

Pro-poor adaptation: The role of assets



Martin Prowse

‘The assets available to the poor may determine their ability to adapt to climate change’

The way in which countries and communities adapt to climate change is now at the forefront of climate change policy, and rightly so. Measures to mitigate the impact of climate change have been slow and sparse, and governments in developing countries are demanding a greater focus on, and funding for, adaptation, with countries such as Bangladesh leading the way (Kaur and Nicol, 2008).

There is, however, no clear path to successful adaptation. What are the best strategies? Who will pay? Above all, who should benefit most? The poorest countries, and the poorest people within them, have contributed least to greenhouse gas emissions, but often face the greatest future risks from climate change. Pro-poor adaptation must ensure that they benefit most from adaptation.

This Opinion argues that an examination of the assets available to poor people is a useful entry point for pro-poor adaptation strategies. It outlines three approaches: Opportunities and Risks of Climate Change and Disasters (ORCHID), Community-Based Adaptation (CBA), and an Urban Asset Adaptation Framework. While the importance of assets is implied in the first two, it is only explicit in the third, which suggests one way pro-poor adaptation might become a reality.

Opportunities and Risks of Climate Change and Disasters (ORCHID)

ORCHID is a managerial response to mainstreaming climate risk management. It appraises projects and programmes in terms of how the impact of climate change affects their objectives (Tanner et al. 2007), particularly on poverty reduction.

Applying ORCHID to projects in Bangladesh funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) reveals that many adaptation measures have focused on improving individual and collective assets, although they are not recognised as such. For example, lifting homesteads above the high water mark in the *chars*, flood proofing transport infrastructure, and improving building design within health and education programmes. Adaptation measures also focus on improving the prediction of hazards.

The study of hazards and disasters helps to explain why ORCHID prioritises such projects. There are two schools of thought: behavioural and structuralist. The former argues that disasters are caused by ‘extreme forces of nature’ and the poor perception of these hazards. This school relies on technology and bureaucracy to predict hazards and prevent disasters. The latter asserts that physical hazards are distinct from disasters: that hazards only become disasters when they interact with a vulnerable population (Blaikie et al. 1994).

The projects highlighted by ORCHID in Bangladesh reflect both schools of thought: the behavioural (improving the prediction of hazards); and the structuralist (reducing the vulnerability of populations through supporting individual and collective assets). Such an implicit focus on assets is also seen in a more popular adaptation strategy – community-based adaptation.

Community-based adaptation (CBA)

Community-based adaptation (CBA) is a bottom-up approach. People have been managing climatic hazards for centuries and CBA focuses on existing technical knowledge and coping strategies, using action research and participatory methods to build on folk wisdom (Huq and Reid, 2007). Adaptation practices stemming from CBA differ across communities (for example, soil conservation techniques in one community, reforestation in another), and many focus on the assets of communities.

CBA often examines the full range of shocks and stresses identified by a community, and is linked to conceptual debates about vulnerability. One starting point in this debate is Chambers’ (1989) argument that vulnerability has two sides: external (risks, shocks and stresses); and internal (lack of defence). Others take different approaches (Figure 1). Moser (1998) uses the concepts of sensitivity and resilience, while the World Bank’s Social Risk Management approach splits vulnerability into three sections: risk; response; and outcome (Alwang et al. 2001).

Dividing vulnerability into risk, response and outcome helps to explain why support for assets

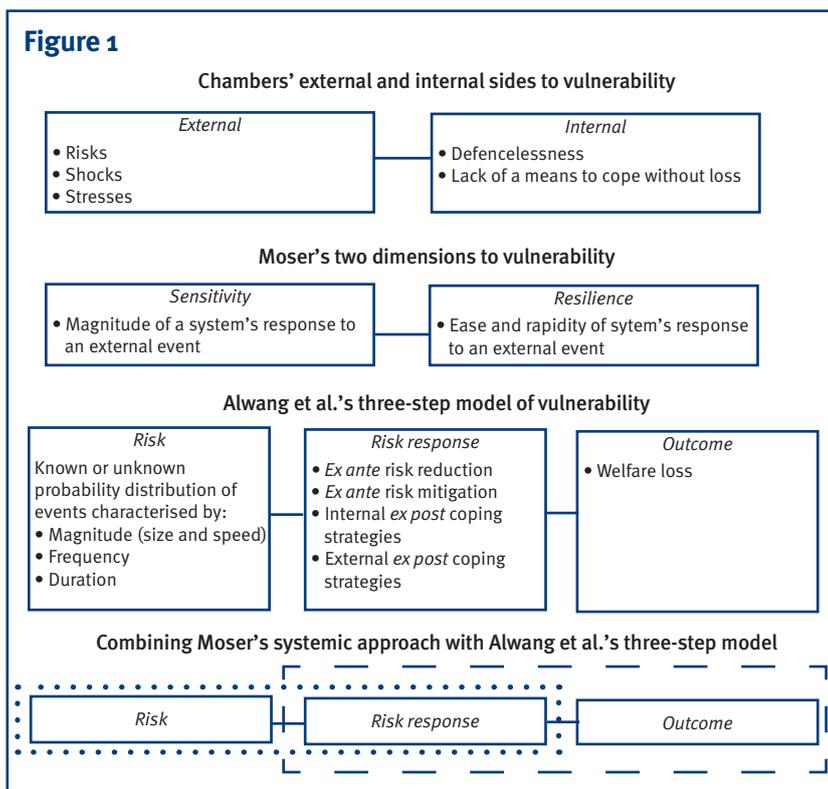
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Figure 1



plays an important role in CBA. Assets – or the lack of them – are central to vulnerability because they are a vital part of the sensitivity to risk, and the actions and consequences that constitute the resilience to risk.

In contrast to ORCHID and CBA, the Urban Asset Adaptation Framework has an explicit emphasis on assets, offering important insights for pro-poor adaptation.

Urban Asset Adaptation Framework

The Urban Asset Adaptation Framework aims to highlight the assets of individuals, households and communities and ways in which they can be supported (see Moser et al, 2008). It focuses on

interventions for different stages of the interaction between a hazard and a vulnerable population at three different levels: household and neighbourhood; municipal or city; and regional and national.

There are three reasons why household assets are crucial to helping poor urban dwellers adapt to climate change (Moser et al, 2008). First, city authorities may not provide them with infrastructure or services. Second, many city authorities may be reluctant to work with the poor, especially within informal settlements. And third, improving the assets of the poor increases the likelihood that they could hold local governments to account.

There are also good conceptual reasons for focussing on assets. Income and expenditure can vary without much change in people's underlying condition, while the assets of a household are often more stable and often tell us much more about current livelihood strategies. Assets also tell us who is likely to remain poor (Carter and Barrett, 2006), and who may accumulate (Moser and Dani, 2008).

Conclusion

Assets are key for pro-poor adaptation. At national and community level, they play a vital role in responding to climate risk. At the individual level the forward-looking view of asset-based approaches complements the long-term focus required to tackle the effects of climate change. An analysis of the assets required by different types of households, in different contexts, is a good starting point for scaling up early pro-poor adaptation schemes.

Above all, focusing on assets highlights that poor people are not passive in the face of climate risk. Assets are central to poor people's response to climate variability they have not created, and for which rich countries bear a heavy responsibility.

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