



Adaptation and Poverty Reduction: Reflections on Research and Practice

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Poorer countries and poor people living within them tend to be more seriously affected by climate change, yet have fewer livelihood assets and limited capacities with which to cope with and adapt to the impacts (Kates 2000; Tanner and Mitchell 2008). This recognition has prompted a flurry of activities to integrate climate change adaptation measures within development and poverty reduction programmes and helps to explain the increasing engagement of non-governmental organisations in research and practice on climate change (e.g. AfDB *et al* 2003; Tearfund 2006; UNDP 2007; ActionAid 2006). While the relationship between the impacts of climate change and increases in poverty are widely accepted (UNDP 2007; Stern 2006), there is less understanding of how climate change can be used as an opportunity to reduce poverty (Tanner and Mitchell 2008). Such opportunities may occur through improving climatic conditions in some areas (IPCC 2007), or through new streams of finance targeted at reducing vulnerability to climate change in poor countries. Some gaps in understanding the relationship between adaptation and poverty reduction can be attributed to the framing of the issue within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and to limited engagement of ‘adaptation researchers’ with closely linked communities of practice.

On this last point, researchers have been focusing on the connection between disasters and levels of development for a number of decades (e.g. Oliver-Smith 1974; Hewitt 1983; Blaikie *et al* 1994) and have more recently begun to consider how strategies for reducing disaster risk need to be tailored to different poverty and social groupings (Enarson and Morrow 1998; Carter *et al* 2008). Indeed, this is the topic of the forthcoming Global Assessment Report for Disaster Reduction (UN-ISDR 2009). The relationship between poverty and adaptation to a variety of livelihoods shocks and stresses has been an enduring focus of research on livelihoods, and latterly on sustainable livelihoods (e.g. Ellis 2000; Ellis and Freeman 2004; Sabates-Wheeler *et al* 2008). Furthermore, work on understanding chronic and transient poverty, as described in Figure 1, emphasises the need to tailor national and sub-national poverty reduction strategies to the particular characteristics of diverse poverty groupings (Hulme *et al* 2001).

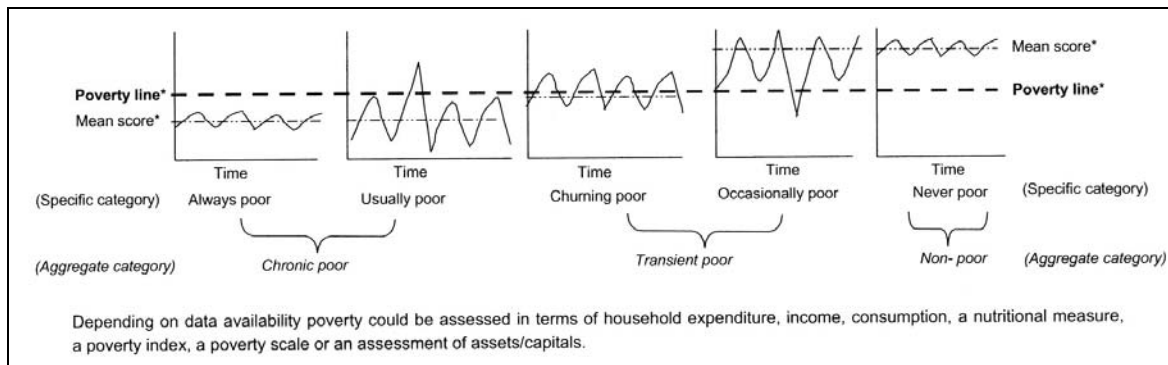


Figure 1: Categories of Poverty (Source: Jalan and Ravallion 2000)

Two key lessons for the practice of adaptation emerge from this literature. Firstly, interventions to reduce the risks posed by shocks and stresses to households and communities are most successful if they simultaneously help to reduce poverty. Secondly, for interventions to reduce poverty effectively, they must tailor measures to different socioeconomic groups within communities, as these groups (e.g. poverty, ethnic, gender, religious, age) have specific characteristics that compromise the ability of more general approaches to achieve equal benefits for all. Broadly speaking, these lessons have yet to translate into the practice of adaptation, where planned interventions still tend to be blind to complexities within communities and are not linked to poverty reduction (Sabates-Wheeler *et al* 2008; Tanner and Mitchell 2008). The second half of this paper considers the implications of these lessons for the research and practice of adaptation.

A Poverty-Centred Approach to Adaptation

Jalan and Ravallion's (2000) categorisation of poverty into chronic (enduring over generations and closely associated with those who are socially excluded), transient (often seasonal or sensitive to shock and stress) and non-poor, provides a route to examining the traditional coping strategies and adaptation options available to people living in these categories. This preliminary analysis reveals a number of elements important for the practice of adaptation, which are summarised here (Tanner and Mitchell 2008):

- the *chronically poor* cannot access adaptation services offered by the private sector, such as micro-insurance products, as they cannot afford the premiums and often do not have assets to insure. However, they can benefit from social protection measures linked to adaptation, such as social pensions and conditional case transfers associated with education and healthcare. These provide a base of assets on which other adaptation interventions can be designed. Thomas *et al* (2005) suggest, at the extremes, the chronically poor often cope with the impacts of climate change by resorting to conflict, crime and sex work or using fragile ecological assets that they would normally seek to protect.
- The *transient poor* can benefit more from micro-insurance, micro-credit and community savings schemes that help to avoid the descent into poverty when exposed to climate shocks and stresses. They are more likely to migrate to seek seasonal work and can gain from activities that enhance remittance flows (Holzmann and Kozel 2007). Approaches

to diversify livelihoods to spread risks are popular, but care must be taken to ensure assets are not stretched too thinly, which can result in poverty traps.

- The vast majority of adaptation options adopted by the *non-poor* will be provided by the private sector. They will invest in the products of the emerging green economy, in tailored insurance products and will diversify their asset base.

Conclusion

Recognising this complexity and tailoring adaptation interventions to different poverty categories will require a shift in approach in both research and practice at the local level and in the design of climate change adaptation strategies at all scales. One such shift is that the scale of analysis must switch from the broad community level to examine not only the location and asset context of communities, but also how vulnerability to climate change varies within location according to socio-economic characteristics that include the multidimensional aspects of deprivation. By focusing attention on the household, it will be possible to increase understanding of the transfer and uptake of adaptive practices and provide a more nuanced appreciation of how households take decisions about risk based on climate information from a variety of sources (Thomas *et al* 2005).

A second shift involves extending efforts to ensure climate change adaptation policies and strategies are able to support the range of adaptive practices pursued by different poverty and social groupings. This will likely be achieved most effectively by adopting approaches which foreground the voices and needs of marginalised people (Polack 2008; Demetriades and Esplen 2008). A third shift is that adaptation researchers and practitioners must develop much stronger relationships with associated communities of practice, particularly those with experience of poverty reduction approaches that are sensitive to differentiation between individuals and households. A final shift is that the adaptation community must quickly develop experience of instruments designed to target the chronically poor, particularly those associated with social protection, as current adaptation efforts appear to be missing this group. Such measures are often capable of providing a core of assets on which other initiatives can be developed more successfully.

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