Warming up the climate change debate: A challenge to policy based on adaptation

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Climate change has become a familiar phrase and increasingly non-specialists are ascribing changes in their landscapes to climate change. While there is no question that the climate is shifting, and it seems closely related to industrial lifestyles, to what extent the climate would have been changing without these stressors is far less certain. But more importantly, these statements reflect the dominant thinking around climate change: how much, where and with what ecological consequences will global temperatures and rainfall shift? Human beings are brought into the debate in two key ways. First, what human land use and energy consumption activities are causing climate change? And second, will humans be able to adapt (McCarthy et al. 2001; IPCC 2007)? The research and policy focus, therefore, is on monitoring and predicting climate change in regions, and determining whether or not there is enough ‘social capital’, knowledge and other ‘resources’ in human communities to enable them to adapt. In this paper, I argue that the debate needs to be opened up to include other issues such as: 1.) inequities in risk and impact within as well as across human communities; 2.) a critical evaluation of how climate change modelling requires problematic simplifications of human behaviour; and 3.) a better understanding of the ways in which socio-ecological regimes emerge, making such simplistic understandings of impact upon humans and the climate inadequate for policy making. In short, I am arguing that we need to pay attention to adaptation in a different way. I suggest that we need to take account of how social and ecological systems co-emerge, and understand adaptation as a contested, negotiated, power laden process. Adaptation is fundamentally a process that is mediated through power and knowledge (cf. Foucault 1980) and as such it is not a quality or characteristic held by individuals or societies. It is a dynamic process that brings together social inequalities, power, knowledge, geo-politics and day-to-day interactions in ways that are far more complex than the present use of the term ‘adaptation’. The emphasis in policy then, needs to be on developing mechanisms for deliberation and democratic decision making around the changes emerging rather than trying to predict how land use will change and whether or not farmers have enough knowledge and networks.

Keywords: adaptation, climate change, political ecology, inequality, governance, resource distribution