. Enabling a hybridised planning process that addresses both uncertainty and conflict may “lead us to process designs that are a better fit to...science intensive public policy conflict [such as climate change]” (Walkerden 2006, 48). The very practice of conservation can cause conflict by restricting access to resources, by introducing new burdens or risks and via engendering an unequal distribution of its benefits (Hammill et al. 2009).

**Creating conditions for adaptive conflict governance**

There are a range of techniques available to deal with conflict. Most often, they are located in studies that examine inter-personal relations and as such, do not help us in devising solutions to wider societal conflict situations. An exception is presented by Thomas and Kilmann (1974) who outline five styles of dealing with conflict as shown in Box 1 below. This technique, now known as the Thomas – Kilmann Conflict Mode instrument provides a link between individual and institutional issues and could be used to help institutions identify which style to use relative to the type of conflict they are trying to resolve.

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| <b>Competitive</b>   | This style is useful in an emergency or when decisions need to be made quickly. It suits people who are in position of power, but can often leave other parties feeling resentful and excluded from decision making.  |
| <b>Collaborative</b> | This process tries to meet needs of those involved, and it is useful in situations where diverse interests are at play, where there has been previous conflict or when a trade off is not possible or likely  |
| <b>Compromising</b>  | This process tries to find solutions that partially satisfy everyone. It is useful when the cost of conflict is greater than the cost of losing ground.   |
| <b>Accommodating</b> | This process means one party will try to meet others’ needs at the expense of their own. It is an effective technique when peace is necessary in the short term, or when issues matter more to one party than another. But it is not an effective approach in the long term because while short term goals are achieved, the conflict at the heart of the problem is not. |
| <b>Avoiding</b>      | This process seeks to avoid conflict entirely. It often means that conflict is not resolved, just put off. It is often ineffective for this reason.   |

‘Conflict is an inevitable feature of resource management, and in the context of climate change governance, something that is increasingly important to resolve across multiple levels, scales, cultures and geographies. To meet this challenge requires going beyond conventional approaches that apply conflict resolution tools within governance, to imagining the conflict per se as the starting focus for creating enabling environments for policy development and environmental management’.

While the Thomas-Kilmann instrument has benefits, conflict management in environmental contexts, also requires mechanisms that situate the issue at various scales, and landscape levels. Other forms of conflict management that are devised for broader planning processes in conjunction with their tool would have advantages by building in attention to conflict at multiple scales. For example, transactive planning, advocates presentation of a diversity of solutions at multiple scales as one possible means by which conflict can be managed (Lane 2003, 284). This is a situation specific, decentred approach which enables dialogue between planners and stakeholders affected by that planning. Effective boundary management and the active engagement of leaders in constructing enabling environments that facilitate resilience and social learning is another (Pouwels et al. 2011, Stephenson 2010). As such, boundary organisations act as the filter and bridge between science and policy to build interdisciplinary and integrated responses to particular problems (Miller 2001). Using a case study of companion modelling to consider the issue of water sharing in the Bhutan, the use of simulations and computer modelling is advanced as a mechanism to understand and map decision making and hence anticipate and resolve conflict (Gurung et al. 2006). ‘Pacification strategies’, that aim to conduct research to reduce uncertainties and ‘facilitation strategies’ that aim to build consensus about beliefs, societal ambition and direction of solutions are two other means of resolving conflict as part of environmental governance regimes (Stephenson 2010).

However, I argue that climate governance frameworks that seek to build adaptive responses could go beyond embedding conflict resolution mechanisms within adaptive governance regimes, to enable the conflict to **become the** conflict resolution process itself. For example, using local government as an illustration, this approach would mean that rather develop a plan or policy to manage climate change, and then embed conflict resolution mechanisms as part of planning process afterwards, I am suggesting that the likely conflicts around this specific management context be identified up front, then used as the basis on which decisions about the most appropriate policies and planning are made, ones that are cognisant of and provide forums for effective ways around that conflict in implementation. This process might take longer to negotiate, but will mean there is less likelihood of climate related policies stalling in implementation due to intractable conflict.

A three dimensional local adaptive conflict governance framework could be a means by which conflict can be placed centre stage and used to enable productive transformation of difficult issues such as climate change. These dimensions are: (i) adaptive management (which includes anticipatory adaptation/foresight), (ii) communications, and (iii) reflexive practice.

#### *Conflict governance dimension 1 - Adaptive Management*

Adaptive management is based on the assumption that circumstances change (Leach, 2006). It is a technique that provides a framework for continually improving managerial practices. However, if we use the *conflict*, rather than the *issue* as the focus, adaptive management could embed greater fluidity and flexibility within conventional environmental management systems—the focus would be on principles of continuous improvement and ongoing conflict resolution.

This turns traditional decision making processes on their head, from a process which considers areas of potential collaboration first and embeds conflict resolution processes afterwards, to one that articulates and acknowledges the areas of difference as the first step in response management. The fluid nature of adaptive

management also suits the dynamics of working with the changing quality of conflict as new science and new problems emerge.

Implementing adaptive conflict management takes place in two phases: (i) by institutionalising intentional and varied policies that may be implemented within a governance framework and (ii) the embedding of mechanisms that promote learning over time and cultivated by the monitoring of responses within the system within which the varied experimental policy systems have been implemented (Arvai et al., 2006). Employing adaptive conflict management techniques can enable policy makers to focus on variation over time within policy, rather than the more conventional place based variation. This feature will enable climate policy makers to engage more effectively with their constituencies. Importantly, this approach enables the synchronous treatment of different options across periods of time and place, crucial in any climate change context.

