



Power and politics in climate change adaptation efforts: Struggles over authority and recognition in the context of political instability



Andrea J. Nightingale*

Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University for Agricultural Sciences (SLU), Ulls väg 28, P.O. Box 7012, SE-750 07 Uppsala, Sweden
 Department of International Environment and Development Studies (Noragric), Norwegian University of Life Science (NMBU), PO Box 5003, 1432 Ås, Norway

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the world, climate change adaptation policies supported by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have provided significant sources of funding and technical support to developing countries. Yet often the adaptation responses proposed belie complex political realities, particularly in politically unstable contexts, where power and politics shape adaptation outcomes. In this paper, the concepts of authority and recognition are used to capture power and politics as they play out in struggles over governing changing resources. The case study in Nepal shows how adaptation policy formation and implementation becomes a platform in which actors seek to claim authority and assert more generic rights as political and cultural citizens. Focusing on authority and recognition helps illuminate how resource governance struggles often have very little to do with the resources themselves. Foundational to the argument is how projects which seek to empower actors to manage their resources, produce realignments of power and knowledge that then shape who is invested in what manner in adaptation. The analysis adds to calls for reframing ‘adaptation’ to encompass the socio-natural processes that shape vulnerability by contributing theoretical depth to questions of power and politics.

1. Introduction

Adaptation programs have been developed around the world to create institutions and infrastructure for guiding responses to climate change. In developing countries, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has provided funding for National Adaptation Plans of Action (NAPAs) that sketch out priorities for individual countries to cope with (or capitalise upon) changing biophysical resources (Eakin and Lemos, 2010). These plans generally follow a UNFCCC template and begin with vulnerability assessments to chart existing biophysical hazards, and then evaluate who is most at risk from them (Ayers and Forsyth, 2009; Denton et al., 2014; FAO, 2007). Once vulnerabilities are known, the focus shifts to technical measures (i.e. infrastructure) and institutional design, including new national and regional level coordination bodies, and community based environmental management groups (Biagini et al., 2014; Eakin and Patt, 2011). As such, these internationally initiated and guided adaptation programs are fundamentally underpinned by the assumptions that one, biophysical change combined with marginalisation creates vulnerability to climate change, and two, the best way to adapt is through a variety of technical and institution building measures.

These two assumptions, while not inherently wrong, are somewhat misplaced given the political realities of many contexts on the front line of adaptation to climate change. The long tradition of political ecology and vulnerability studies has already thoroughly undermined the first assumption by showing that biophysical change is always mediated through a variety of social and political mechanisms (Forsyth, 2014; Ribot, 1995; Swyngedouw, 2010; Taylor, 2015; Watts, 1983). This work points to the socio-natural character of vulnerability and the need for international programs to focus more explicitly on how people seek to gain access to and control over changing resources. The second assumption about the merits of institution building has also been questioned by political ecologists (Cleave and Franks, 2005), but nevertheless remains an overwhelming priority in climate change adaptation circles (Adger et al., 2009; Agrawal and Perrin, 2009; Noble et al., 2014; Olsson et al., 2014). Adaptation projects attempt to bring stakeholders at different levels into cooperative arrangements (institutions) to govern resources that cross current jurisdictional boundaries (Agrawal and Perrin, 2009; Bulkeley, 2015; Eakin and Lemos, 2010; Striple and Bulkeley, 2013), underpinned by Ostrom’s work on design principles that show how good institutional design can promote successful management of collective environmental resources (Agrawal,

* Address: Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University for Agricultural Sciences (SLU), Ulls väg 28, P.O. Box 7012, SE-750 07 Uppsala, Sweden.
 E-mail address: andrea.nightingale@slu.se.

2007; Ostrom et al., 1999). While the promotion of cooperative arrangements sounds perfectly reasonable, in many contexts, it is precisely these institutional rules and relationships that are hotly contested. Whether institutions succeed or fail has less to do with design principles (although they are also important (Forsyth, 2005)), and more to do with how social-political struggles play out within them. In the case study of Nepal presented below, I show how institution building alone cannot adequately guarantee adaptation outcomes and is an insufficient response to pressing adaptation needs.

I therefore argue for the need to refocus the premise of ‘adaptation’ to capture the intertwined biophysical and political processes that together shape adaptation needs.¹ Rather than efforts at responding to biophysical change, adaptation is profoundly a socio-natural process that shapes vulnerability and *which* changes adaptation efforts target (Nightingale, 2015b; Ribot, 2011, 2014; Taylor, 2015). If power and politics reshape the purpose of adaptation efforts, then adaptation becomes about adjusting to entangled socio-political contestations, biophysical change, livelihood desires, struggles for authority to govern change, and desires for social and political recognition by both those promoting programs and recipients of them. In this paper, I focus primarily on power and politics by developing a conceptualisation of the exercise of power based on struggles over authority and recognition. The analysis adds theoretical depth and empirical evidence to a small, but growing number of critiques that are attempting to reframe adaptation as both an intellectual and development project (Eriksen et al., 2015; Inderberg et al., 2014; Manuel-Navarrete and Pelling, 2015; O’Brien, 2012; Tschakert et al., 2013b).

Foundational to my argument is that projects which seek to empower actors to manage their resources, produce realignments of power and knowledge that then shape who is invested in what manner in those projects. Adaptation projects, no matter how technical or apolitical, cannot avoid such realignments. And it is precisely this dimension that institutional design fails to adequately regulate. The promotion of particular decentralised organizations and participatory user-groups to manage changing resources are technologies of governing that both reflect and promote these social and political realignments (Korf, 2010; Li, 2007). The success of well-designed adaptation and mitigation programs is contingent upon whether people will support and abide by new projects and programs; questions of power and politics that cannot be managed away through institutional design (see also Tschakert et al., 2016, 2013a). Perhaps most importantly, authority and recognition help illuminate how resource governance struggles often have very little to do with the resources themselves. Rather, gaining authority to govern a new resource user-group can be a goal in itself as a means for having one’s authority legitimated, as opposed to a desire to control resources for their own sake (Peluso and Lund, 2011; Vandekerckhove, 2011). Or, membership in a new adaptation program signals status and a sense that the state is supporting people in society, as opposed to the program bringing significant material benefits (Nightingale and Ojha, 2013).

