

THE ADAPTATION REGIME: WHY IT CAN'T IMPROVE GLOBAL SOCIAL JUSTICE

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According to growing scientific evidence, climate change is likely to have adverse effects on human societies (Pachauri 2007) having disproportional impacts on developing countries, poor and marginalised groups of people, and may exacerbate existing inequities between developed and developing countries and between rich and poor (IPCC 2007). Since the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at the Earth Summit in Rio as the global legal policy framework for reversing the impacts of climate change (UNFCCC 1992), much of the international policy focus has been on mitigation efforts. Yet, from the beginning developed countries committed to helping developing countries to adapt through funding and technology transfer under UNFCCC Commitments 4.4 and 4.5. While adaptation has been present in academic circles for more than a decade, the UNFCCC negotiations did not seriously focus on adaptation until the Marrakesh Accords in 2001 and subsequently the plan of action in Nairobi in 2006.

The response to the specific adaptation problem is gaining momentum. It has taken the form of additional funding and policy guidance for the developing countries, as well as the development of national policies and strategies for both developed and developing countries. Specific funding for adaptation has been set aside by all of the major conservation and development funding mechanisms (Global Environmental Facility, World Bank, regional development banks, etc.). Several adaptation funds were established for developing countries: Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF) in 2002 at Marrakesh, Special Climate Change Fund (SCCF) in 2001, and The Adaptation Fund at the United Nations Climate Conference in 2007 at Bali. In short, adaptation is considered as a major policy response to the issue of climate change by the international community especially in relation to the developing countries where most of the adaptation is likely to take place.

In this paper, we identify a growing international ‘adaptation regime’ (a ‘regime complex’) and argue that the structure, conceptual framework and institutional setting of this ‘regime’ is similar to the ‘development aid regime.’ Based on the questionable outcomes of ‘development’ in terms of reducing inequalities and bringing social justice, we question whether employing the same structures and logics in the adaptation regime will produce significantly better results in addressing ‘vulnerability.’ To test this hypothesis, in this paper we identify the major actors, mechanisms, norms, and decision-making processes in seeking to identify the basic structure and institutional setting of an ‘adaptation regime.’

Additionally, we examine a small set of major funded adaptation programmes and projects from the GEF and UNFCCC project databases in different countries to identify the types of solutions and approaches being proposed. Further we seek to identify major ‘climate change adaptation’ discourses in academic and other relevant literature. This paper is part of a research programme in early stages, “Adapting to Adaptation” funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation within the Centre for International Environmental Studies at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland.