

# Social Protection and Climate Change

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**Abstract** This overview is an introduction to the theme session on ‘Social protection and climate change’ in this *IDS Bulletin*. It first reviews the different dimensions of the relationship between social protection and climate change before presenting the articles of the session. The message that emerges from these analyses is twofold. On the one hand, there is a growing recognition that social protection needs to become ‘climate proofed’ if social protection interventions are to remain effective in the long term – in other words, social protection policymakers and practitioners cannot afford to ignore climate change any longer and need to integrate this new constraint into their planning and action plans. On the other hand, there is also growing evidence that social protection can play a critical role in reducing the immediate impact of climate change, and in the longer run, strengthen the resilience and adaptive capacity of people to climate change impacts.

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Climate change has without doubt become one of the most important challenges for social development and human security. The constant request for ‘more’ or ‘stronger’ evidence and the ideologically driven denialism that have impeded decisions during the last three decades have now been replaced by a universal consensus that action is urgently needed. In developing countries, climate change-related events are already affecting the lives and wellbeing of people, in particular – but not only – among natural resource-dependent communities. Droughts, floods, hurricanes and other climate change-related events are becoming more frequent and more intense (IPCC 2007; Schlenker and Lobell 2010).

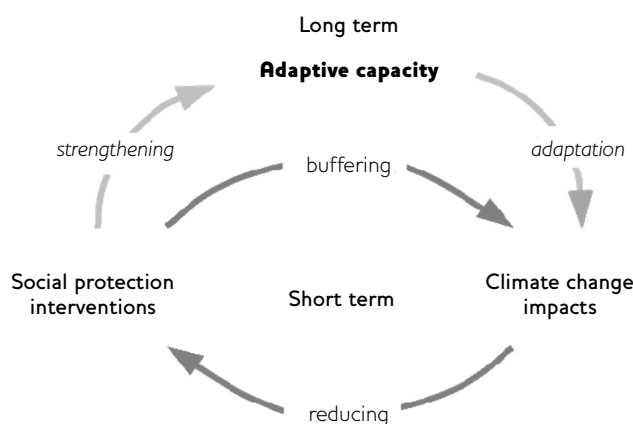
In a parallel, but so far unrelated, way, the concept of social protection has evolved from a relatively narrow focus on safety nets in the 1980s to present-day definitions that take into account longer-term mechanisms designed to combat chronic poverty as well as short-term interventions to reduce the impact of shocks (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004; Barrientos and Hulme 2008). Several international development agencies have recently put social protection at the centre of their strategies for alleviating poverty and managing vulnerability. The World Bank is currently developing its 2012–22 ‘Social Protection and Labour Strategy’ (World Bank 2011) and the latest European Report on

Development focuses on ‘Social Protection for Inclusive Development’ (ERD 2010).

Climate change and social protection are closely interconnected through three main linkages (Figure 1). First, as suggested above, climate change is now recognised to be an (increasing) source of hazard and vulnerability for populations of both developed and developing countries. The Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disaster (CRED) recorded 385 natural disasters in 2010, 84 per cent of which were related to hydro-meteorological causes (such as drought, flood, storm or extreme temperature). Among these, the heatwave that hit Russia between April and June is estimated to have killed more than 55,000 people, while the flood that impacted China between May and August affected 134 million people and cost US\$18 billion (Guha-Sapir *et al.* 2011). Social protection, through its vulnerability reduction interventions – whether preventive (e.g. insurance schemes) or protective (e.g. post-disaster relief) – plays a critical role in reducing or buffering the negative impact of climate change (Ellis *et al.* 2008).

But the relationship between social protection and climate change is not limited to this unidirectional linkage. The relationship unfortunately also goes the other way. Climate change is increasingly affecting social protection interventions and programmes, reducing or even

Figure 1 Conceptual representation of the linkages between social protection and climate change



cancelling out their positive effects. A good example of this scenario was the effect of the drought that affected the Horn of Africa in 2008. Among the households impacted by the drought in Ethiopia were many who had slowly managed to build their assets through cash transfers they received from the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) prior to 2008. There is some evidence that the most severely affected households fell back to below their initial poverty level when the PSNP started in 2005 (Devereux *et al.* 2008).

