Climate change adaptation
Reimaging our place in the world

How society can adapt to climate change is an urgent challenge for the global community. Yet what exactly is that challenge? How can we imagine new ways to respond? Climate change adaptation has long been defined as society’s response to an external, changing environment. Dr Andrea Nightingale at the University of Oslo, however, shows that this framing constrains our imagination and puts too much emphasis on technological solutions and managing hazards. When instead climate change is understood as simultaneously a social and environmental problem, the focus shifts to how and when change can occur. Dr Nightingale argues that the global community should be debating key political questions such as, ‘who ought to govern change’, and ‘what knowledges do we need to understand uncertainty and change?’ These questions put issues of power, politics, and inclusion at the centre of concerns around governance of climate change. Possibilities for transformative change can emerge out of these debates, particularly if they help people understand better our interconnectedness and become emotionally invested – not just cognitively aware – of how their everyday lives are connected to the global climate problem.

Despite being one of the most severe threats to humankind, climate change and our response to it remains a contentious issue. Adapting our economic, political, and social systems is becoming ever more urgent, but at the same time more challenging. Decades of warning calls have gone largely unheard, or ignored by society, and with each passing year the scale of the challenge grows. Given this inability of climate science to catalyse enough action, at the University of Oslo, Dr Andrea Nightingale argues it is past time that we reimagine the climate problem itself.

Climate change has been framed as a threat from a global, external, environment by most scientists. The result has been efforts to either modify that external environment to reduce risks, or to improve capacity in society for coping with risks. What climate change means for people and their communities has been difficult to communicate within this framing. This approach is both impractical and politically contentious.

When climate change is understood as a problem of one entangled social–natural system, at local as well as global scales, questions about how we understand our place in the world become more central. This is far more than an existential question. Dr Nightingale shows how climate change is bound up in political struggles over who ought to govern change, and how problem formulation and novel research can help bring the scale of climate change down to the scale of peoples’ lives. When seen through this lens, rather than adjustments and risks, climate change adaptation becomes a far more dynamic and potentially transformative process. Debates shift to how and when change can occur, who is best poised to guide change, and how to make climate change realities more tangible in people’s everyday lives.

Together with her collaborators, Dr Hennart Ojala (University of Copenhagen and Institute for Studies and Development Worldwide, Sydney), Dr Siri Eriksen (Norwegian University of Life Sciences), and Dr Noemi Gonda (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences), Dr Hil Khatri (Southwark Institute of Advanced Studies, Kathmandu), and Dr Ben Muck (Aramco Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Kenya), and with support from the Swedish Research Council, Dr Nightingale raises new and often difficult questions: What are people assumed to adapt to? Who is authorised to govern change? Who is assumed to have the right knowledge for directing change? Who is presumed to require change? In short, they argue that the conversation needs to move away from its focus on technical solutions to consider the politics and effects of climate change.

A FIVE-PRONGED APPROACH
Dr Nightingale and her colleagues offer five key propositions to explain the process of adaptation and to enable transformative change.

1) First, adaptation decisions and actions must be seen within the context of struggles over governing change – that is, whose interests are served and whose authority is legitimised?

2) Knowledge and authority must be understood as dynamic and self-reinforcing – that is, knowledge provides the basis for asserting authority (or for challenging it).

3) To understand adaptation processes, it is important to identify and understand how different groups are positioned (vulnerable, poor, resilient, etc), and how this narrative affects their own agency.

4) Adaptation cannot be separated from pre-existing social dynamics that govern power and knowledge.

5) Transformative change becomes possible at the intersection of contested politics and a shift in our emotional responses to social–natural change.

Ultimately, Dr Nightingale argues that no single actor or process can determine the “correct” adaptation decisions. There is a critical need to debate multiple framings of the climate problem, to embrace rather than attempt to reduce uncertainty, to question our subjective labelling of communities, and to identify how power and politics create vulnerability and control the narrative of change. Possibilities for transformative change can emerge out of these debates, particularly if they help people become emotionally invested – not just cognitively aware – of how their everyday lives are connected to the global climate problem.

An interesting facet to this challenge is the way that the politics of uncertainty become part of the climate change discourse and justly technological solutions based on ‘hard science’ and models. Yet adaptation processes will always have unpredictable outcomes and are dependent on the relations that emerge between people and with their ecosystems. Thus, efforts to promote adaptation need to focus more on these relations, rather than possible outcomes. Current attention on how some groups are more vulnerable to climate risks casts people in relatively fixed identities and capabilities in relation to climate change. Successful climate change adaptation strategies must recognise that ‘identity’ and membership of a marginalised group (eg, indigenous and minority groups, women) are not fixed, but rather inextricably bound up with both access to and control over resources and political authority. Identity politics and emotions thus become part of the climate challenge. As climate changes, so do the politics of identity and recognition. The desire for recognition of one’s own situation (identity politics), combined with struggles over who should govern change, create openings for new emotional, cognitive, and political responses that can help to reimagine our place in the world.

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE
To date, most climate change adaptation policies, such as those supported by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), focus on providing funding and technical support to developing countries, but the often unstable political contexts create additional challenges.

The Himalayan nation of Nepal offers an example of the complexities of climate change adaptation. Nepal is considered a country at high risk from climate change owing to its vulnerability to biophysical changes, its poor infrastructure, its weak economic position and reliance on foreign aid, and accelerated rates of socio-political change. In short, both the human and natural environments in Nepal are highly dynamic.

To gain greater insight into the situation, Dr Nightingale spent 13 years (2005–18) collecting field evidence, conducting interviews with politicians and government officials (eg, those making decisions about adaptation policies), experts (those implementing adaptation...
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Dr Nightingale argues that it is naive, if not downright dangerous, to assume that climate change adaptation programmes have failed to drive transformative change. The failure to address these failures are issues of power and politics.

The questions at the heart of my research are precisely these. From a theoretical perspective you make a convincing argument, but how do you translate this to the real world? Do practical steps should be made by different players (eg. UN and state organisations, NGOs, etc) to ensure that climate change adaptation becomes more inclusive, more sustainable, and truly transformative?

References