The Nepal case is globally illustrative; it is a country targeted as high risk from climate change biophysical impacts, with poor infrastructure, a so-called under developed economy, and rapid rate social, economic and political change.² Many other countries in the Global

¹ In this paper I explicitly want to speak to the global community of climate change scholars and development practitioners and therefore I retain the nomenclature of ‘adaptation’. Others have persuasively argued for the problematic nature of the concept (Bassett and Fogelman, 2013; Ribot, 2011; Watts, 2015), but here my purpose is to engage with programs which bill themselves as ‘adaptation’ and therefore it is useful to probe what precisely people are ‘adapting’ to, and under what circumstances, within those programs.

² The 2015 earthquakes highlighted the inadequacies of the state’s disaster response capabilities and added another layer of vulnerability in Districts already deemed highly vulnerable to climate change. As this article is going to press, Nepal has just held local elections for the first time in nearly 20 years. The elections will radically reshape the institutional structure of local governance and therefore will have significant implications

South share similar challenges. Nepal’s adaptation programs are noteworthy in the extent to which every step has engaged some form of multi-stakeholder and participatory process, including bottom-up consultation exercises for the NAPA and the Local Adaptation Plans of Action (LAPA) (Dixit, 2010; GON/MoE, 2011a). The NAPA triggered the development of new organizations at all levels based upon institutional design principles intended both to foster wide-spread participation in adaptation activities (the LAPA is one such outcome), and to help link across scales of governance (Ayers and Forsyth, 2009; Ojha et al., 2015; Rutt and Lund, 2014). Yet these dimensions of good institutional design are unable to ensure that programs unfold as intended. Instead, adaptation programs tend to co-opt well established development efforts (both programs and their specific interventions) and in the process, fail to promote transformative change. Most importantly, power and politics are embroiled in all aspects of adaptation programs, including in their inception and design, making power constitutive of adaptation rather than an externality that requires post-implementation management.

In what follows, I first develop a theorization for understanding socio-political processes in adaptation programs based on struggles over authority and recognition. The subsequent section traces Nepal’s LAPA process (Local Adaptation Plans of Action) across scales from global geopolitics, through national processes, to adaptation programs at the grassroots. The case study shows how the urgency promoted by international donors to “get the institutions right” operates on the ground, becoming embroiled in international, national, and local tensions over what challenges are most pressing, which biophysical threats are most relevant and most importantly, who ought to make such decisions and carry out plans; tensions which can sabotage the best of institutional designs. While the empirical specificities will be different around the world, the Nepal case illustrates the importance of more theoretical and empirical attention to the influence of power and politics in not only shaping adaptation outcomes, but also how they are embedded within the institutions proposed, the measures adopted, and who is considered to require adaptation support or capable of guiding and managing environmental change (see also Shove, 2010). The analysis contributes theoretical depth to questions of power and politics and helps add to a reframing of ‘adaptation’ that can take seriously the socio-natural processes³ that shape vulnerability.

2. Understanding power and politics in adaptation programs

The analysis in this article is limited to ‘adaptation’ as policy-specific projects aimed at helping people adjust to climate change.⁴ Institutions I use in the sense most often adopted by other scholars of the commons and environmental governance: regularized patterns of behavior that derive from underlying rules and norms (Leach et al., 1999; Ostrom, 1990). These are usually codified into formal institutional forms such as community user-groups, but they should not be conflated with organizations (District Forest Offices, specific community user-groups) wherein institutional forms shape the functioning of these formal offices or groups. In other words, institutions shape the operation of organizations, but the two are not the same conceptually.

The ways that institutions are infused with power and politics is potentially a very large terrain of governance (see Eriksen et al., 2015). In internationally sponsored climate change adaptation contexts,

(footnote continued)

for adaptation programs. Nevertheless, attention to authority and recognition will be crucial to understand how governance is reconfigured post state restructuring.

³ This paper focuses specifically on authority and recognition but is underpinned by an understanding of adaptation as a socio-natural process (Nightingale, 2015a, 2015b).

⁴ More generally, adaptation refers to the actions and responses taken by individuals and collectives to environmental variability over time and space (Olsson et al., 2014), as opposed to something specific to climate change. For a good review of the literature on adaptation, its limitations, and its relationship to wider processes of change, see (Eriksen et al., 2015)

however, the focus is on: (i) formal government and governance institutions intended to guide and foster positive change (Adger et al., 2009; Bulkeley, 2012, 2015; Hulme, 2010), and (ii) the relationships between these institutions and people targeted for adaptation efforts (Agrawal and Perrin, 2009; Tschakert et al., 2016). Politics in this article refers to formal governmental and political party processes but also explicitly goes well beyond such dynamics to include collaboration and contestations that serve to govern everyday affairs. My understanding of politics is underpinned by a relational and emergent conceptualization of power (Dean, 2013), meaning that evident inequalities and other dimensions of social stratification are performed in everyday interactions. Social, political and economic differences, therefore, are the outcome of the exercise of power rather than indications of power held (or not) (Allen, 2014; Butler, 1990, 1997). A relational conceptualization of power draws attention to the contradictory outcomes of the practices, relationships and contexts wherein power is exercised (Butler, 1997; Dean, 2013; Foucault, 1995), rather than trying to pin down whether power is a positive or negative force.

Authority has been written about extensively in relation to the state and global governance (Hansen and Stepputat, 2006; Rose, 1999). From these debates two key conceptual points emerge that are relevant here. One, authority is a relational dynamic through which the legitimacy to govern change is claimed and acknowledged (Cashore, 2002; Lund, 2006; Nuijten, 2003; Sikor and Lund, 2009). Rather than a unidirectional force that is exerted in a quintessential ‘power over’ dynamic, authority is a relation that requires acknowledgement (recognition) and continual renewal. It therefore can reflect a very uneven exercise of power that has somewhat surprising and unpredictable outcomes. Two, authority is often claimed by state and non-state actors alike, in overlapping or competitive dynamics that require careful ethnographic attention (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Hansen and Stepputat, 2001; Raeymaekers et al., 2008). A definition of authority used by Sikor and Lund (2009, p. 9) is “[a]uthority characterizes the capacity of politico-legal institutions, such as states and their constituent institutions, village communities, religious groupings and other organizations, to influence other social actors,” but importantly, in their formulation, that capacity is relational and not static. More specifically to the concerns of this paper, authority captures how the operation of power manifests in the competition for influence and the ability to exert agendas by one individual or organization over another within environmental governance and adaptation processes (Fairhead et al., 2012; McCarthy, 2005; Nightingale and Ojha, 2013; Wolford et al., 2013).