Conflict in this way can also be used to build more strategic alliances and at multiple levels – from local to international. Having the conflict front and centre means that there are fewer nasty surprises later on, and individuals and groups will be clear about what it is they are negotiating. Crafting conflict issues as ‘risks’ is one way in which conflict can be built into governance in and of itself, rather than something to navigate *against*. Overall, this builds greater acceptance of, and willingness to trial different mitigation and adaptation options that will also have resonance in a climate management context.<sup>2</sup>

Evaluating the conflict per se could also be a strategy employed to guide policy development at the evaluation stage of governance programs. Such evaluations could have five elements: (i) information collation, (ii) systems analysis and vision, (iii) plan making, (iv) implementation of actions, and (v) monitoring and reviewing (adapted from Leach 2006). Undertaking ongoing evaluation will also enable the reflection of how well the management of conflicts within climate change is making it possible for all actors to work together *with* rather than in opposition to the management options suggested for their locale.

Finally, implementation of conflict into adaptive management will also develop adaptive capacity at local levels - a necessary precursor to building adaptive learning and the skills base in local communities to enable the implementation of management policies that will protect infrastructure, the environment and people.

Adaptive capacity is determined by an array of factors including: (i) the range of available technological options, (ii) the available resources and their distribution across the municipal population, (iii) the structure of critical institutions and the criteria for decision-making, (iv) the human and social infrastructures, (v) the access to risk-spreading mechanisms, (vi) the ability of decision makers to manage credible information and their own credibility, and (vii) the public’s perception of the source of the impact (Crabbe and Robin, 2006).

### *Conflict governance dimension 2 - Communications*

Local conflict governance frameworks need to have a communications component to ensure that at both development and then implementation, climate change management can be accepted. International experience shows that there are a

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<sup>2</sup> The idea of trial and error is an overlooked one, but one that is supported within the idea of continuous improvement embodied within adaptive management.

number of ways in which climate change can be communicated effectively (Moser, 2005). There are key two principles adapted here: transparency and appropriateness.

*Transparency.* Transparent communications about the parameters of the issue is important in building trust. For example, being open about and using the science to explain current climate events and possible future ramifications will assist policy makers in communicating the need to take proactive action to ameliorate negative impacts within governance regimes.

It will also create the conditions for discussing positive adaptation strategies, the sharing of experiences and build creative responses, especially important given current communications about climate change are dominated by the binary conceptualisation around whether it is 'real' or not. As Arnold et al. (2012, 19) note: "When individuals open up to one another through respectful interpersonal communications, destructive conflicts can be transformed into productive opportunities for learning and integrative problem solving".

*Appropriateness.* Many other strategies can be employed to ensure communication about climate change is effective including: (i) choosing language that is appropriate to the audience (a good first step), (ii) concentrating on what is feasible for different groups (important) and (iii) maximising opportunities by aligning climate change as an issue with other contemporary issues that resonate with local interests and local agendas (Nurse-Bray and Ferrier, 2009).

Communication materials and strategies need to work within the culturally accepted discourse at local levels. Ultimately, communication strategies must also be based on solid guidelines. While these principles are commonly understood by communication practitioners, they bear repeating: (i) carefully define communication goals, (ii) identify and characterize the intended audiences, (iii) have those working on the front lines well informed and committed, (iv) ensure that communication is not just one-way, and (v) do not reinvent the wheel; learn from other fields and from retrospective/evaluative studies of climate change communication efforts.

### *Conflict governance dimension 3 - Reflexive Practice*

This leads to the final conflict governance dimension: embedding reflective practice as a guiding principle within climate change for local level governance. Learning from past experience is a crucial step to ensure the success of management arrangements. Torell (2000, 354) notes that adaptive, learning based management is derived from three principles: (i) adjusting actions and project strategies as new information is obtained, (ii) learning by doing and experimentation, and (iii) active participation by relevant actors.

The utility of reflexive practice is highlighted in a case study that used workshops to reflect on riparian management in the USA, and shows that it enabled leaders and stakeholders to: "become more aware of the value of dialogue to challenge problematic power relations and enhance collaborative learning and adaptive decision making" (Arnold et al. 2012, 19). This form of reflexive practice as part of an adaptive conflict governance framework for climate change will not only cut costs, but facilitate innovation. Introducing policy makers to existing initiatives in this manner also lessens the pressure caused by the sheer psychological weight of climate change, and can further help organisations build regional to international alliances and networks that may offer future opportunities to adapt to change.

## Summary

Conflict is an inevitable feature of resource management, and in the context of climate change governance, something that is increasingly important to resolve across multiple levels, scales, cultures and geographies. To meet this challenge requires going beyond conventional approaches that apply conflict resolution tools within governance, to imagining the conflict *per se* as the starting focus for creating enabling environments for policy development and environmental management. It requires re-charting the imaginary of conflict as a negative force, to re-conceiving conflict as a powerful tool and one that can assist in recreating how we see, understand and do something about climate change. It is an approach that asks us to “think about it today”.

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### **IPGRC Research Mission**

A primary focus of our research agenda is on political dynamics of governance and institutional innovations in the provision of public goods and regulation especially as it relates to economic and social development in the region.

This will address issues relating to the organisation of markets and politics, and their effectiveness and fairness in addressing complex economic and social problems. It will also include an examination of the transformations of political organisation and authority at various scales – global, national, and regional – which have a bearing on the complex multilevel governance of the delivery of public goods and regulations.

The centre has a particular focus on the global and regional challenges arising from the shifting tectonic plates of economic and political power to the Indo-Pacific region.