

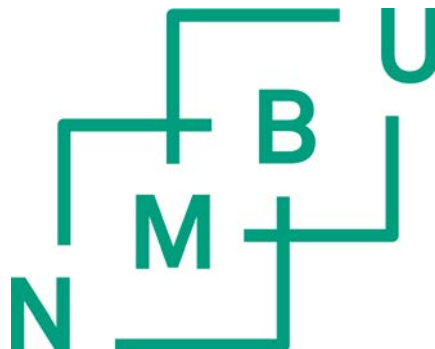
Changing seascapes: local adaptation processes in Belizean fishing communities

Seascapes i endring: lokale tilpasningsprosesser i Beliziske fiskerisamfunn

Philosophiae Doctor (PhD) Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses how contextual social, economic and political conditions interact and influence adaptation to coastal change, through an in-depth focus on two Belizean fishing communities. Belize is considered to be highly vulnerable to climate change and has been described as a place where climate change adaptation is urgent. The study is informed by social science oriented adaptation thinking and political ecology and uses mixed qualitative methods where interviews with local villagers constitute the core data. The thesis comprises four separate but interrelated papers that address how broader development processes, collective action and values intersect with local adaptation processes to coastal change. Research findings illuminate that livelihoods in the studied communities are highly dynamic and have undergone profound adaptations over Belize's colonial and post-colonial history. Long-term trends evident in both communities are the transition from land-based to marine resources and the decline of small-scale agriculture. While environmental change has been a factor in influencing livelihood adaptations, it is outweighed by political-economic forces and trajectories to which local livelihoods continuously have had to engage with and adapt to. Deep connections between local livelihoods and political-economic processes at national and global scales are identified in the thesis. More recent changes in the Belizean seascape have been emergence of tourism and marine conservation. The findings show that how climate change adaptation for ecosystems and fishers are envisioned by conservation organisations and government bodies, do not resonate with local realities and adaptive strategies. The thesis identifies consistent discrepancies between how dominant discourses portray risk and adaptation to coastal change and how such changes are experienced at the local level. Through a focus on coastal erosion, the analysis shows that coastal communities not prioritised by formal policy can, through local activism and collective action, contest government inaction on coastal protection and place adaptation on the decision-making agenda. The findings furthermore underline that how processes of coastal environmental change unfold locally are intimately linked to how different resources are valued. Localised aspirations of development and striving to safeguard or enhancing what is conceived of a good way of life in specific places emerge as a central motivation to why people undertake adaptive actions. The thesis argues that efforts to strengthen local capacity to respond to climate change in coastal Belize must build upon more localised aspirations of development and enable local groups to have a greater say in decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods. The social, political and economic issues related to adaptation discussed within the thesis communities are relevant to the wider Caribbean and other small, low-lying coastal states.