Conceptualizing authority in this manner spotlights how the ability to govern environmental change (i.e. adaptation programs) is not simply mandated through policy, but rather is an outcome of dynamic and often contested social (socio-natural) relations (see also Bulkeley, 2015). Thus when looking at institutions and organizations for climate adaptation, ‘authority’ is not contained to state actors or formal programs only. Often, there are conflicts over which actors or institutions have the right to govern resources, and also, because of their importance for everyday life, resource governance is a context wherein actors seek to gain or bolster their authority without necessarily having serious concern for the resources at stake (Nightingale and Ojha, 2013; Vandekerckhove, 2011). There is a need to explore the consequences of these struggles over authority to understand which institutions and people are authorized (Ribot, 2003), how, and what kinds of priorities for coping with climate change emerge as a result.

Bulkeley (2012) has theorized three different modalities of authority within climate change contexts in order to elaborate how climate governance is accomplished: instrumental (as consent), associational (as consensus), and governmental (as concord). The three modalities help to show that legitimacy to govern can be achieved by the deployment of power in different ways and for different purposes. In her recent book (2015), she elaborates this typology and places it within a conceptualization of governance that emphasizes the practices and relations through which climate emerges as an entity of concern for

governing. Accomplishing climate governance occurs through socio-natural assemblages that need to bring people and things in relation to each other in particular ways to be successful.

While the analysis here is similarly informed by an underlying framing of climate change adaptation as a socio-natural process (Nightingale, 2015b), it is targeted at understanding how climate change governance becomes enrolled in other, on going processes of political contestation and governing such that what is at stake is often not, in fact, *climate* or even adaptation. Rather, a less structured understanding of authority helps to capture how micro politics influence the macro politics of climate change (and *vice versa*) to shape what resources become targets of ‘climate programs’, which actors are authorized to govern, and who is considered needing (or worthy of) assistance. Bulkeley’s entry point is climate governance itself, whereas mine is the messy sphere of political contestations into which climate programs land. The exercise of power (exertion of authority) is not always purposeful (cf. Bulkeley, 2012) and cannot be directed in a straightforward manner. While certainly intentionality is important, feminist theories of power (Allen, 2014; Butler, 1997) demonstrate how power is always contradictory. Regardless of intentions, processes of subjection and recognition—which occur with greater frequency than, for example, climate negotiations—distort the most forceful intentions. The operation of power always has some sort of ‘recoil’ (Butler, 1997), such that exerting authority can simultaneously serve to undermine that authority. In climate change adaptation, attempts at managing changing resources can function to increase conflict over their governance rather than rationalizing their use. This means that programs aimed at alleviating vulnerability can in fact exacerbate it (Eriksen et al., 2011; Marino and Ribot, 2012; Nagoda, 2015). Therefore, authority in relation to climate change adaptation projects needs to be understood as a dynamic relation, continually renewed⁵ and, most importantly, linked to processes of recognition.

A narrow focus on struggles for authority risks missing other important ways in which people seek to gain access to and control over changing resources. The practices and symbols through which people claim their rights as citizens or resource users are equally important (Lund and Boone, 2013; Peluso, 2009). Recognition captures this relation between governing and the governed. There are three important aspects of recognition that pertain to my argument. First, as Lund and others have argued (Hagmann and Péclard, 2010; Lund, 2006; Raeymaekers et al., 2008) in developing country contexts where multiple actors compete to exercise public authority, one of the crucial ways in which authority is claimed is by having others recognise it. This debate has probed how the state comes to have presence and meaning through various forms of claiming and recognizing authority (Lund, 2006, p. 687). Legitimacy emerges from recognition of authority by others and the tropes through which it is asserted, rather than whether that authority is universally considered legitimate. Bringing these insights into climate change adaptation points to how programs—whether sponsored by the state or not—claim legitimacy and authority to govern changing resources through adopting various well-established tropes, practices and relationships, most often from on-going development programs. In Nepal, these aspects of recognition have proven challenging for adaptation efforts that lack clear government agency oversight. At the same time, the importance of these processes of recognition for establishing authority to govern resources mean that many programs seek to work through already established organizations at the local level (Ojha et al., 2016; Rutt and Lund, 2014).

Second, recognition refers to the desire by ordinary people to have

⁵ Bulkeley’s formulation also acknowledges the dynamic and uneven nature of authoritative relations. The typologies, however, reflect a somewhat different understanding of how power operates. They allow for power to be held, and separate out dynamic, contested processes such as consensus and concord which in my formulation are analytically held together in order to capture the possibilities of contradictory outcomes from assertions of authority.

their needs and rights fulfilled by governments or development programs. Tania Murray Li has emphasized how programs channel the desires of the population into the ‘will to improve’ (Li, 2005, 2007), enlisting people into development projects and simultaneously reshaping both externally imposed as well as genuine local needs into globally legible projects and targets. In climate change adaptation, projects conceived at the global and national scale both reshape people’s understandings of their own needs, and capitalise upon their desires for improvement to harness voluntary labour into adaptation projects. While this makes adaptation sound like a rather nefarious business, it is crucial to also acknowledge that many adaptation projects tap into unfulfilled needs and thus serve to make local populations feel recognised by governments and indeed, the outside world. Adaptation programs in politically contentious contexts like Nepal therefore cannot be assumed to be based upon objective evaluations of biophysical threats and needs, but rather are deeply bound up in contested understandings of whose needs and desires should be prioritized in development efforts. As such, adaptation programs can be potent tools to secure local recognition where competition for authority is rife.

