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# Conference Summary Report: The politics of climate change adaptation: Taking stock of academic and practitioner experiences

20 and 21 October 2014, Vitenparken, NMBU

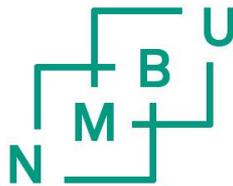
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The Department of International Environment and Development Studies is part of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU). The Department's activities include research, education and assignments.

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Photo (cover): Women carrying food aid from the World Food Programme, Nepal. Sigrid Nagoda.

Cover design: NMBU

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# Conference summary report

## **The politics of climate change adaptation: Taking stock of academic and practitioner experiences**

20 and 21 October 2014, Vitenparken, NMBU

This report summarizes key messages from the two-day conference “The politics of climate change adaptation: Taking stock of academic and practitioner experiences” organized by the Department of International Environment and Development Studies (Noragric) at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU). The conference aimed at examining findings from a recent research project (“The politics of climate change adaptation: Exploring the interactions of climate and development interventions in Mongolia and Nepal”, 2011-2014) in a broader empirical, theoretical and policy context, and convened a mixed group of academics, practitioners and students from a wide variety of countries to share knowledge and experiences about the political facets of climate change adaptation. Discussions drawing on empirical findings from Mexico, Nepal, Mongolia, Mali and Norway as well as a panel debate with practitioners shed light on the multifaceted nature of adaptation processes. The presentations and discussions illustrated how adaptation is influenced by political dynamics related to particular development interests, power struggles and inequities at global, national and local levels.

### **Reframing adaptation – The need for bringing in frameworks for analyzing power and politics in order to understand the space for deliberate transformation**

The conference highlighted that there is an obvious need for bringing in frameworks for analyzing power and politics in order to understand the space for deliberate transformation. Furthermore, we need multi-scalar approaches to adaptation that acknowledges linkages between local and global social and ecological processes. Andrei Marin (Noragric, NMBU) in his joint presentation with Andrea Nightingale (Gothenburg University) and Siri Eriksen called for a reframing of the adaptation concept to take into account the operation of power within climate change responses. Outcomes of adaptation processes are the result of complex power negotiations at different policymaking levels, and adaptation is seldom or never a benign or fair process. Therefore, adaptation measures needs to build on an understanding of power and its consequences for inequality and vulnerability. Furthermore, the role of local strategies employed to mediate change and variability must be recognized and supported in policies aimed at strengthening the adaptation process.

**There is no such thing as a technical adaptation – apolitical adaptation may exacerbate vulnerability**

Climate change adaptation is often framed as an apolitical, technical and practical response to mediate negative effects of biophysical changes and hazards, thereby ignoring the social, political and cultural features inherent in adaptation processes. Climate change adaptation measures and programs are however not developed or implemented in a political and social vacuum, on the contrary; climate adaptation interventions are embedded into social and cultural worlds and are highly influenced by political processes at multiple scales. By concealing climate adaptation as an apolitical and technical process consisting of a set of actions or interventions – instead of being understood as a social transformative process involving decisions by actors at all scales from the individual up to that of global institutions – we run the risk of further consolidating unequal power relations and exacerbating marginalization processes. As pointed out by Siri Eriksen (Noragric, NMBU) in the introduction to the conference, exploring the politics of adaptation is critical because the alternative - depoliticizing adaptation and treating it as separate from societal processes - runs the risk of exacerbating, rather than reducing, inequities and vulnerability.

Policies are not simply ‘generated’ and ‘implemented’, but are rather shaped by divergent interests and have (to different degrees) unpredictable outcomes. Drawing on findings from Mongolia, Batjav Batbuyan (Monglia Academy of Sciences) and Andrei Marin (Noragric, NMBU) described this dynamic as the ‘social life’ of policies. They illustrated how power is also exercised through turning issues into ‘non-problems’ and by making ‘non-decisions’. A stark example of this is provided by the issue of privatization in Mongolia, where discussions of new legal regulations over pastureland have been deliberately taken off the political agenda to avoid controversies before elections.