These two dimensions of the relationship are straightforward. I would argue however that a third ‘dimension’ is now emerging; one that brings a longer-term and more constructive spin to this interrelationship. This is the *adaptive* social protection dimension, which links social protection to climate change *adaptation* (CCA) by recognising that social protection interventions have the capacity not simply to buffer the impacts of climate-related disasters on households’ livelihoods, income, food security and assets, but to be a vehicle of long-term change and development by enhancing the adaptive capacity of households.

A growing literature is emerging that discusses these three dimensions. Heltberg and colleagues (2009) recently published a report on the contributions that social policy interventions such as health, education, community-driven development and, in particular, social protection interventions can make to adaptation and to reducing vulnerability to extreme climate-

related impacts at the household level, and the Swedish Government’s Commission for Climate Change and Development commissioned a briefing paper on social protection and CCA (Davies *et al.* 2008).

More recently, Mearns and Norton (2010) put these considerations into a broader climate change context by advocating the need to bring the social dimensions of climate change more centre-stage. Other international development organisations, such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), have begun to examine linkages between social protection and CCA in more detailed national contexts. For example, UNICEF recently released a scoping study of linkages and synergies between CCA and social protection in Cambodia (Stirbu *et al.* 2010).

The two articles in this *IDS Bulletin* on this theme relate directly to the ongoing discussion about the links between social protection and climate change. The first article, by Paul Siegel and colleagues, describes the current effort by the Rwandan government to establish a comprehensive social protection programme that can reflect and respond adequately to the nature of the risks and vulnerabilities faced by the population of this small but densely populated country. Called the Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP), it is viewed as Rwanda’s social protection ‘flagship’ and, as such, receives close attention and support from the donor

community. Siegel and his colleagues (in this *IDS Bulletin*) argue, however, that there is a need to ‘climate-proof’ VUP. Referring to the concept of ‘no-regrets’ actions, i.e. actions ‘that can be justified from economic, social and environmental perspectives whether or not natural hazard events or climate change (or other hazards) take place’, the authors advocate for such an approach to become one underlying pillar to structure social protection programmes in the future. In the case of the VUP, recognising the likely increasing impact of climate change events in the region, the authors call for the adoption of an adaptive social protection approach and propose a series of recommendations on how to climate-proof VUP in a manner that integrates social protection with disaster risk management, climate change adaptation and food security.

The second article on this theme in this *IDS Bulletin*, by Rachel Godfrey Wood, explores two other dimensions of the relationship between social protection and climate change, namely the ability of social protection interventions to buffer harmful impacts on household livelihoods and the longer-term potential of social protection to strengthen the adaptive capacity of households to respond to risks in general and climate change in particular. Drawing on a thorough knowledge of the literature, she looks at these questions in the specific case of cash transfers. This focus is especially relevant given the attention that cash transfer programmes are currently receiving from the donor and development communities (see Arnold *et al.* 2011). Although she recognises

that cash transfers cannot address all areas of adaptation, Godfrey Wood builds a strong case, demonstrating that cash transfers can contribute significantly to households’ adaptive capacity, helping them respond to multiple causes of vulnerability, and facilitating necessary livelihood improvements and transitions in the face of increasing climate change-related events.

The main message underlying these two articles is therefore in line with the linkages illustrated in Figure 1. On the one hand, there is a growing recognition that social protection needs to become ‘climate smart’ or ‘climate proofed’ if it is to remain (or to become) effective in the long term – in other words, social protection policymakers or practitioners cannot afford to ignore the impact of climate change any longer and need to integrate this new constraint into their action plans and programming. On the other hand, social protection offers an important potential avenue to help reduce the immediate impact of climate change-related events, and in the longer run to strengthen the adaptive capacity of people and build up their resilience to climate change. As both articles highlight, however, there are still many conceptual and practical challenges in trying to bring these two domains together, partially because both social protection and climate change adaptation have so far evolved in two separate ‘silos’. Despite this, the evidence is building that close linkages exist that need to be accounted for more systematically if we want to create synergies and complementarities between the two domains.

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