Third, these two dimensions of recognition are somewhat related to, but not subsumed to Nancy Fraser’s (2000, 2008) work on recognition in relation to social movements and modern organised politics. Fraser addresses the ways in which political movements that were once based upon agitation for redistribution of resources, for example feminism, are increasingly organised around a desire for recognition of identity. While Fraser is deeply sceptical of this trend, she argues that ignoring identity within political struggles is also dangerous because it risks disregarding the rights and needs of marginalized groups. Rather, she argues for “an alternative politics of recognition, a non-identitarian politics...” that can hold onto economic inequalities as a basis of exclusion without needing to reduce people and movements to essentialised identities (Fraser, 2000, p. 120). Yet, on the ground realities make such a politics challenging. In many developing countries, on-going struggles over recognition and identity are inextricably bound up in both access to and control over resources as well as ethnicity or race in such a manner that refocusing politics on resources themselves is elusive (Peluso, 2009, 2011; see also, Watts, 2004).

In climate change adaptation, understanding how identity politics operates is crucial. Populations of people are being (re)defined in relation to climate threats (‘vulnerable’, ‘adaptive capacity’, etc), and projects seek to (re)organise local people into groups that are deemed to have similar needs, capabilities or threats (Gonda, 2016; Marino and Ribot, 2012). Yet, these same populations of people are simultaneously embedded in other forms of identity politics that intersect with distributive justice issues in rather contradictory and often unpredictable ways (Tschakert et al., 2016). In Nepal formal political party struggles are increasingly defined around cultural identities, making it crucial to understand how these struggles are related to changing environmental resources and access to adaptation project benefits.

The lenses of authority and recognition therefore bring into view how the trajectory of change unfolds in practice, providing a better anticipation of adaptation outcomes than institutional design alone can do. In climate change adaptation programs, these dynamics of power are foundational not only to the operation of organizations, but also to the conceptualisation and emergence of institutions. Institutional rules do not arise in an idealised vacuum, rather they are reflections of hegemonic ideas of how subjects, resources and organizations ‘ought’ to be configured in relation to each other. At a geopolitical level, the kind of adaptation programs funded and the interventions believed to be important are reflective of Nepal’s subjectivity in relation to the global political order. In this sense, institutions (like those presented in the NAPA) are the outcome of struggles over authority and recognition. And as they unfold at the grassroots, these struggles take on new forms and further shape outcomes. I now turn to the Nepal case to more specifically to probe these dynamics.

3. Nepal in transition

The Nepal case is based upon fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2016 and content analysis of key climate change policy documents including: the *National Adaptation Plan of Action* (NAPA) (GON/MoE, 2010), the *Local Adaptation Plan of Action* (LAPA) implementation guidelines (ADB, 2012; GON/MoE, 2011b), the *Strategic Program for Climate Resilience* (2011) and the *Pilot Programme for Climate Resilience* (PPCR) (Climate Investment Funds, 2011). Other data derives from: 20 expert interviews with people involved in government and donor sponsored adaptation planning projects; 50 semi-structured interviews in 8 Districts with political and government leaders as well as people involved in resource use (community forestry user-groups, irrigation groups, women’s groups, farmers, merchants); innumerable informal conversations with a cross section of people in the Districts and Kathmandu (i.e. chats with friends, taxi drivers, porters, hotel waiters, people met on trails, villages and in tea houses); participant observation during short field stays of 7–20 days; and media reports. My long engagement with Nepal (30 years), language fluency, as well as the multiple data collection methods have been crucial to constructing an understanding of political dynamics which are most often hidden, half spoken and deeply sensitive for most people (Burghart, 1996; Spencer, 2007).

Change, political instability and heavy foreign donor investment are characteristic of Nepal’s modern history (Bista, 1991; Whelpton, 2005) so the question for this paper is how climate adaptation programs land in such political contexts. Of most relevance for adaptation needs are: migration, a rapidly changing agrarian economy, education, gender relations, political transition, and Nepal’s marginal position within the global economy.⁶ Nepal’s political transition dates back at least to 1950, but recent significant events have included the civil war (1996–2006), People’s revolution and demands for a federal republic (2006) and the protracted Constitution writing process (2008–2015) (Jha, 2014). In this context, people’s political subjectivities (Krause and Schramm, 2011) have been radically reshaped from those based on caste and geography, to more complex subjectivities emerging out of intersectional social differences of gender, caste, ethnicity, class, age, geography and political party membership (Nightingale, 2011). As a result, social and redistributive justice questions have been placed squarely within the political agenda and political representation is increasingly claimed on the basis of cultural identities (Bhattarai, 2003; Paudel, 2016; Shneiderman, 2009). The vast majority of non-governmental organizations are associated with a political party, and in several places our research has shown that leaders and NGOs change parties in order to ensure they are in line to lead new programs (Rankin et al., 2016). These shifting political alliances and conflicts over cultural identities are precisely the dynamics that underpin the political instability and presently permeate all aspects of national, regional and local planning processes (Byrne and Shrestha, 2014).

These rapid political, social and economic transformations have major implications for land use, livelihoods and by extension, climate change adaptation. Many young people in the far east of Nepal described themselves to me as the ‘left behind generation’ because they had to abandon their education during the civil war and migrated to the Gulf, India and Malaysia for work, a practice which is on-going (Sharma, 2016; World Bank, 2011). They see this as now limiting their livelihood options to agriculture and manual labour, keeping them trapped in resource dependent livelihoods. Women have begun ploughing in some places due to a shortage of male labour, which was

⁶ Nepal is also under going rapid rate environmental change such as a shift in monsoon rainfall patterns, melting of glaciers and increasing temperatures (Duan et al., 2006; Hannah et al., 2005; Regmi, 2009) in addition to being at very high risk of serious seismic activity. Biophysical change is the subject of most climate change research in the Himalayas today, however, and for this reason, I am confining my analysis in this article to political economic and social dimensions.

unheard of historically, while in other places, educated, relatively elite young women are able to find development related jobs and participate less in household agricultural labour. Climate adaptation programs in Nepal, however, have largely been designed with an outmoded understanding of rural livelihoods in mind and as such do not address these dimensions of vulnerability and how they shape adaptation for different people (see also Nagoda and Eriksen, 2015; Tschakert, 2012).