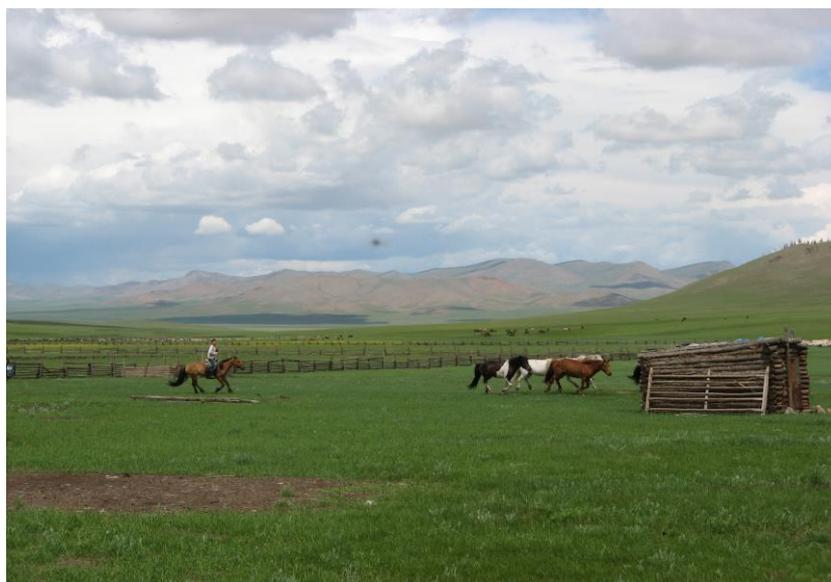


Photo: Andrei Marin. Summer pastures fenced off and cultivated with oats as emergency winter fodder, Mongolia

**Adaptation needs to be conceived as a process to be supported, especially an empowering, democratic and deliberative process, not as an action, solution or technology to be implemented**

Emerging from the conference is also the recognition that the political nature of adaptation processes requires us to alter the ways that formal adaptation policies are conceived. Keynote speaker Andrea Nightingale (University of Gothenburg), argued in her presentation that climate change adaptation programs are predicated upon the need to respond to biophysical change, however, this is a rather misleading starting point; biophysical change is not isolated from other processes of change. Drawing on her findings from Nepal, Nightingale illustrated how climate change adaptation programs land in already politicized contexts and are highly influenced by struggles over authority, control over resources and political recognition. She concluded that making general protocols for adaptation planning is highly problematic, and that there is a need to focus on politics and power to understand adaptation needs.

Keynote speaker David Manuel-Navarrete (Arizona State University) argued in his presentation that adaptation is fundamentally political because it is part of the politics of development; it requires social-ecological transformations; and because it is a property of complex socio-ecological systems, the dynamics of which are determined by political processes. Manuel-Navarrete drew on empirical examples from Mexico to highlight the political facets inherent in adaptation processes, and exemplified how a local adaptation process initiated by civil society and grassroots mobilization was impeded by top down political decisions favoring certain interests, leading to suboptimal outcomes for the local community. He therefore argued that adaptation should be a participatory and democratic process that takes into account different views and interests to avoid further marginalization and oppression.

Not only may adaptation policies be ineffective when ignoring politicized contexts and the way power dynamics drive vulnerability; such apolitical approaches may even contribute to making matters worse. This was clearly illustrated in two further studies of Nepal presented at the conference. By drawing on empirical findings from her PhD study in Humla in northern Nepal, Sigrid Nagoda (Noragric, NMBU) demonstrated how social structures and power relations are key drivers of local vulnerability patterns, and how climate stress reinforce inequity and marginalization dynamics. Nagoda argued that traditional food aid aimed to reduce food insecurity might contribute to maintaining this status quo rather than challenging the local power structures that shape the vulnerability context, thereby potentially increasing food insecurity in the longer term. Moreover, Nagoda observed that formal climate change adaptation documents tend not to capture local understandings of the vulnerability context, including local dynamics and social complexities. Because climate adaptation is mainstreamed into existing development frameworks, adaptation efforts are effectively constrained from altering current development approaches when addressing vulnerability. Furthermore, policies that build

on a linear and technocratic climate adaptation approach addressing the outcomes of climate change, rather than the contexts creating vulnerability, reinforce the dynamics causing vulnerability.

Yograj Gautam (University of Bergen) similarly drew on his PhD study on food assistance programs in Humla to illustrate potential adverse effects of policies aimed at reducing vulnerability. Gautam argued in his presentation that the food assistance programs have not been embedded in an understanding of local needs, priorities and capacities or recognized socio-economic inequalities, and are therefore highly ineffective in reducing farmers' vulnerability to climate change.

