## Revisiting Community-based Adaptation

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**Abstract**

Community-based adaptation emerged as a unique theory and approach to address adaptation deficit in developing countries. The evolution of community based adaptation clearly shows that it is advancing well and has potentials to provide strong basis for implementing adaptation priorities in developing countries. There are however issues and challenges around its scale of operation and gaps in wider institutionalization and scaling up within the mainstream development. Mainstreaming CBA will be an opportunity a head to address the governance issues and to ensure effective and efficient mobilization of resources to benefit the needy population. There is a need to explore practical context specific mechanism to mainstream community based adaptation in developing countries.

***Key words: CBA, Institutionalization, Up scaling, Mainstreaming***

**Introduction**

Climate change is a reality now and its impacts will be felt by marginalized and resource dependent communities through a multitude of impacts cascading through natural and social system’ (Adger 2003, p. 387). Brown et al (Brown, et al 2011, p. 17) explains climate change as tame, tricky, wield and wicked problem. The authors argues that unbounded or wicked problems of climate change require a different approach to planning and implementing solutions that acknowledge uncertainty and explicitly encompasses disagreement between different group affected. This requires a process of dialogue among various actors i.e. from international to local level.

Climate change adaptation is now discussed with the broader context of sustainable development (Adger, Huq et al. 2003). The work of Traerup (2010) focuses on drawing literatures to support the argument about synergy and linkages. The strong link between climate change adaptation and sustainable development is highlighted by many researchers in their articles and book chapters. The authors argue that collaboration and synergy between both sciences is key to ensuring sustainable future (Munasinghe 2001; Markandya and Halsnæs 2002; Sperling 2003; Swart, Robinson et al. 2003; Agrawala and Ahmed 2005; Munasinghe and Swart 2005; Huq, Reid et al. 2006; McGray 2007; Dowden 2008; Grist 2008; Nolon 2009; Parry 2009; Salih and Opschoor 2009; Cohen 2010; KLEIN 2010; Ayers 2011).

Adaptation has now been used in majority of the disciplines. The development communities are making best use of it to advocate the similarities of development and adaptation interventions. Tanner and Allouche, (2011) argue that adaptation and development is situated within existing poverty levels and income inequalities. The disaster risk reduction communities are advocating for commonalities in disaster risk management and adaptation. Similarly, natural resource management and other groups also claim that many of their activities are similar with adaptation. This interest of development communities to adopt adaptation pathways is very encouraging. Lessons on the analysis also reveal that incorporating adaptation in mainstream development is win win approach which can bring more synergy and effecient resource mobilization (Huq, Reid et al. 2006; Huq 2008).

Development communities provide examples of community based adaptation as representative of development perspective (Ayers, Alam et al. 2010). Community based adaptation has evolved alongside the UNFCCC negations and developed its distinctive set of terminology and community of practice. The community based adaptation aspires for building the resilience of communities by enhancing their capacity to cope and better adapt to both variability and changes. It shares common ground with development community. Many of the approaches in community based adaptation overlaps with development and risk reduction interventions (Mitchell and Tanner 2006). The similarities with other disciplines often make community based adaptation easier to practice but difficult and challenging to gain support and enough resources.

**Emergence of Community Based Adaptation**

The globalization of climate change adaptation has recently shifted towards looking at practical view and approaches to adaptation. This view and approach combined both the development and technological views and advocate for identifying practical measures and approaches to solve adaptation deficit. The adaptation nature, which is local specific and diverse, demands for practical solutions and approaches that, is more innovative, flexible and responsive. Localizing adaptation became a strong agenda among the research and development communities in developing world in the last 10 years due to realization about its context specific and local significance.

Community Based Adaptation (CBA) emerged as a strong approach and theory to facilitate adaptation in developing countries. Community based adaptation has evolved alongside the UNFCCC negotiations and developed its distinctive set of terminology and community of practice. The rationale for community involvement or community-based activities is now well established. Because community-based activities and organisations are rooted deeply in the society and culture of an area, they enable people to express their real needs and priorities. This allows problems to be defined correctly and responsive measures to be designed and implemented (Uitto and Shaw 2006). Together, development and climate change professionals have Increasingly adopted the discourse and practice of CBA (Dodman and Mitlin 2011).