This failure to incorporate rapidly changing livelihoods and identity politics is one way in which adaptation programs avoid tackling political change head-on. Social justice questions appear in a superficial way in the NAPA and LAPA, with brief mention of gender and ethnicity questions, but almost no significant engagement with what they might mean in practice (Jones and Boyd, 2011; Nightingale, 2015b; Yates, 2012). It is therefore highly problematic that adaptation programs are not designed to specifically query how these social, economic and political changes are transforming who is considered responsible for adaptation and what kind of support they expect from the outside. Despite these struggles over authority and recognition being evident in all aspects of adaptation planning and implementation, at an institutional and policy level, political dynamics were quite literally edited out (Nightingale, 2015b).

4. Nepal's climate change adaptation efforts

Global geopolitics of development aid has been instrumental in shaping adaptation efforts in Nepal. The framing of Nepal as a 'highly vulnerable' country that requires international support to cope with climate change has been crucial to how donor aid has been given and received.⁷ In this section, I pay particular attention to how adaptation efforts are realigning the ways different actors and organizations are 'supposed' to collaborate. Of course these efforts are not necessarily successful (Jones and Boyd, 2011; Nagoda and Eriksen, 2015; Yates, 2012). Rather, we see how struggles over authority and recognition play a major role in shaping outcomes.

Nepal has long been upheld as a success story of participatory resource governance and therefore it is not surprising that it has been targeted by international donors for pioneering initiatives to 'get the institutions right' around climate change. Adaptation policy at the national level has been developed through UNFCCC supported initiatives, including the NAPA (GON/MoE, 2010), Climate Strategy document (2011), and Pilot Programme for Climate Resilience (PPCR) (Climate Investment Funds, 2011) (see Nightingale, 2015a, 2015b for details on the plans, how they were developed and their relationship to political instability). There is little to fault in the formal institutional designs of Nepal's adaptation policies and programs. The Local Adaptation Plan of Action framework has been globally praised because of its emphasis on consultative, bottom up information gathering and linking between scales of governance in its institutional design (Ayers and Forsyth, 2009; Karki et al., 2011). It uses a participatory methodology that maps vulnerability at the district scale in order to identify risks and prioritize which districts should receive support. The Districts act as the main bridge between the national level and the local level and government offices are expected to plan and coordinate activities within their jurisdiction. At more local scales, Community and Local Adaptation Plans of Action (CAPA and LAPA respectively) have been rolled out in a number of Districts, mainly with donor support (GON/MoE, 2011b). Building institutions is central within all the plans, for example, community-based user-groups are proposed in the NAPA as a key mechanism for the governance of resources as disparate as forests and

⁷ There is no question that Nepal is experiencing and will experience very significant climate change impacts from a biophysical perspective, but my point here is that these international framings *also* create political and biophysical outcomes. 'Climate change in Nepal' could be framed in terms other than 'vulnerable' and these other framings could lead to alternative priorities and imaginations for international support (Nightingale, 2016).

biodiversity, to energy and urban water supplies (Nightingale, 2015b).

Yet to assume that consultative exercises and policy documents that stipulate how different levels of governance will cooperate can overcome struggles over authority and recognition is not only naïve, it is dangerous if we accept that adaptation measures are indeed vital for Nepal's future. During the NAPA negotiations, according to three different key informants who were present, the international and local facilitators asked participants to avoid questions of party politics and to instead focus on technical measures, believing these to be politically neutral. One informant described how participants were reluctant to champion certain proposals for governing new programs because it would reveal their political party affiliations, identities that many professionals prefer to keep private. Recognition of authority in Nepal at the moment is almost always linked to party politics (Nightingale et al., 2018; Rankin et al., 2016) and therefore which proposals participants at the NAPA negotiations supported were deeply entangled in party alliances rather than climate governance objectives alone. At the time, debates over how to structure the new Nepali federal state were some of the most contentious issues at the national level. These federalism debates therefore had a profound impact within the NAPA and PPCR negotiations on how to configure different levels of environmental governance, and yet were not explicitly discussed, mainly because they were perceived as distractions to finalizing the policies (Nightingale, 2015b). The documents need to be read as products of the messy politics of the time, not as achievements that somehow overcame them. Failing to take seriously how struggles over authority and recognition at all levels shape governance processes, means the NAPA and LAPA have proposed measures that are set up for failure almost before they have begun.

One example of such failures is the placement of most climate programs under the Ministry of Environment. While it may seem an obvious choice, it has never been a powerful ministry compared to the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation and the Water Ministry, which govern the two resources most closely related to Nepal's climate risks. International actors saw it as the obvious overarching Ministry and key informants speculate that it was accepted by national leaders to lead climate efforts *because* it is politically weak. Top-level leaders were reluctant to hand more political power to already powerful Ministries in the form of large sums of international money for climate change. As a testament to its relatively marginalized position within the government bureaucracy, the Environment Ministry has been renamed several times since 1980, most recently from the Ministry of Population and Environment to the Ministry of Environment in 2010 and then to the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (MoSTE) in 2013. These changes in name reflect changing development priorities and its lack of powerful leaders who might resist such changes. Today MoSTE is expected to oversee all climate change programs and ensure that *all* development efforts are 'climate resilient'. Its jurisdiction is somewhat diluted, however, by the decision to place funding for the mitigation program, REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation+) within the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MoFSC). REDD+ emphasizes institutional capacity building to manage carbon credits and deliver benefits of forest conservation. Struggles over authority were paramount in the decision over where to place which programs. International donors often target 'environment' ministries⁸ but top ministry jobs are one of the most potent mechanisms of recognising (or diluting) political power of supporters (and opponents) within national level party politics. Which ministry is best suited for the task is of secondary concern when viewed from the context of national politics.