These studies all highlight the importance of taking the vulnerability context and local strategies to manage variability and change as a starting point for supporting adaptation to climate change. Professor Gufu Oba (Noragric, NMBU), drawing on his two recent books, illustrated how adaptation to environmental change has formed part of pastoralist systems for centuries. Critically, threats to pastoralist systems come not only from climate change, but rather from governance and other social and political changes in the region that undermine pastoralist adaptation strategies.

**Mitigation and adaptation are intimately linked. Delinking them from each other and from development pathways can be a political choice**

There are increasing calls for understanding developed and developing country contexts as well as mitigation and adaptation as closely linked, through the development pathways that produce them. The recent (2014) report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change emphasizes the need to go beyond incremental adaptation to transform systems, structures, relations, behaviours, beliefs and worldviews that contribute to climate change and social vulnerability. Such changes include actions and decisions in the practical, political and personal spheres. Although most focus has been on changes in the practical sphere, where technological innovations and changes in behavior take place, the boundaries for such actions are defined by the political sphere of systems, structures and power relations. The personal sphere of individual and collective beliefs, values and worldviews as well as dominant paradigms is critical for achieving climate resilient pathways because they influence both the structures and relations inherent in the political sphere as well as practical actions. Climate resilient pathways are described in Working Group II chapter 20 regarding Sustainable development and climate resilient pathways as “development trajectories that combine adaptation and mitigation to realize the goal of sustainable development” (Denton et al, p. 1104). This chapter nevertheless illustrates a tension between perceptions of transformations as an outcome of climate change (such as the need for massive relocation) and transformation as a deliberate process address both emissions and social drivers of vulnerability in order to avoid such dramatic impacts of climate change.

In her presentation, Siri Eriksen argued that the latter view of transformation makes most sense because current development pathways drive both social vulnerability and emissions that cause climate change. Development as usual is not enough: current carbon-intensive development models need to be challenged in order to avoid reinforcing both vulnerability patterns, inequity and modes of production and consumption driving emissions. The IPCC Working Group II chapter 13 on Livelihoods and poverty concludes that in order to move towards sustainability: “a fundamental rethinking of poverty and development will need to emphasise equity among poor and non-poor people to collectively address greenhouse gas emissions and vulnerabilities while striving toward a joint, just, and desirable future” (ch 13, p. 818).

Berit Kristoffersen (University of Tromsø) exemplified in her presentation how climate change may open up new opportunities for economic activities in the Arctic region, and how this influences Norwegian adaptation policies. She illustrated how Norwegian climate policies are influenced by the notion of ‘opportunistic adaptation’, defined as; “the ideas that the economic benefits of climate change should be prioritized over efforts to address the causes” (Kristoffersen 2015). She argued in her presentation that the concept of ‘opportunistic adaptation’ exposes the linkages between the processes of adaptation and mitigation.

Climate change adaptation lands in different political contexts, and understanding these dynamics and how they interact with development processes is equally important in developed as in developing country contexts. Introducing a policy dialogue exploring practical experiences with adaptation processes in both types of contexts Herdis Laupsa (Norwegian Environmental Agency) presented an overview of the work on climate change adaptation in Norway from the national point of view. The policy dialogue included a panel debate between representatives from the Norwegian Red Cross (Helene Ruud), the Directorate for Civil Protection (Erling Kvernevik), the County Governors’ office in Sogn and Fjordane (Haavard Stensvand) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Antonie Kræmer). Andrew Kroglund from the Development Fund moderated the dialogue. The policy dialogue highlighted the need for more knowledge on the impacts of climate change, but also emphasized the challenge of translating technical and scientific knowledge into local policies and practices. Furthermore, the uncertain nature of climate change and difficulties in making detailed and accurate projections of future climatic conditions challenges policymaking and implementation of technical adaptation measures. This demonstrates the inadequacy of managerial approaches to climate change adaptation. Rather than planning for specific, and to some degree uncertain, impacts of climate change, there is a need for sustainable social transformation that strengthen the ability to prepare for and respond to uncertainty. It was further emphasized that climate change is a development issue, necessitating social transformation not only in the developing world, but also in developed nations – starting with changes in individual behavior.