Ayers and Huq also argue that (2009) Community-based adaptation emerged out of a growing recognition in the developing community that those most vulnerable to climate change are the poorest people in the world’s poorest regions. The community based adaptation aspires for building the resilience of communities by enhancing their capacity to cope and better adapt to both variability and changes (Ayers, Alam et al. 2010). The CBA approach has its conceptual roots in resilience, implying that CBA recognises that environmental knowledge, vulnerability and resilience to climate impacts are embedded in societies and cultures.

The community-based adaptation to climate change approach (CBA), which has developed considerable currency with civil society organisations, is designed to help the poorest and most vulnerable adapt to climate change (Huq and Reid 2007). It has often been referred to as a bottom-up adaptation approach, which recognises that the majority of finance for climate change adaptation is currently channelled through national governments, with no assurance that these resources will reach the poorest and most vulnerable people. Consequently, the focus of CBA is on empowering communities to take action themselves based on their own decision making processes shaped by their own knowledge as resilient actors(Ayers and Forsyth 2009).

**CBA in Practice**

Community based adaptation[[2]](#footnote-3) has been popular in mostly least developed countries and among many adaptation and development communities. Huq and Reid (2006) perceive that CBA can be viewed simply as an additional (though fairly new) layer of community-based development activities, practices, research and policies. CBA begins by identifying the communities in the developing world that are most vulnerable to climate change. Once a community’s vulnerability has been established, using the best available science on climate change impacts, the process of engagement with the communities can begin.

There is history of advancement in CBA due to efforts put forward by some researchers in international conference, which occur every 2 years. In the first CBA workshop, the participants discussed possible impacts of climate change on local communities living in vulnerable areas and how to enable them to adapt to climate change in the future. In the second CBA conference, the CBA Network was formed to forge strong alliance among the CBA practitioners. The third CBA agreed to establish the Global Initiative on Community Based Adaptation (GICBA) to Climate Change, a network seeking to support CBA-related activities by generating and sharing relevant knowledge. In the fourth CBA, participants held rich discussion on different prospective of advancing CBA. Recurring issues raised at the first international conference on CBA held at Dhaka on March 2011 revolved around its theme of scaling up successful CBA projects (IISD 2011). The workshop has been venue to share learning and find ways of addressing some of the challenges in CBA. It has been also meaningful to refine the approach and provide opportunities of more networking and collaboration among climate and development communities.

There are many advantages of promoting community based adaptation project and initiatives in developing countries. Community-based adaptation is a promising way to manage the risks associated with climate change, as it can empower communities and offer synergies with broader poverty and sustainable development objectives (Heltberg, Siegel et al. 2009). The supporter of community based adaptation argue that it is advancing well and contributing resilience building and addressing social vulnerability in many least developed countries. Donor agencies have also shown great interest in investing in community-based adaptation, recognizing that it is a valid approach to building adaptive capacity in vulnerable communities (Ayers and Forsyth 2009). There is fair recognition among development organizations that CBA can be effective way of addressing short term adaptation response in countries which are in transition, conflict and process of rebuilding.

In the last 8 years, there are many small scale initiatives locally and nationally testing and promoting community based adaptation practices. Countries like Bangladesh is in advance stage of innovating and generating lessons on CBA. Other countries are also adopting these practices. Huq and Reid (2007) reveal that It is important now to support as many CBA activities as possible and to share the experience and knowledge gained. One important feature of the lessons from CBA so far is that learning itself requires practice. It is not possible to learn the theory of CBA in a university or training workshop and then apply it in the field — the learning comes from the practice itself. Adaptation is a classic case of learning-by doing or ‘action-research’. One of the uniqueness of CBA is that it involves huge number of civil society and community based organizations.