The lack of clear authority at the national scale is problematic for adaptation ambitions because it opens up the possibility for

⁸ Mexico similarly chose their Environment ministry, and like Nepal, that ministry is relatively weak (Hallie Eakin, personal communication).

competition and lack of coordination between programs at all levels. Struggles over authority and recognition are paramount. Key informants have assured me that there is no communication or collaboration between the PPCR and the NAPA offices, both located within the MoSTE premises, with the consequence that their efforts overlap and compete. The REDD+ program's location within the MoFSC means that there is no coordination between REDD+ and PPCR, LAPA and CAPA projects. In part this has to do with their physical locations and in part due to party struggles over who is chosen to lead which programs. LAPAs,⁹ which are the main vehicle for implementing the NAPA, do not have a central office within the Ministry. Rather the LAPA program is scattered across projects hosted by donors such as the UK, United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Norwegians, while implementation is sub-contracted out to national and district level Nepali NGOs. This means that programs designed to help with adaptation and mitigation at the national scale are working independently of the programs intended to bring adaptation planning down to the community-level.

In addition to its relatively marginalized (unrecognized) status within the overall bureaucracy, placing the NAPA and PPCR within the MoSTE has complicated implementation because the Ministry lacks offices at the sub-national (district) level, unlike the Forest and Water Ministries. As a result, there are no line officials to receive funds and direction on how to implement most climate change programs in the districts. Complicating these struggles over authority further, district level implementation of LAPA programs have lagged well behind donor promoted CAPA programs, mainly because of the on-going political instability at the national level (Nightingale, 2015b). Struggles for authority between state and non-state actors emerge as donor projects, frustrated by the lack of progress in government channels (personal communication 2010), seek to implement these LAPA-like (CAPA) programs on the ground. And within government programs, Nepali NGOs fiercely compete for contracts to implement LAPAs, some of which have no experience with natural resource management development projects (personal communication 2013); their interests are mainly in securing new contracts.

In short, the intention of ensuring good oversight for climate programs by authorizing one ministry to oversee efforts has been undermined by national level political manoeuvring that ultimately has nothing to do with climate change. Ministries, programs and NGOs compete for authority because they want resources from new climate funds, and recognition of their rights as citizens and civil society actors. At the same time, shifts in top-level actors due to political party struggles have diluted or delayed programs. Which ministries and officials are recognized as having that authority reflects complex national level party politics, international donor politics, and histories of resource governance in Nepal. The empirical result is that authority to guide national adaptation efforts has been dispersed across Ministries and programs, and the intention to ensure cross scale cooperation sidelined due to the MoSTE's lack of district level offices (see also Rutt and Lund, 2014).

5. District and local level adaptation efforts

These institutional choices (Ribot, 2003) by donors and government officials at the national scale have major ramifications for local level projects. The lack of MoSTE offices at District and sub-District level (Village Development Committee or VDC) creates a vacuum of authority over adaptation programs. Governance at District and VDC levels is already complicated by the uncertain political situation. In the absence of local elected officials, civil servants have been given legal

responsibility for core governing tasks (Byrne and Shrestha, 2014). At District level, the Local Development Officer (LDO) is required to preside over the District development council. These councils are both formal in the sense that there are written rules for their operation, but also informal such that in practice they serve as a meeting ground for all major political actors in a District. The council meetings have become a crucial playing field for competition over authority and recognition. Each political party seeks to win contracts for certain projects or to assert their development priorities (Byrne and Shrestha, 2014; Rankin et al., 2016). While this may sound like democracy in action, in most places it has led to corruption, siphoning of development funds for party activities and personal gain (Byrne and Shrestha, 2014).¹⁰

Climate change funding lands in this context, fueling competition to control the new projects, with the lack of sectoral representation for the MoSTE at the District level adding a further twist. Without a champion for climate change related activities (i.e. a 'climate office' at District level), the Local Development Officers (LDOs) are left with major dilemmas over what climate related activities should be conducted and who should be responsible for them. It is also very unclear what portion of the budget should be spent on climate change, even though the LDO has been directed to ensure that all development efforts are 'climate resilient'. As one LDO said, "we have so many demands here, roads, drinking water, electricity. Climate change is a cross cutting issue but there is no Ministry of Environment office here... how can local infrastructure [i.e. offices at the local level] and national level structure come together?" His conclusion was that without a 'line Ministry' at the District level, it was going to be nearly impossible to make good decisions about how to address climate change issues.¹¹ As a partial response, the government has provisions to implement a new body to promote intersectoral cooperation, the District Energy and Environment Coordination Committee (DEECC). This body is expected to coordinate, facilitate, monitor and evaluate LAPA programs implemented at village level in Climate Change Coordination Committees. Implementation on the ground will be delivered through a range of services providers (NGOs), line agencies (i.e. for water, agriculture and forestry) and community groups (Ojha et al., 2016). To date, however, DEECCs are not yet functioning, reflective of wider political failings that have to do with the post-civil war political transition.

Competition for authority at the district and VDC level intersects with this messy administrative space for adaptation with significant consequences for outcomes. In one place, the District Forest Office was not involved with a CAPA project because it was implemented in the buffer zone of a conservation area and supported by an international donor. The program was implemented through community forestry user-groups (CFUGs) at VDC level, meaning that District Forest Office rangers, who otherwise are supposed to support CFUGs, were largely ambivalent towards the new adaptation activities. Furthermore, the program had provisions for implementation of CAPA projects territorially (through VDCs) and sectorally (through CFUGs). But because of the lack of elected representatives at VDC level, the program was unable to successfully target territorial areas and rather relied exclusively on CFUGs as the local level organization for CAPA. These groups are chosen because in so-called 'highly vulnerable areas', their already well developed institutions (Ojha, 2012) are considered measures of adaptive capacity. In other words, projects have a high likelihood of success. Yet, as I elaborate further below, it is problematic to assume that CFUGs

¹⁰ Of course not all people involved in these development councils are corrupt, but there is widespread evidence and a general belief amongst ordinary people that this politics of consensus is mainly about ensuring everyone involved has a chance to mis-use funds.

¹¹ This particular person had received some training in climate change and is friends with a close friend of mine, which I believe is part of why he was so candid with me. I am grateful for his honesty and thoughtfulness as his account gave me new insights into a process that had been previously only described by people who were not actually present at the development council.

⁹ Nepal has been a pioneer in promoting LAPAs, which were put forward as a better tool for adaptation efforts because of its inherently decentralised, bottom up methodology for implementation.

will necessarily reach the most vulnerable.

