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A brief overview of Community-Based Adaptation

Patrick Kirkby, Casey Williams and Saleemul Huq



Introduction

Many consider Community-Based Adaptation (CBA) to be a ‘vital approach to the threat climate change poses to the poor.’¹ However, no concise yet comprehensive overview of CBA exists. This briefing paper seeks to fill that gap by providing an overview of CBA, its core principles and challenges.

The CBA approach

The aim of CBA is to support the adaptation needs of ‘those most vulnerable:’ vast numbers of poor and marginalised peoples living in high-risk environments, primarily in developing countries. The vulnerability of these peoples is a function of their low capacity to adapt and cope, as well as their exposure and sensitivity to climatic variability and change. Proponents of CBA are often driven by concerns over the social injustices of climate change, since ‘those most vulnerable’ tend to contribute the least greenhouse gas emissions. It is considered an imperative that vulnerable peoples are provided with adaptation support that is planned, participatory and specific to local contexts.

In practice, CBA is delivered in the form of project interventions by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In some instances, it is also integrated into government-led policies and programmes. We estimate that there are up to several thousand CBA-style projects in existence or already completed—primarily in Africa, Asia and the Pacific Islands. Although it is difficult to determine how much climate finance is directed at CBA due to inadequate reporting, CBA practice is expected to continue to grow under emerging and expanding streams of climate adaptation financing.²

CBA is also a research agenda, and a Community of Practice (CoP), organised around an international conference series held since 2005. The aim of the CBA conferences is to share knowledge, strengthen connections, build capacity and inform policy and practice. CBA is also receiving increased attention

at the international level, including at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP).

Principles of CBA

The overall aim of CBA is to empower communities to prepare for and respond to climatic stress by facilitating adaptation that is inclusive, community-driven and sustainable. In theory, this is achieved by enabling local peoples to plan for the impacts of climate change and determine the methods and goals of adaptation.

The CBA process begins with an assessment of vulnerabilities to climate stress, the factors underlying such vulnerabilities and related capacities to adapt. The assessment process typically combines technical appraisals by external actors with participatory self-assessments. CBA practitioners then seek to work in partnership with local peoples to strengthen their capacity to prepare for and respond to the effects of climate variability and change. CBA practitioners aim to build upon existing adaptive capacities, which consist of existing local knowledges, networks, practices, skills, technologies, expertise, norms and institutions—as well as peoples’ intrinsic motivations, aspirations and goals. The CBA process seeks to build the overall capacity of communities regardless of whether or not specific climate change impacts manifest.

Ideally, CBA is a community-led and driven

process—a partnership between institutions and communities—rather than something done for and imposed upon local peoples. The processes of assessment, planning, intervention and evaluation must be participatory—including all sections of local society, and incorporating peoples’ diverse priorities, concerns, perspectives and cultures. CBA practitioners must aim to tailor adaptation strategies and actions to local cultural contexts, in order to preserve local autonomy and produce endogenous outcomes that are relevant and acceptable to local peoples.

Some CBA analysts argue that, for wider impact, CBA should not remain as isolated activities within a community. It must

also be *scaled-up* – which requires communicating local needs to higher levels of decision making – and *scaled-out*, which involves turning small-scale projects into large-scale endeavours and/or expanding local adaptations over a large geographic area. Proponents

of ‘mainstreaming’ suggest that CBA should be integrated into broader adaptation and development schemes. In theory, mainstreaming expands the reach of CBA in order to benefit a greater number of people. Mainstreaming also allows the needs of the most vulnerable to be reflected in subnational, national and international adaptation programs, policies, plans and investments.

Challenges in practice

In principle, the CBA approach aspires to be inclusive, empowering and context-specific—supporting the adaptation needs of those most vulnerable to climate change. However, the experiences of CBA researchers and practitioners suggest that these aspirations are difficult to achieve in practice. In this section, we highlight some of the key challenges that CBA has encountered in practice.

Misperceptions of ‘community’

The term ‘community’ is often used in a way that implies a cohesive group of people with shared cultures, values, aspirations and goals. However, local populations tend to be ‘characterized as much by internal differences (in the priorities, needs,

vulnerabilities and capacities of the people) as by commonalities.’³ They also tend to have uneven, and often unfair, distributions of power. We suggest that ‘communities’ should be seen as loosely connected social and cultural groups composed of a diverse set of beliefs, values, identities and factions.

Achieving meaningful participation

It is challenging in practice to achieve inclusive, fair and meaningful participation of local peoples—particularly the poorest and most marginalised.

The concerns, priorities and perspectives of those less powerful tend to be dominated by the voices of the powerful elite. Often, ‘participatory’ decision-making tends to reflect the ‘needs’ of the elite, who

disproportionally capture benefits from interventions tailored to the poor and vulnerable. Adaptation planning is also complicated by conflicting and competing priorities and short-term interests. A lack of ‘social capital’ can inhibit people from coming together to make collective and democratic decisions, and to take collective actions. Furthermore, the rhetoric

of ‘participation’ is often reduced in practice to a means for external institutional actors to legitimate and build public acceptance of pre-planned policies and interventions.

