



seminar on
Community Based Adaptation to Climate Change

Hughes Hall, Cambridge
 21st November 2009

REPORT



Flooding in Bangladesh

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Report compiled by Holly Edwards, the Humanitarian Centre

1 Seminar objectives and participants

The Humanitarian Centre seminar on *Community Based Adaptation to Climate Change* was held at Hughes Hall, Cambridge on 21st November 2009. The seminar was the first in a series of researcher-practitioner dialogues on key policy issues in development, to be held in 2009/10.

The objectives of the seminar were as follows:

- To bring together researchers and practitioners in the field of community based adaptation (CBA), and facilitate a **dialogue** on this emerging and rapidly advancing area.
- To promote and strengthen **knowledge** of CBA strategies and issues.
- To give practitioners, academics and research students with an interest in CBA a space in which to **make contacts** and **network**.

“Community based adaptation starts from [the] local context and engages with the **capacities, knowledge and practices of coping that are present in the community**. CBA aims to enable communities to understand and **integrate the concept of climate risk into their livelihood activities** in order to cope with and respond to immediate climate variability and long-term climate change.”

Practical Action (Ensor, 2009)

During the day there were presentations and case studies from five experts, with time for questions and a group discussion during the afternoon session. There were 33 participants in total, these included academics, NGO workers, independent consultants and research students. The Seminar was facilitated by Steve Jones, Chair of the Humanitarian Centre.

This report summarises the key messages from both presentations and discussions. Presentation slides are available online at www.humanitariancentre.org.

2 Programme

The seminar was started with a **keynote address from Dr Nick Brooks of the University of East Anglia (UEA)**. This gave a comprehensive overview of CBA - including historical examples from East Africa, current policies, and guidance for future strategies.

Key points from Dr Brooks' presentation:

- Adaptation to climate change should aim to move away from current approaches, which tend to be **ad hoc and reactive**, towards more **anticipatory and deliberative** strategies.
- It is important to recognise the importance of **traditional knowledge**, which should act as a foundation on which to build adaptation.
- **'Maladaptations'** – that is, adaptations that are or become more harmful than helpful – have had disastrous consequences historically, and continue to this day.
- In order to build communities' **resilience** to climate change, systems must be allowed to have a certain level of **redundancy** – i.e. additional or duplicate systems that would function in the case of a severe climate shock. Although redundancy is a feature of many businesses and technologies (e.g. aircraft), it is a concept unpopular with development economists.



Nick Brooks presenting (photo: Steve Jones)

- Considering future scenarios, climate change **challenges may be much greater than appreciated**. By simply ‘climate-proofing’ the status quo, we risk locking ourselves into maladaptation.

The seminar continued with three **case studies** from various parts of the world, chaired by **Dr Tim Bayliss-Smith**, University of Cambridge:

1. **Ian Willis**, University of Cambridge – Approaches to adaptation in drought prone areas of Kenya’s coastal province.
2. **Dr Joelisoa Ratsirarson**, University of Antananarivo – CBA in Madagascar.
3. **Hugh Brammer**, former senior advisor to the FAO in Bangladesh – CBA in Bangladesh.

Maladaptation in the Sahel

The 1950s saw unusually high rainfall in the Sahel region of Africa. Development policies at the time encouraged agricultural intensification, and marginalised traditional subsistence pastoralists. By focusing on productivity and growth, there was a loss of resilience. The new systems failed to consider climate variability, and massively increased vulnerability.

When rainfall declined in the early 1970s agriculture collapsed, causing famines in the region. By ignoring community-based practices and traditional coping strategies, and by failing to build in redundancy, development policies contributed to a major humanitarian disaster.



Hugh Brammer (photo: Steve Jones)

The case studies presented a variety of strategies being undertaken to adapt to the consequences of climate change, including improved **rainwater harvesting** in Kenya and **crop diversification** in Madagascar. Ian Willis cautioned that environmental degradation is occurring at a faster rate than the ability to adapt, and that there is a significant delay between the evidence of degradation and the implementation of suitable programmes. He emphasised the importance of **supporting good governance** and ensuring that **central government meets decentralised needs**. Dr Ratsirarson outlined several CBA strategies, including a **community-implemented irrigation system** and **diversifying income-generating activities**, and also emphasised the importance of including CBA in **government and policy** – government policy must support adaptation. Hugh Brammer argued that, in Bangladesh, climate change is **distracting attention and resources** from more urgent matters, such as recurrent severe flooding and broader development priorities. He emphasised that there is very high **uncertainty** surrounding future impacts of climate change as, amongst other things, **existing climate models cannot predict the current climate accurately – let alone the future**. Mr

Brammer also pointed out that the Bangladesh delta is a **dynamic** system, with **451km² of new land** formed between 1984 and 2007. He proposed that Bangladesh could emulate the Dutch strategy for protecting land below sea level – a costly strategy which would rely on western funding. He concluded that **climate change must be addressed as part of the ‘bigger picture’**, in the context of overall development needs.

The afternoon session started with a plenary discussion, involving all participants, chaired by **Professor Richard Carter**, technical director of WaterAid. Key messages and questions from the plenary session are included in section 3.

The seminar was concluded with a presentation from **Dr Jonathan Ensor** of Practical Action. This addressed the way forward for CBA, and stressed the need for **good governance**.

Key points from Dr Ensor’s presentation:

- Processes must be put in place to allow **community participation** in decision making.