While the struggle over authority—and the undermining of adaptation goals as a consequence—may be more clear here than struggles over recognition, it is important to point out that at the moment, ordinary people and local level organizations seek recognition by the state and other authorities precisely through processes like the development council and adaptation planning. Political parties struggle—sometimes violently (Byrne et al., 2016)—to win contracts for new programs like CAPA and LAPA at sub-district levels. Ordinary people measure representation and government functioning by whether they have been provided new projects that deliver genuine livelihood benefits. Thus parties need to win contracts so they can employ their local supporters and provide new projects to their constituents. During previous research on political change in Nepal, we asked how people they would know when the ‘New Nepal’ (slogan of the 2006 revolution) had arrived. People all across Nepal consistently named fulfilling their needs and rights as citizens—specifically roads, electricity, health care, education and ‘development’ (*bikas*)—as markers of political change (Nightingale et al., 2018; Rankin et al., 2016). These material manifestations of ‘*bikas*’ reflect genuine needs but also are increasingly articulated through a language ‘taught’ by development (Nightingale, 2005; Pigg, 1996). It is difficult to separate out these desires from politics given that cultural identities, livelihood security and recognition have become so intertwined with party politics and the functioning (or not) of the government in many people’s eyes. Projects are recognized as representing ordinary people based on whether leadership positions are held by their ‘own people’, a form of identity politics defined by caste, ethnicity and political party membership (Cameron, 2007; Paudel, 2016).

Recognition and authority are relationally constituted through these processes and serve to shape who controls which projects and for what purposes. CFUGs have welcomed the infusion of CAPA adaptation funds in the area I worked, and invested in new household and collective livelihood activities such as a paper factory, irrigation for cardamom threatened by shifts in winter rainfall, and plantations of tea and shrubs to make paper (*loкта*). These projects, however, have been partially undermined by historically powerful political leaders (*kipat*)¹² attempting to reclaim exclusive authority over forest resources (this would mainly take the form of taxes on forest products). In interviews, local people blamed the political instability for allowing such claims to be made, and while they rejected them, the fact that several people told me about the claims was at least a partial recognition of the *kipat*’s authority and worries that they could successfully levy (informal) taxes. CAPA programs serve to increase the possibilities for new kinds of forest enterprises, making control over them more desirable and increasing local struggles for political authority.

Struggles for recognition also come into play as climate adaptation programs intersect with people’s desires for ‘improvement’, or more accurately in Nepal, ‘*bikas*’. The tea plantation was established on private land, rather than within the community forest, in order to avoid conflicts with the Forest Office over restrictions on clearing forest land. The landowner claimed that the land had been donated, but the tea plants themselves were collectively owned. If successful, the benefits would be distributed to the entire user-group. Yet, I wondered how much of the profit would be redistributed as the landowner could make significant demands for land rent once the tea was ready for commercial harvesting. In addition, the land was already laying fallow due to migration-related labour shortages so the landowner was able to add value to it with little cost to himself. The choice of a tea plantation makes sense from a climate change perspective as most crops are already showing signs of moving up in elevation due to warming temperatures. Yet, it is unclear whose needs were recognised in choosing to locate the tea plantation on private land—land that was about 500 m

uphill from poorer family’s lands. Similarly, the irrigation lines for cardamom did help overcome the decrease in winter rainfall on plantations within privately held forests. The point to focus on here, however, is that the choices of adaptation efforts overwhelmingly favoured the wealthier, higher caste landowners. They are certainly not the most vulnerable people in the VDC. Rather, they were able to use their social and political clout to shape the adaptation project towards their needs rather than those of more vulnerable people in the area.

The bottom up, participatory design of LAPA, CAPA and REDD+ projects therefore cannot overcome struggles over authority and recognition. Rather, messy politics and subjectivities shape how adaptation programs materialise in rural Nepal and whose needs are prioritised. This was starkly evident when I moved down to the household level to see how adaptation was implemented. The CAPA program I visited was insistent that I walk the irrigation lines and visit the families who had been given livestock as part of diversifying the livelihood of two local Dalit (lowest caste) families. On the one hand, the adaptation efforts chosen clearly reflect desires for development, better sources of cash income and needs for assistance to improve current agricultural livelihoods (as well as rather standard, technical development interventions). On the other hand, these visits left me puzzled as to why my hosts had been so insistent that I see what they had achieved. As mentioned above, irrigation for cardamom benefits farmers with extensive private forests, none of whom were particularly destitute by Nepal standards. The Dalit families already had other livestock, with one owning 3 cows, goats, a pig and chickens in addition to the baby cow given to him by the project. In contrast, I was told stories of landless people living in the VDC who did not belong to the CFUG.¹³ How this particular Dalit family could have been singled out as the ‘most vulnerable’ in order to be given livelihood assets, I could only interpret through the lens of party politics: the cows were given to buy votes. Struggles for recognition of political rights and needs are fierce; other CAPA participants complained that they could not address their own ambitions for coping with climate change impacts on agriculture because of the government-mandated need to prioritise spending on marginalized people, defined around identity. As one Bahun (higher caste) man said, “we cannot get big development here because the VDC budget is divided between women, Dalits, education, health and environment.” From a climate change adaptation perspective, they are all vulnerable, so making decisions on whose needs to support over others is not clear from a biophysical hazard assessment.

There are two other important points to be made about this CAPA vignette. One, who requires adaptation and what constitutes it, is still very unclear in Nepal. At the moment, groups targeted for adaptation on the ground are largely determined through political party alliances, layered through with identity politics. These politics are also framed by the geopolitics of climate change that underpins vulnerability assessments and at least in part, how marginality is conceived. There is a need to justify choices to donors as well as others in the district, meaning that some people are identified based on genuine vulnerability characteristics—like the overall social and economic discrimination faced by Dalits (Cameron, 2007)—but many vulnerable people remain invisible in adaptation efforts—like the landless families in the VDC.

Two, it illustrates something I heard repeated across Nepal and at all levels: no one really knows what adaptation ought to do. NGO implementers and local people fall back on known development technologies such as paper factories, irrigation systems, apple farms, tea plantations and provision of livestock for livelihood diversification. The example is certainly not unique in Nepal (Khatri et al., 2016; Nagoda, 2015), and discussions with friends and colleagues in Kathmandu revealed very little surprise over how decisions about ‘vulnerability’ and

¹³ That particular field visit was too short to avoid being managed by my NGO guide and his local contacts. Since I generally do field work independent of such intermediaries, I found it fascinating to see how they orchestrated my movements and local contacts.

