

ABSTRACTS FOR WORKSHOP NO. 8:
RETHINKING THE CLIMATE CRISIS:
FROM SOCIAL VULNERABILITY TO SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

(in random order)

Urban vulnerability in Africa and new directions for climate risk governance

Trond Vedeld

Abstract

Vulnerability to climate change in African cities is most obvious with regard to the risks from extreme weather events (such as storms and floods). Although research on this topic is still in its infancy, several observers suggest that the overall risk from climate change is typically associated more with vulnerability than with 'hazard exposure' and the 'disaster event' itself. The most vulnerable among the populations to climate threats are recognized to be asset-poor people living in dangerous and exposed places (e.g. floodplains or valley bottoms), and those living in informal settlements and in poor-quality housing. Key drivers of these 'underlying' vulnerabilities to climate extremes are held to be rapid urbanization and related urban changes; the limited capacity of urban governments to enable climate risk management; and the expansion of cities into high-risk sites.

This paper outlines a framework for analysing urban governance and planning issues in African cities exposed to extreme events and utilizes this framework to explore such claims. The paper draws upon work under a large-scale EU funded research project: Vulnerability to Climate Change in Urban Africa (CLUVA), using Dar es Salaam as the main case in point. The paper illustrates how climate drivers are being superimposed on other risks and vulnerabilities rooted in ill-managed city development and poverty; suggesting a new and more critical role for urban governments that internalizes climate risk management within a broader framework for sustainable city development. For example, in many informal settlements the lack of sanitation facilities and drainage or ill-maintained drains, imply that even normal rainstorms might cause serious flooding, landslides and pollution of fresh water sources. The findings call for a paradigm shift in urban planning and governance that may help ensure tolerable living for a diversity of urban populations in the short and long term. A 'climate risk governance' approach would fit well within a local agenda for social transformation and sustainable city development (based mainly on "no-regrets" strategies). Within this approach there is scope for specific climate risk management actions to break barriers at local level to manage risks and further adaptation related to e.g. early warning, outreach on climate services, contingency planning, and land use zoning. To this end it is important to explore the implications of urban governance and policies for socio-spatial and socio-economic transformations, and the role of poor people as agents of change in the politics of climate change.

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Learning from the history of vulnerability and resilience discourse and practice for a better development future

Ilan Kelman

Development research and practice has long explored different conceptions and applications of vulnerability and resilience. That covered vulnerability reduction and resilience building for disasters such as earthquakes, cyclones, and epidemics (e.g. HIV/AIDS) along with longer-term development challenges such as creeping environmental changes, poverty, inequality, and violence. Over previous decades, many studies and on-the-ground programmes melded development and disaster concerns through a framing of vulnerability, resilience, or their combination.

More recently, climate change work has taken over significant parts of vulnerability and resilience discourse. That work tends to neglect the vulnerability- and resilience-related lessons established through previous and ongoing development and disasters work. Instead, four principal mistakes are made through climate change.

First, the history of vulnerability and resilience studies tends to be neglected in favour of reinventing similar concepts. Second, vulnerability and resilience tend to be viewed as being a snapshot in space and time, rather than as a long-term process embedded in development topics and requiring an understanding of history. Third, the framing of vulnerability and resilience is mainly in terms of climate change rather than understanding the development contexts on which tackling climate change should be based. Fourth, climate change's tendency to emphasise ecosystem science poorly acknowledges how society, as part of the environment, differs from other ecosystem components.

Drawing on the history and wider scoping of vulnerability and resilience literature, from development and disasters work, demonstrates the advantages that would be gained by climate change work learning from history. First, repeated mistakes would be avoided, such as seeking a "normal" state for society, which is unlikely to be achieved. Second, dealing with climate change would be embedded within disaster risk reduction, thereby permitting all long-term disasters to be addressed simultaneously. That assists in avoiding the creation or exacerbation of new problems through focusing on only climate change. Similarly, disaster risk reduction is accepted as one development concern amongst many that must be addressed simultaneously with other development concerns.

