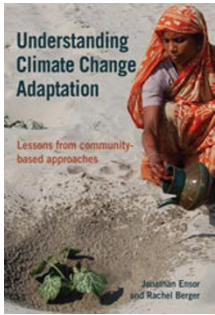


Blurring the boundaries



UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION: LESSONS FROM COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES

by Jonathan Ensor and Rachel Berger

Practical Action Publishing: 2009. 192pp. £14.95

Efforts to help the rural poor adapt to climate change should bolster resilience to natural disasters and climate variability rather than focusing on specific impacts.

The rural poor in developing countries — a group that includes around 2 billion small-holding farmers — are already feeling the effects of climate change. In the mountains of Peru, llama herders have noticed that storms are becoming more erratic and extreme. In Kenya, farmers face increasing drought that slashes crop yields. In Bangladesh, traditional ways of predicting the weather and seasons — such as timing when ants vacate their nests and measuring wind direction — now often fail to work. Even with drastic cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, warming will continue for decades, and farmers, pastoralists and others living off the land will have to adapt to some degree. The question is whether these adaptations will be guided by informed, concerted efforts, or whether communities will be left to figure it out on their own.

In recent years, a small number of projects have looked at how informed interventions might help the rural poor adapt to such impacts. A new book, *Understanding Climate Change Adaptation*, may be the only non-academic title available that focuses specifically on this work. The authors, Jonathan Ensor and Rachel Berger, work for Practical Action, a UK-based non-profit organization that has been one of the leaders in running adaptation projects. Practical Action — formerly known as the Intermediate Technology Development Group, or ITDG — has long been involved in the ‘appropriate technology’ movement, an effort to develop simple, low-cost technologies that tackle specific problems faced by the poor.

So it’s interesting that Ensor and Berger argue that what poor rural communities need to cope with climate change isn’t so much tailored technologies, such as raised bridges, improved levees and new varieties of crops to be grown as monocultures. Instead the authors support a ‘second-generation’ approach to adaptation. This

term encompasses less tangible measures such as bolstering and adding to existing stores of knowledge, creating new social networks and maintaining traditional practices of growing a diverse selection of crops. These measures, say the authors, should give people greater resilience and flexibility, and ultimately the ability to change their livelihoods in order to adapt, whatever may come.

Similarly, Ensor and Berger promote ‘no regrets’ adaptation approaches, arguing for projects that will help people cope with existing climate variability and natural disasters as well as with the anticipated impacts of anthropogenic warming. This blurs the lines between climate adaptation and more general efforts in the areas of development, poverty alleviation and reducing risk from disasters. But such blurring may be inescapable, say the authors, given the uncertainty in regional predictions about climate change.

In general, it’s expected that dry places will get drier and wet places will get wetter, for example. But many areas will buck this trend, and the rule of thumb doesn’t indicate how much wetter or drier any given region might become, how rainfall might be distributed throughout the year or whether it will tend to come as a drizzle or a deluge. Climate models are of some use in trying to get a sense of what’s likely to happen in the coming decades. But various models often disagree wildly about what will occur in a particular locale. In some places it’s not even clear whether rainfall will increase or decrease over the twenty-first century. With such uncertainty, Ensor and Berger argue, the best approach is to encourage resilience and the ability to adapt — an approach that helps people now and, if sustained, should continue to do so in the face of future climate change.

The book’s focus on small-scale projects, run by a handful of employees and reaching a few hundred to a few

thousand rural people, means it addresses only part of the endeavour of climate change adaptation. It omits cities and the possibility of large-scale projects, such as building walls to hold back encroaching seas. Also, the book’s dry, somewhat academic descriptions of the various locales and projects means you have to look elsewhere to get an evocative picture of these places and people, and their problems.

But by focusing on rural poor communities, especially on farmers, the authors build a persuasive case that much of development to date has actually undermined people’s resilience rather than aided it. The green revolution, for example, has seen a huge boost in crop yields over the past few decades — but higher yields have come as a result of intensive irrigation, expensive chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and hybrid crops whose seeds can’t be saved to replant the next year. “Such agricultural systems are the antithesis of climate resilient and adaptive agriculture,” say the authors, since they foster dependence on commercial seed and chemical suppliers while erasing the diversity of crops people once grew. While many traditional crops have lower yields, they are also more resistant to drought, disease and other vagaries.

In showing what is being done on the ground to help people cope with climatic change, Ensor and Berger hope to bolster calls for more funding for adaptation. Of the money richer countries have pledged so far to aid adaptation in developing nations, they’ve contributed little — only a tiny fraction of the billions or tens of billions of dollars that might be needed each year for people to adapt reasonably well. At the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen this December, many developing countries hope to secure a deal

with much greater financial support from the western world. *Understanding Climate Change Adaptation* not only supports the plea by these countries, it shows where

the money, well spent, could make a big difference.