## **The need for self-reflection, both among researchers and practitioners, of them as stakeholders and their interests and values, and how they affect and form part of power relations**

Understanding climate change adaptation as an inherently political process requires that researchers and practitioners also reflect on their role in power relations and political dynamics. Todd Crane (International Livestock Research Institute) stressed in his presentation that not only is politics an inherent feature of adaptation; scientific research is also situated within political agendas. The politics of scientific research, he argued, involves for example the control of knowledge production processes, framing of research, and data quality standards. He drew on the example of an applied agricultural research project in Mali to illustrate how researchers have agendas and needs of their own, thereby influencing the outcomes of the project. This calls for self-reflection within the scientific community, and acknowledgement that researchers are also stakeholders in a project.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

Knowledge and experiences shared at the conference contribute to a deeper insight into the social and political dynamics inherent in climate change adaptation processes. These insights have implications not only for our theoretical understanding of the social dimensions of vulnerability and adaptation to climate change, but also for policy development and implementation, as emphasized by Professor Jon Ensor (Stockholm Environment Institute, University of York). Commenting on several of the conference presentations on the first day, Ensor argued that the inadequacy of climate change adaptation interventions to address the root causes of vulnerability, e.g. food aid programs in Nepal, is a source of great concern. He further questioned how one can challenge the dominance of top down, apolitical adaptation approaches, and incorporate a sensitivity to power and politics in adaptation planning and policy. "Is there a limit to what external interventions can achieve – in terms of enabling successful adaptation – in the face of strong indigenous or domestic politics?" he questioned.

Hence there is the potential that aid or adaptation programs - if kept in a technical realm implementing particular solutions - become disempowering. However, if adaptation is supported as a political process such programs also have the potential of becoming empowering. There is no question that there will be a need to support populations that are facing multiple stressors in their efforts to mitigate adverse effects of climate variability and change, however, we need to realize that adaptation measures might have unintended negative consequences, and actually reinforce dynamics causing vulnerability. In spite of having good intentions, institutions and governments designing and implementing climate change adaptation policies and projects might end up doing more harm than good if they ignore social, political and cultural dimensions of vulnerability. Rather than imposing a set of technical measures on a local community, there is a need to support local social transformation. Adaptation needs to be a

participatory, empowering and democratic process that includes different views and protects a diversity of interests, particularly the needs of the most marginalized. Conversely, when the design and implementation of adaptation policies and projects do not allow for a democratic and participatory process, some interests are effectively excluded and ignored.

The key message emerging from the conference is thus the recognition that there is no such thing as a 'technical adaptation'. All climate change interventions are inherently political, and adaptation is seldom a solely benign, neutral or fair process. The outcome of adaptation for different groups is the result of complex negotiations at various decision-making levels, influenced by who sets the objectives about what is considered desirable and good. Even the use of concepts is in itself political, for example who is defined as vulnerable and why. Labeling a group vulnerable can be disempowering because it implies that they are helpless and require outside assistance. Labeling oneself as vulnerable can however also legitimize gaining access to resources. 'Depoliticizing adaptation' is a deliberate political act. 'Depolitization' effectively means that some interests are not invited into and included in the decision-making process. Such shutting down some voices or perspectives means furthering particular interests. Moreover, mitigation and adaptation are intimately linked. Delinking them can be a political choice (such as in the case of Norway), or linking them to development objectives (e.g. energy security/economic growth in developing countries or privatization of land) can legitimize interventions that serve very particular types of interests. Understanding these political dimensions to how adaptation comes about is critical if the climate change problem, and the development pathways driving it, is to be addressed. This calls for a much more careful analysis of power relations and political dimensions of adaptation than has so far often been the case.