Community based adaptation has its similarities to development paradigm. It is based on the adaptation as development approaches. Ayers and Forsyth (2009) argue that responding to the concept that adaptation is local and place based, community based adaptation addresses the local specified nature of vulnerability. The community based adaptation rests in principle of local participation and ownership in designing and implementing adaptation responses. It considers that adaptation strategies must be generated through participatory processes, involving local stakeholders and development. Community based adaptation initiatives have been popular in least developed countries due to local specific successes and impact. But some argue that treating adaptation as development is often problematic as it is often difficult to determine the significance and urgency of addressing climate risk (Ayers 2011).

**Challenges in CBA**

Despite the rapid progress in the development and sharing of knowledge about CBA, challenges remain. Whilst the number of CBA case studies is proliferating, it will be important to find practical ways to ‘scale up’ initiatives and to find better ways to draw out and communicate lessons from CBA more widely (Reid 2010). The fifth conference on CBA held at Dhaka on March 2011 concluded that the challenge for CBA is around its theme of scaling up successful CBA projects (IISD 2011). Institutionalizing CBA within development programme, particularly government programme is a problem in coming days. The issues around scaling is also highlighted by Ayers (2011, p. 840) who argue that despite potential of community based adaptation in operationalizing local inclusiveness, scaling up of the initiatives to climate policy is problematic because little attention is paid to wider policy-making context of adaptation. Similarly, Ensor and Berger highlight the challenges around CBA due to lack of conducive policy environment and support from the government (Ensor and Berger 2009).

The challenge of Community based adaptation is to get out of the confined, projectized and NGO branded boundaries and join the mainstream development. In relation to CBA, some critics have pointed out that when CBA is defined as an approach to adaptation alongside wider scale adaptation planning, the result is an ‘one‐project, one community’ approach that actually encourages an ‘aggregated community’ discourse (Dodman and Mitlin 2011). The project driven and small scale interventions in CBA is also a challenges for its wider scaling and mainstreaming. As Saleemul Huq, from IIED, in 5th CBA conference expressed that CBA practitioners need to multiply the good practices and project from few dozens to few hundred and thousand to make to more strategic and wide spreading. It is also taken as NGOs or community organizations initiative often lacking support from government. The issue of the project initiative was its sustainability after the completion, and the incorporation of the community based adaptation practices in the local development policies and government plan (Shaw 2003). CBA practitioners must look to more strategic and wide ranging climate change policies and measures (Ayers and Huq 2009). It is essential that CBA practitioners and researchers should learn from and engaging much more closely with development actors and drawing on the well-established livelihoods literature and policy approaches (Sabates Wheeler, Mitchell et al. 2008).

There are also issues around governance of adaptation and the limitations of community based adaptation approach. Nieuwaal et al. (2009) argue that adaptation is not only, or particularly, a technical issue, but that it can be characterized as a complex social interaction process*.*  As noted by Dodman and Mitlin (2011), while there has been much work on developing participatory tools and methods for enabling community‐based development at the project level, relatively little attention has been paid to building up the links with political structures above the level of the settlement. Similarly, the thesis of Ayers (2011) has shown that the governance of adaptation presents a paradox, based on the dual requirements of being part of a ‘global’ climate change problem, managed and financed through international administrative frameworks; and yet needing to respond to disaggregated local vulnerability contexts, where the factors driving vulnerability are often detached from impacts of a global climate change risk. This means adaptation has to be managed coherently across scales. This further demonstrates the need for CBA looking at cross governance structure and broadening its strategy.

There are important lessons to be learnt from community based approaches. In one hand, there are success stories of community led development for e.g. community forestry initiatives in Nepal. While in other hand, community-based development has also been criticized for its inadequate understanding of power relationships at the local level, which thus leaves room for elite capture. For e.g. the solar home system in Bangladesh, represents the ‘counter-elite’ approach and explicitly excludes local elites from the decision-making process (Wong 2010). It is argued that CBA needs to recognise the considered experience of participatory development to date, particularly in relation to local involvement in project planning and implementation, as well as acknowledging the specific challenges raised by climate change (Dodman and Mitlin 2011).

Huq and Reid (2007) also believe that ‘the theory and practice of CBA are in their infancy but both are likely to grow very rapidly. It is important to allow as many pilot activities to be carried out as possible and to share the experience and knowledge gained from them’. Reid et al (2009, p 27) argue that CBA has a lot of challenges. According to the authors, power structures are at the heart of climate change vulnerability, it is therefore necessary to see the active role of communities to shape the policy as well as influence the negotiation process. To be successful CBA, communities need to be the custodians of policy and programme development and ownership should rest on them.