“Historically, **bad governance** and a **failure to respond to local needs** have hindered development efforts. Those problems will frustrate adaptation if not managed. Moving toward **participatory democracy** is essential”

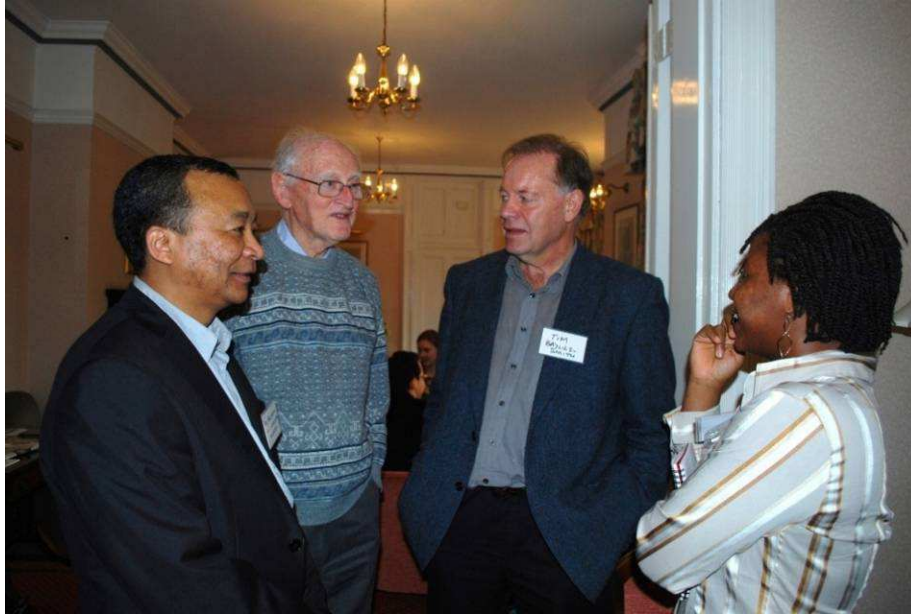
Commission on Climate Change and Development, 2009

- Adaption funding must **prioritise the most vulnerable** or the poorest will not be supported.
- Community based planning and implementation should be in conjunction with **civil society monitoring**.
- **Key stakeholders must be represented at all stages** – planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting.

3 Key messages from the seminar

The following is a summary of the **key messages** to come from the seminar, both from presentations and from the afternoon discussion session. A number of **questions** were also raised, for future consideration.

1. CBA is about **building the adaptive capacity** of communities so that they can manage their own environment and become resilient to future shocks.
2. Climate change **must** be considered as part of the '**bigger picture**' – i.e. it should not distract from more general development goals. Adaptation needs to be incorporated into strategies rather than take over.
3. In order for CBA to be successful, **good governance** is vital. Leadership in the **emerging nations** will **be** key.
4. What is '**community**'? CBA assumes socially cohesive groups, but this cannot always be relied upon. How can adaptive capacity be built in situations where there is no traditional **leadership** (e.g. in some urban settlements – see point 7)?
5. What is the role of **technology**? Whilst **new technologies** may be beneficial in aiding adaptation, the importance of **traditional technologies** and knowledge must be recognised. Communities have applied their own adaptation techniques historically, and these should be built upon.
6. How **can** agriculture-**dependent** communities be supported? Should **GM crops** be part of the answer?
7. Historically, development policies have frequently had negative results, increasing vulnerability instead of reducing it. CBA gives the international community a chance to **re-think development approaches** entirely.
8. For the first time in history, more people live in cities than in rural areas. What are the challenges for **urban CBA** and how do they differ from approaches in rural areas?
9. How can adaptation be planned when there is so much **uncertainty** in predicted climate change? Is the international community dangerously **optimistic** about future scenarios?
10. There needs to be more linkage between **environmental and humanitarian** approaches to climate change issues.
11. How can **social enterprise** be encouraged to engage with CBA?
12. How can **policy makers** be engaged in the dialogue?



Joel Ratsirarson, Hugh Brammer, Tim Bayliss-Smith and Claudia Prempeh (photo: Steve Jones)

4 Summary Evaluation

The seminar was generally well-received, with a suggestion from Jonathan Ensor that another event on this subject could be held in a few months' time. This purpose of this meeting would be to:

- a) Pick up on themes and questions raised and explore them further
- b) Evaluate the outcomes of the Copenhagen Conference with regards to CBA
- c) Summarise research and policy progress in CBA

80% of respondents gave the seminar a rating of four out of five for usefulness.

"A very informative and enjoyable day"

"The layout and format of the event worked well, although there could have been more time for discussion of issues identified by the presenters."

"Very well organised and a great location, plus an interesting mix of people"

Some comments from the feedback forms

"This was a lively meeting that tackled a very topical issue. The rather vague possibilities of future climate change that we used to talk about have now hardened into strong probabilities of a warmer and more uncertain world, with severe problems to be faced by vulnerable people from floods, droughts and rising sea levels. With limited resources and failing states, the need to understand responses at community level becomes more and more urgent, especially if a successful local adaptation can mitigate some of the expected changes. This meeting at the Humanitarian Centre contained an eclectic mix of researchers and practitioners, with in-depth case studies from Kenya, Madagascar and Bangladesh. In the stimulating debate that followed, our eyes were opened to new threats but also new opportunities for action."

Tim Bayliss-Smith, session chair

The Humanitarian Centre would like to thank Hughes Hall for generously hosting this event

Cover photograph courtesy of DFID Bangladesh