

Long term policies on adaptiveness: for whom? To what? By what? By when?

By Louis Lebel

Adaptiveness

Adaptiveness needs explanation. It is a term resurrected in the Earth System Governance group. The purpose was to try and not privilege a particular school of theories of change – adaptation in the climate change community, adaptation in studies of human behaviour and evolution, adaptive capacity, resilience, vulnerability, robustness, social learning and so on.

By adaptiveness I mean the collection of processes through which a social group benefits in response to, or in anticipation of, challenges created through environmental changes. It includes the phenomena of (1) “narrowing” perceived gaps between current responses and imagined best where the latter doesn’t shift and (2) “pursuing or tracking” changes in what is “best” when that itself changes; (3) “transforming or re-organizing” when what is “best” requires a leap across thresholds or from one regime to another.

Mechanisms may be of the “build adaptive capacity” or maintain “social-ecological resilience” sort. Or, on the other hand, be framing or more specific policies to change way of doing something or adaptation and transition policies.

In this talk I focus on adaptiveness with respect to large scale environmental changes or earth system challenges. My key point is that we need more, creative and critical research on questions of governance around adaptiveness.

By governance I mean the process by which social groups or societies share power, inform decisions and take action. Governance emerges from the networks, beliefs and institutions that guide behaviour; it is not the sole prerogative of state government.

For whom?

What does it mean to say a society has “adapted”? Does that mean every woman and child? Or is the some average person implied?

Consider climate change. Adaptation has so far had a cozy ride. Most of the politics has been about who should pay. The policies themselves are usually thought of as good intentions, but maybe failing in particulars. Few questions are asked about who benefits from, who is served by the pursuit of adaptation policies? Or conversely, who is excluded, who is re-burdened?

National adaptation policies and interventions to climate change, ecosystem degradation and so on, may produce losers not just winners. Actions taken to protect “national assets” may make disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, whose “property” doesn’t count, much more vulnerable. At the international level securing resources that makes one country better “adaptive” may make another less so.

A key unit of analysis, therefore, are institutions that allocate burdens and risks: of these we can ask for whom? And whether or not they are fair?

To what?

Although there are broad arguments out there that “wealth” equates to adaptiveness; and conversely lack because of the flexibility of having nothing. Neither of these arguments are convincing or satisfying to practical responses to diverse environmental change challenges. Adaptive capacity may be rather specific and the resources and capabilities acquired by social groups not always convertible.

Thus, a group can be very capable of dealing with shortage of water, but hopeless in tackling unusual floods. Another may have food needed, but lack energy to add-value to it or move it.

Narrow initiatives may fail to take into account side-effects. Adapting to reduced dry season rainfall by increasing operating storage may also increase vulnerability to let the storm which exceeds river regulating capacities and then leads to even more catastrophic floods. Interactions between land and water policies can be at complete cross-purposes.

Exactly what society should be adapting to, building adaptive capacity for, reducing vulnerability to... is subject to politics. This may be polarized or consensus-building; have a deliberative or formal representative emphasis; expert- or grass-root led.

How decisions are explored and made in adaptation policy development needs analysis.

By what? By when?

Who benefits from adaptation may not be the same group which has to do the adapting. Asking questions about who is being asked to change behaviour, take on new burdens and risks helps unpack issues of fairness in adaptation.

It is not uncommon for policies to assume that it is through institutions of the state that global change will be addressed. But others argue that it is finer levels, in firms, and communities, at local government where some of the most critical actions to adapt to will take place. Politics over choice of and among levels and scales are likely to be part of “adaptiveness”.

The issue of short and long-term interactions in “building and eroding” adaptiveness are not well understood. How societies reach decisions about how “responsive” they should be to shocks and disturbance seems to me a crucial question with a large cultural (perceptions of risk) foundation. When do societies wait for a crisis unfold before acting? Whose interests are served by reacting more quickly or slowly?

Many “adaptation” challenges are tackled from the logic of optimization. We need more efforts that look more closely at contestation and negotiation, at how problems are framed, and the way compromises in collective actions are achieved.

Governance attributes

Do some forms of governance enhance capacities to adapt to environmental changes?

There are arguments and some evidence that meaningful participation, because it builds trust and promotes deliberation, could be important to building and maintaining adaptive capacity through learning. Adaptive co-management is one form studied and promoted. But these need to be studied critically too: for the costs involved, and the way they shape how power is exercised. Polycentric and multi-level governance has often be suggested as crucial to responding to global environmental changes. But again empirical evidence about performance, about how local justice challenges are addressed are rare.

In my part of the world a critical question is often: do alternative, community-based initiatives detract from the actions taken by local government now possible as a result of

decentralization reforms? And who benefits from, and what are the risks of privileging local when addressing large scale environmental changes?

Conclusions

Critical and well designed research is needed on initiatives , programs, projects, institutions, and routines which address “adaptiveness” to large scale environmental changes. This will include analysis of discourses and social practices, as well as efforts to institutionalize and break-up arrangements.

I suggest that theories and insights from governance studies more broadly will find some interesting challenges when it has to deal more specifically with “time and sequence”, uncertainty and surprise, that is inherent in talking about and action on “adaptation”.

I believe the key will be in exploring the detailed social processes and mechanisms in diverse cultures of how decisions about the future are explored, deliberated and acted upon.

I am not confident that we will come up with the magic “framing policy principles” for adaptiveness. Rather I anticipate that research on adaptiveness will reveal needs for further democratization: adaptation needs to be politicized, and that informed negotiation and struggles over fairness will be the norm. That is what makes engaged research on “adaptiveness” interesting and important for the long-term.

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