¹² See Caplan (1970) on the *kipat* system.

'adaptation' activities had been made in this place. But the case study adds more evidence to how it is struggles over recognition that are closely associated with livelihood security, more than access to biophysical resources (see also Nightingale and Ojha, 2013). Therefore these struggles need to better inform adaptation program planning rather than the emphasis on biophysical risks and institutions.

In these dynamics of authority and recognition we see how climate change adaptation programs come into the District level and are enrolled in power and politics through overlapping authorities, desires for recognition and identity politics. The lack of competence at the District level is seen as a technical problem to be overcome by creating new organisational structures or by training those who are assumed to be receptive, such as the DEECC and CFUGs (ADB, 2012). However, authorising CFUGs to govern climate change adaptation and mitigation projects is not a neutral decision (see also Ribot, 2003, 2009). CFUGs hold their own elections for key leadership roles, but they are not representatives of the state. Rather, at the local level, there is the potential for them to enter into competition with the VDCs, and within CFUGs struggles over identity politics are rife, undermining 'democratic' representation of members. These politics intersect with and shape whose needs define adaptation efforts and who is able to control access to changing resources—both those provided by projects and those that manifest in the biophysical environment.

To only blame Nepal's messy politics for these flaws in adaptation implementation, however, is to absolve the global community of their own failures. It is therefore important to turn the analytical gaze back to how the international aid complex lands in Nepal's contested political environment. Facilitators working with LAPA in the districts lamented in interviews that, because the NAPA and LAPA were delayed by unsettled state transformation processes (Nightingale, 2015a, 2015b), they were under pressure to produce results from their activities within nine months. After that time, the NGO implementers' contracts would again be reviewed and renewal was contingent upon showing an impact on the ground. These kinds of demands almost guarantee that standard development practices—and those which can be easily shown to outside visitors such as myself and national level donor representatives—will be chosen as 'adaptation' activities. The facilitators told me, 'no one really knows what adaptation should be and we do not have enough time to let local people talk it through properly. We need longer time frames for people to understand adaptation. We also do not know.' (paraphrase from group interview). Experience from community forestry has shown that it takes time to ensure that marginalized members are able to adequately assert their rights (Ojha, 2008). Therefore, the urgency promulgated by international actors surrounding 'getting the institutions right' and having action on the ground shapes the socio-natural outcomes of adaptation efforts and sets them up for potential failure before they have begun.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the current focus on putting in place the right organizations and institutions—the norms and rules within organizations at multiple levels—is inadequate for successfully promoting climate change adaptation. Rather, institutions are shaped by struggles over authority and recognition such that the dynamics of multi-scalar institutions as they play out on the ground require more critical scrutiny. Using the case of Nepal, I have shown how climate adaptation programs land in highly politicised contexts from the national level down to the community level. Programs have reconfigured authority between all levels of government, creating challenges for on-the-ground civil servants charged with facilitating plans. The outcomes are contradictory: on the one hand there is a genuine need to guide and manage very real biophysical and political change in Nepal. In this respect one anticipates politics to come into play as it does in other domains. On the other hand, who is authorized to decide what constitutes 'positive change' and on what basis, is inextricably bound up in

the current political instability and its identity politics.

Contestations over such relationships and the scale at which financial and physical resources should be controlled are central to why political consensus has been impossible to achieve in Nepal since the revolution. Formal party politics have emerged as particularly contentious and ubiquitous within resource governance contexts. The case study shows how struggles over authority and recognition shape which leaders and institutions are given the legitimacy to guide and govern change with varying degrees of success. At the national level this has manifest in the reshuffling of top-level governance organizations, while at District level there is a lack of clear authority and line management for climate change programs, creating a vacuum of responsibility and power to champion a climate change agenda. As a result, these contested political dynamics have very real consequences for whether the new policies and programs can in fact support adaptation on the ground.

Identifying organizations and individuals to champion climate change are only one part of the equation, however. Struggles for recognition within climate change adaptation programs are often a desire to have rights and needs acknowledged and addressed, in addition to being struggles over who will manage and guide responses to environmental change. Nepal provides a stark example because the political transition has been characterized by public struggles over political representation and cultural identities (Jha, 2014; Paudel, 2016). Climate adaptation programs are not immune to these struggles. Rather, they land in localities and can become vehicles for furthering the interests of some leaders (giving livestock to secure votes) and some farmers (providing irrigation for cardamom) and intersect with identity politics based on gender, caste and ethnicity (tea plantations on private land). A lack of recognition within adaptation programs thus becomes evidence of how certain people have been unable to claim authority or assert their rights as political and cultural citizens, issues which ordinary people complain about vehemently.

In this sense, adaptation programs are both simultaneously deeply embedded in the ability of nation-state and development actors to assert authority, and also potent symbols of whether ordinary people feel they belong to the nation. Who gets involved and how they make programs fit their needs become more clear when program objectives are understood to intersect with pre-existing identities, needs and relations. By conceptualizing recognition and linking it to struggles over authority, I am able to anticipate how adaptation programs realign power and knowledge, with significant implications for who is invested in those programs and resources, for what purposes, and with what consequences. The conceptualization brings into view how the trajectory of change unfolds in practice, providing a better anticipation of adaptation outcomes than institutional design alone can do. The unpredictability and complexity of these outcomes need to be taken seriously rather than reduced into simple stories of adaptive capacity and policy recommendations.

Perhaps of most concern, is not that these political realities exist. Most people with experience in developing countries will recognise many of these dynamics. Rather, it is that international donor funds are being poured into adaptation efforts, based on biophysical and livelihood vulnerability assessments, when there are more fundamental concerns that shape vulnerability. The focus on adaptation thus becomes a distraction to addressing vulnerability, or worse compounds existing vulnerability. Indeed, the Nepal case seems to suggest that the latter is quite possible. This analysis points to the dire need to refocus adaptation efforts on questions of politics and power in addition to institutional design, rather than on technical programs and evaluations.

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