# List of presentations at the conference

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## ***Day One, 20 October 2014***

### **Introduction and keynote speech**

Siri Eriksen: *The politics of climate change adaptation: Taking stock of academic and practitioner experiences. Introduction and overview.*

David Manuel-Navarrete [Keynote]: *Why is adaptation political? Key political facets of adaptation.*

### **Session 1: The politics of adaptation**

Andrei Marin, Andrea Nightingale and Siri Eriksen: *Why adaptation needs to be reframed.*

Sigrid Nagoda: *Politics of adaptation and humanitarian interventions in North West Nepal.*

Batjav Batbuyan and Andrei Marin: *The 'social life' of the pastureland law and the politics of adaptation in Mongolia.*

Jon Ensor: *Comments on key themes emerging from the presentations (session 1).*

### **Session 2: Policy dialogue: How can adaptation efforts contribute to climate resilient development pathways?**

Herdis Laupsa: *What now? Where do we go with adaptation in Norway?*

Siri Eriksen: *The IPCC WGII report and climate resilient pathways.*

### ***Panel discussion***

Andrew Kroglund, The Development Fund [Moderator]

Helene Ruud, Norwegian Red Cross

Erling Kvernevik, Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection

Haavard Stensvand, the County Governors' office in Sogn and Fjordane

Antonie Kræmer, Norwegian Agency for Development Assistance

## ***Day Two, 21 October 2014***

### **Session 3: Adaptation on the ground: from policy to practice**

Andrea Nightingale [Keynote]: *Playing with politics and power in Nepal's climate change adaptation programs: From NAPA to LAPA.*

Berit Kristoffersen: *Opportunistic Norwegian climate politics.*

Gufu P. Oba: *Climate change adaptation in Africa: An historical ecology.*

Todd Crane: *The hidden politics of applied agricultural research for adaptation: Participatory technology development in central Mali.*

Yograj Gautam: *Aid or Abyss? Assessing the effectiveness of food assistance programs in the Nepal Himalaya.*

## Participants at conference "The politics of climate change adaptation", 20 - 21 October 2014

<b>First Name</b>	<b>Last Name</b>	<b>Affiliated institution and job title</b>
Andrea	Nightingale	University of Gothenburg, Professor
Andrei	Marin	Researcher, NMBU
Antonie	Kræmer	Norad, Adviser
Batbuyan	Batjav	Institute of Geography
Berit	Kristoffersen	University of Tromsø
Bertha	Shilunga	UMB, former student
Bill	Derman	NMBU, Professor
David	Manuel-Navarrete	Arizona State University
Elin	Selboe	University of Oslo, Postdoctoral research fellow
Erling	Kvernevik	DSB, senior adviser
Gry Tina	Tinde	Norad, Senior Advisor in Section for Research, Innovation and Higher Education
Gufu	Oba	NMBU Professor
Haavard	Stensvand	Fylkesmannen i Sogn og Fjordane, Head of Emergency planning
Hans	Adam	NMBU, PhD
Heather	Sinclair	The Pennsylvania State University, Graduate Student
Helene	Amundsen	CICERO, Senior Research Fellow
Helene	Ruud	Norwegian Red Cross
Herdis	Laupsa	Senior Adviser, Section for Climate Science and Adaptation
Irene	Tollefsen	FOKUS, advisor
Irina	Pleva	NMBU, Master student
Jana	Sillmann	CICERO

Jonathan	Ensor	Senior Researcher, Stockholm Environment Institute, University of York
Kassim	Kulindwa	NMBU, Noragric, Associate Professor
Kirsti	Stuvøy	Associate Professor, HiL/NMBU
Lars Otto	Naess	Institute of Development Studies, Research Fellow
Linda	Syгна	cCHANGE
Marianne	Mosberg	NMBU, Higher executive officer
Marianne	Karlsson	Noragric, PhD candidate
Mette	Møglestue	Norad
Nina	Holmelin	CICERO, Research Fellow
Ognjen	Zurovec	NMBU, PhD Candidate
Peter	Andersen	Dept. Geography, Univ. Bergen, Associate Professor
Pål	Vedeld	Professor, Noragric, NMBU
Rahat	Sabyrbekov	NMBU, PhD Candidate
Ruth	Haug	NMBU, Professor
Sigrid	Nagoda	Noragric, NMBU
Silje S.	Vevatne	Norad, Adviser
Siri	Eriksen	Noragric, NMBU, Associate professor
Todd	Crane	International Livestock Research Institute, Researcher
Tor Håkon	Inderberg	Fridtjof Nansen Institute, Senior Research Fellow
Trond	Vedeld	NIBR, senior researcher
Trude	Rauken	CICERO, Research Fellow
Truls	Bakke	NMBU, Master's student in international environmental studies
Yograj	Gautam	University of Bergen, Stipendiat

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