Subordination of local perspectives

In theory, CBA is an attempt to break away from ‘top-down’ discourses of climate change vulnerability and adaptation—allowing for local peoples to determine adaptation agendas. However, the ‘scientific’ knowledge systems that dominate the international adaptation community tend to frame adaptation as ‘additional’ to development—techno-scientific responses to particular climate-related stresses. Such top-down perspectives risk subordinating local perspectives, priorities, knowledges and cultures, inhibiting local self-determination and limiting meaningful participation.

Issues with focusing on the ‘local’

CBA’s focus on local adaptation risks downplaying the way structures, policies and actions outside communities influence how climate impacts are experienced in specific places. In addition, focusing too much on small-scale, bottom-up, local, project-based activities may limit the potential to provide adaptation support to the vast populations

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of climatically vulnerable populations in developing regions.

Insufficient and uncertain financing

Although developed countries have committed to mobilize US\$100 billion annually by 2020 to address the needs of developing countries in responding to climate change, current financing for adaptation is considered to be insufficient to meet the adaptation needs of billions of vulnerable people.⁴

Lack of distinction between CBA and development

CBA interventions often resemble development actions, since addressing vulnerability through strengthening adaptive capacities often requires addressing existing 'development deficits.' This lack of distinction makes it difficult to identify good CBA practice, attract donor funding and align projects with adaptation financing requirements.

Integration into government policies and programmes

Experiences suggest that mainstreaming CBA into national development planning can be difficult—particularly in developing countries.^{5,6} This is particularly true in cases where there are turbulent and corrupt political systems, rapidly shifting agendas and a lack of political will. Mainstreaming is further inhibited by a lack of coordination and collaboration between and within government agencies, implementing NGOs and CBOs. In addition, the staff of institutions and local governments sometimes lack the required technical expertise, funds, resources and labour capacities to integrate CBA into government policies.

Sensitivity to local cultures

Local cultural factors may contribute to peoples' vulnerabilities, and may inhibit both planned and autonomous efforts to strengthen adaptive capacity. For example, local gender norms may limit opportunities for women to contribute to participatory decision-making processes, and may constrain their ability to build resilience to climate stress and adopt alternative livelihoods. Engaging with cultural particularities is complex and challenging,

and requires CBA practitioners to remain empathetic, sensitive and responsive to local cultures. In many instances, peoples' worldviews, beliefs, values and motivations can be a resource that CBA practitioners can engage with to enable adaptation.

Suggested readings

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Conclusion

Community-Based Adaptation aspires to be an effective, socially just and sustainable approach to support the adaptation needs of the climatically vulnerable poor and marginalised. However, as with any development paradigm, there are barriers that constrain the realisation of 'best practices.' Attaining a robust and shared understanding of the principles of the approach, and reflecting critically on its key challenges, provides an opportunity for ongoing improvement. Moreover, it allows us to engage in debates about the ethics and efficacy of working with local peoples, to consider how lessons learnt in practice can inform theory, and conversely, how theory can influence practice. As a relatively new, emerging and expanding paradigm and practice, we suggest that further research and critical debate is needed to continue to improve the effectiveness and fairness of the way that the adaptation needs of those most vulnerable to climate change are met.

Patrick Kirkby

Patrick Kirkby is a PhD candidate (Geography) at the University of Tasmania, Australia and visiting researcher at ICCCAD.

Casey Williams

Casey Williams is a visiting researcher at ICCCAD and a Hart Fellow, Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University

Dr Saleemul Huq

Dr Saleemul Huq is the director of ICCCAD and senior fellow at IIED.

Notes

¹ Huq, S. & Reid, H. 2007. Community-Based Adaptation: a vital approach to the threat climate change poses to the poor. IIED Briefing Paper. International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). / ² Fenton, A., Gallagher, D., Wright, H., Huq, S. & Nyandiga, C. 2014. Up-scaling finance for community-based adaptation. *Climate and Development*, 6 (4), 388-397. / ³ Miyaguchi, T. 2011. Community-based adaptation to climate change: the concept, challenges and way forward. *SANSI: An Environmental Journal for the Global Community*, 5, 21-35. / ⁴ World Bank 2010. *Economics of Adaptation to Climate Change: Synthesis Report*. Washington, DC: The World Bank. / ⁵ Ayers, J. M., Huq, S., Faisal, A. M. & Hussain, S. T. 2014. Mainstreaming climate change adaptation into development: a case study of Bangladesh. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews-Climate Change*, 5 (1), 37-51. / ⁶ Regmi, B. R. & Star, C. 2014. Identifying operational mechanisms for mainstreaming community-based adaptation in Nepal. *Climate and Development*, 6 (4), 306-317.

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The International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) conducts research, builds capacity on climate change and fosters the growth of networks in Bangladesh and globally.

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