There are issues around the globe about the community based or community driven projects. Evaluation shows that projects are dominated by elites and controlled by staffs of implementing organizations (Mansuri and Rao 2004). There are limits to community-based approaches as it may overlook or neglect broader social processes. The different nature of communities and power dynamics makes situation more complex (Wismer and Mitchell 2011). The case studies in natural resource management reveal the reality in developing countries over the success and failures of community based initiatives and collection actions.

The ownership of community based adaptation has to be shared among community, civil society and government sector. Till date the ownership is between community and civil society. Government perceive it as initiatives that are handled by NGOs with short term gain and often in small scale. This dilemma of branding community based adaptation is proving challenging to its future. The engagement of government and even private sectors might open avenues for mainstreaming community based adaptation at national and international level.

The literatures in CBA show that the foremost challenge ahead is to mainstreaming CBA within development planning process. Ian Burton, University of Toronto, speaking at the opening of fifth international conference on community based adaptation emphasized the need to expand CBA to all communities, link CBA to developments at national planning levels, integrate adaptation into new areas, and make CBA more strategic (IISD 2011). Furthermore, to maximise CBA’s influence, practical ways of consolidating lessons, sharing knowledge and scaling the approach up are needed, so it is relevant to larger-scale adaptation policymaking yet does not compromise the participatory and community-driven nature of the approach. It is also necessary to find practical ways of making CBA replicable in a variety of settings so it can be scaled up with the least damage to its participatory nature (Reid 2010).

**Conclusion and Way Forward**

The global and national scenarios clearly anticipate that one of the best ways to ensure effective integration and mainstreaming of climate change adaptation and development is to start intervening in the planning process. Effective adaptation has to be planned and delivered across a range of scales. Recognising this, the Copenhagen adaptation text has included the principle of “subsidiarity”, or making decisions and implementing response measures at the most appropriate level. In theory, subsidiarity should be operationalised through decentralised institutional designs that are responsive to local level vulnerability contexts, but also accommodate wider adaptation planning scales (Dodman and Mitlin 2011). However, existing institutional designs for adaptation generally focus either at the national level through National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs), or comprise of community-based adaptation initiatives that have tended to take a projectised approach and are detached from broader climate and development policy contexts.

It is critical that community based adaptation should be means of implementing adaptation priorities identified in NAPA. The nexus of NAPA and Community based adaptation can offer best modality to effectively promote adaptation responses in developing countries. But there is lack of discussion around how CBA can support NAPA implementation and vice-versa. There is also a significant lack of middle-range proposals for adaptation planning and delivery that can meet the requirements of subsidiarity in practice (Reid 2010). Addressing planning deficit will be a crucial to the success of promoting effective adaptation at national and local level. Institutionalization of community based adaptation demands mainstreaming approach to successfully imbed climate change within development priorities.

The research and development community has important task ahead in finding ways addressing some of the dilemmas around putting CBA in practice and sustaining it. Information and knowledge gap exist in understanding what works better, how and in what circumstances? There is also need to analyse the effectiveness of current initiatives, of local and community based adaptation planning, on mainstreaming climate change adaptation in addressing bottom up concerns in planning. The lack of clarity on the operationalizing adaptation planning further outlines the need for studies and research to suggest/ devise strategic framework of action and modality to address the uncertainty in CBA and miss match in planning. If this is done, then it will smoothly and effectively drive adaptation agenda in poor and developing countries like Nepal.

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1. Phd Scholar, Flinders University, South Australia, email: [regm0003@flinders.edu.au](mailto:regm0003@flinders.edu.au) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Reid et al (2009, p. 13) define community based adaptation as ‘a community led process, based on communities’ priorities, needs, knowledge and capacities, which will empower people to plan for and cope with impacts of climate change’. According to the authors, CBA needs to start with communities’ priority and needs, to have poverty and livelihood benefits, and reduce the vulnerability to climate change and disasters. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)