Published online: 11 June 2009
doi:10.1038/climate.2009.58

Mason Inman

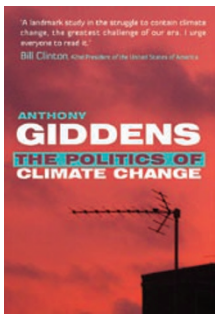
Mason Inman is a freelance science writer based in Karachi, Pakistan.

e-mail: mi@masonmade.com

A third way

THE POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE BY ANTHONY GIDDENS

Polity Press: 2009. 256pp. £12.99



New philosophies on climate policy are well and good, but to be meaningful they must be translated into concrete policy options.

Though a widely respected and prolific sociologist, Anthony Giddens is best known as the brains behind the ‘third-way’ politics of the United Kingdom’s New Labour movement in the late 1990s, during which he became something of a guru to former Prime Minister Tony Blair. Giddens sought to forge a new kind of politics that moved beyond the traditional debates of the political left and right. In his latest book, *The Politics of Climate Change*, Giddens applies his third-way thinking and considerable intellect to climate change, to generally good effect.

As a philosophical treatise, *The Politics of Climate Change* is excellent and in places even brilliant. Giddens is not shy of offering up perspectives sure to provoke the dominant climate policy intelligentsia. Among his heresies, he tells us that “skeptics do deserve and must receive a hearing”; and that “tackling global warming has nothing to do with saving the earth”. He dismisses popularized phrases such as ‘sustainable development’, which he calls a “slogan, rather than an analytical concept”. Similarly, he rejects the precautionary principle — typically characterized as ‘better safe than sorry’ — arguing that “it can be used to justify completely opposite courses of action”. For example, it can give good reason for mitigating expected climate change, but equally, if the greater fear is harming economic growth, it can be used to validate inaction.

Giddens is also quite clear in his evaluation of existing policies. “There is no nation that gets even close to what might be regarded as an effective performance in terms of reduction of greenhouse gases,” he writes. Taking the UK as an example, he

is rightfully sceptical of the ability of the Climate Change and Energy Acts to deliver on promised emissions reductions, and he is similarly justified in noting the absence of adaptation planning from existing policy.

Having largely dismissed the rhetoric of targets and timetables that has come to dominate climate policy discussions, Giddens then moves on to promoting his own perspective. Here the book is far less satisfactory, resorting to wishy-washy recommendations and generic exhortation. For instance, he contends that “climate change should be lifted out of a right-left context, where it has no place” and says “it is up to the government to move toward a thorough clean-out of anti-environmental subsidies” without defining how either would be achieved in practice.

Many of Giddens’s recommendations have a frustrating impartiality about them such that it is nearly impossible to divine his exact stance on the issues. He argues, for example, that successful adaptation requires that we “specify what the effects of global warming will be” but that it should also be flexible because “it isn’t normally possible to predict in detail what will have to be confronted and when”. A preponderance of such seemingly contradictory statements undercuts the prescriptive value of the book.

The book is also marred by an unacceptable number of mistakes in the details of climate policy and science. While these will probably be glossed over by the layman, they sit like an uncomfortable stone in the shoe of an expert reader. Among these are Giddens’s claim that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change identified a most-probable scenario for the future climate, and his assertion

that El Niño events may act to moderate human-induced warming.

Perhaps more discomfiting is the apparent moment of academic hubris when Giddens takes a well-known phenomenon — that people do not act on an incrementally growing threat until it becomes visible, by which stage action may be too late — and names it “the Giddens paradox”. In climate change circles this concept, which is not in fact a paradox, has been cited in the literature for decades. If there is a “Giddens paradox” to be found in this book it lies in the stark contrast between the author’s compelling and sensible third-way philosophy on climate policy and his frustrating inability to translate that philosophy into concrete policy options. Overcoming that paradox is what will lead to actual progress on climate policy.

But make no mistake: overall, Giddens’s book is valuable in setting forth a picture of climate policy distinctly different from that found in conventional circles, namely the political left and right. We are in desperate need of a third way. By legitimizing policy discussions other than the stale approaches that now dominate the debate, Giddens moves us a step closer to realizing a viable alternative.

Published online: 18 June 2009

doi:10.1038/climate.2009.61

Roger A. Pielke

Roger A. Pielke, Jr is a professor in the Environmental Studies Program and a fellow of the Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences at the University of Boulder, Colorado.

e-mail: pielke@colorado.edu