Third, rather than the mechanistic view demonstrated by the dominance of ecosystem concepts in climate change work, the people's and communities' knowledge, needs, and wisdom could be incorporated into investigating and addressing vulnerability and resilience, including that related to climate change. That assists in understanding the contextuality (sometimes place-based, sometimes people-based, and sometimes both) of vulnerability, resilience, and the vulnerability-resilience connections and overlaps. That also assists in determining how vulnerability and resilience should be communicated—and whether or not using those terms is appropriate in many development contexts, including climate change.

Consequently, climate change will be tackled, but not at the expense of other disaster and development challenges. Instead, climate change will take its appropriate place within wider development discourses and actions.

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Climate Change, Mobility, and Human Security: A Gathering Storm of Global Challenges?

Christian Webersik

Abstract:

History tells us that humans are perfectly capable of adapting to a changing environment. The past ice ages are proof of the great adaptive capacity of our kind. Climate change will happen—and if unabated—with catastrophic consequences. More intense natural hazards—including extreme weather events, sea-level rise, and a hotter and drier climate—are predicted outcomes seriously affecting human security and people's choice of where to live on a much more crowded planet. In the past, people moved to less populated regions when faced by environmental change but today, population densities have increased dramatically and arable land has become scarce. Large cross-border streams of “climate migrants” or “environmental refugees” caused by tropical cyclones, associated flooding and landslides, droughts, and sea-level rise could trigger resource competition with violent outcomes in the receiving country or region. But can these claims be substantiated? This paper examines different types of natural hazards relevant for climate-induced migration, and argues that without an analysis of identifying those who are most vulnerable to natural hazards, where they live, and how they are affected, it is difficult to assess the impact on human security of climate-induced migration. Especially poor countries do not have choices, for them, mobility may be an important way of adaptation.

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Re-framing vulnerability: the political economy of environmental change, ethics and the poor

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Abstract

Environmental change and development are most often presented as separate issues. Most literature on vulnerability and adaptation to climate change treats negative impacts on poor people as something that can be treated on its own, or unrelated to structural conditions and contexts. Rethinking the transition from vulnerability to social transformation requires a major reframing of ideas on poverty, development, and progress. It calls for a critical agenda on poverty research superimposed to a new science for climate change. In this paper, we introduce the field of critical global poverty studies and argue that rethinking climate change as an opportunity for fair social transformations requires a critical understanding of poverty, as relational, historically grounded, and as embedded in global political economy. Historical relations and modernist ideas about 'progress' and 'development' in the minority world have privileged market-based forms of producing and simultaneously perpetuating high levels of consumption, wealth and privilege for some. We argue that these forms of economic development have produced and are perpetuating poverty in the majority world while also creating the current climate change crisis. It is ironic that these 'synergetic yet malignant processes' are presented as separate issues by both dominant discourses on climate change and dominant discourses on poverty.

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Towards a New Science on Climate Change

Abstract Submitted by Karen O'Brien, University of Oslo

The issue of climate change raises many interesting and important questions about the capacity of humans to take deliberate actions to prevent what some scientists refer to as “dangerous climate change,” including potential planetary tipping points. This capacity depends in part on the ability of science to provide sound knowledge and guidance to inform decisions. Is our current approach to science up to the task? The current situation suggests that the knowledge and insights emerging from the scientific community are *not* influencing policy and planning in an effective way. Mistrust in the science of climate change appears to be increasing, and the public discourse has started to focus on a “belief” in climate change, rather than on “understandings” of climate change. Consequently, many efforts are now being made to revolutionize education and capacity building, which includes renewed emphasis on interdisciplinarity and systems thinking. In this talk, I will argue that this is necessary but insufficient to promote effective responses to climate change; what is needed is rather a new science on climate change that takes into account the coexistence of different beliefs, values and worldviews, including different approaches to both the present and future. It is a science that recognizes patterns and connections among processes, viewing climate change within its larger social, political and human context, rather than as a separate “environmental” problem that can be managed or solved. Drawing on recent and ongoing research projects, I outline some of the features of this new science, including how insights from the human development literature can contribute to a better understanding of the adaptive challenges and transformative changes raised by climate change.