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## Ethics in adaptation decision-making

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Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Rock Ethics Institute
Publisher	Rock Ethics Institute, The Pennsylvania State University
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Download date	2026-07-07 04:51:43
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/175524">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/175524</a>

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## Ethics in Adaptation Decision-Making: Learning Tools and Tipping Points

By [Rock Ethics Institute](#) on January 3, 2009 1:40 PM | [0 Comments](#)

*Editor's Preface: This is the third in a series of articles in [ClimateEthics.org](#) looking at ethical issues entailed by the fact that people around the world will need to adapt to climate change. Also see [Planning for adaptation to climate change raises ethical questions about the priorities: Examples from Tanzania and Ethical Issues in Funding for Adaptation in Countries Vulnerable to Climate Change: the Example of Bhutan](#). Adaptation needs will continue to generate profound ethical questions for the international community about such matters as how to set priorities for adaptation funding, who should pay for adaptation costs, how to deal with the needs of climate change refugees, along with many others in the years ahead.*

### I. Introduction

This is the third in a series of posts on [ClimateEthics.org](#) that looks at host of ethical issues that arise due to the inevitable need for many around the world to adapt to climate change.

Many developing countries put high hopes in the Adaptation Fund which is expected to be launched at the 14th Conference of the Parties (COP) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Poznan, Poland (December 2008). The main purpose of the Fund is to provide financial assistance for adaptation resources for the most vulnerable. From a distributive justice perspective, the Adaptation Fund may offer practical ways to share both benefits and burdens of negative impacts from climatic changes. At the same time, the so far vastly insufficient funds (2% levy from certified emission reductions issued from Clean Development Mechanism projects, which equals to roughly \$300 million by 2012) have triggered a perverse race to the bottom where countries risk competing against each other by essentially portraying themselves as vulnerable as possible in order to access the limited funds. This dynamic not only bypasses the intrinsic questions of ethics and justice between North and South, it downplays people's agency, learning, and concrete efforts to enhance their own adaptive capacity and to respond to climatic changes. While the Bali Action Plan identified the need for enhanced action on adaptation by all Parties to the Convention, there are several obstacles to ethical and efficient implementation of adaptation actions. This paper discusses two of these obstacles: the first relates to an almost complete lack of culturally and literacy-sensitive learning tools for adaptation decision-making; the second obstacle concerns unequal and sometimes ineffective solutions in reducing risks associated with tipping points of 'dangerous' abrupt climatic changes.

### II. Learning Tools For Anticipating And Preparing For Uncertainty

In addition to the unresolved questions of equitable access to and distribution of resources from the Adaptation Fund, the most urgent issues of justice in the adaptation debates are the rights of recognition (of needs) and participation in the adaptation process – recognition and participation as main pillars of justice. Besides various technological and infrastructural adjustments currently discussed, the main focus should be on changing people's behavior and livelihoods to enable and empower the most vulnerable to enhance their adaptive capacity and build resilience into their livelihoods now rather than targeting adaptation in the future.

The adoption of the Nairobi Work Programme was one of the major breakthroughs during the COP 12 in 2007. This five-year project assists Parties, particularly developing countries, to improve their understanding and assessment of climate change impacts, vulnerability, and adaptation and to make informed decisions on practical adaptation actions and measures to respond to climate change. It is structured around nine focus areas, including methods and tools for vulnerability assessments and adaptation planning, adaptation practices, and scenarios and downscaling. In order to enhance adaptive capacity and build livelihood resilience among the vulnerable, it is essential to shift the conceptual core of the current adaptation discourse from responses to predicted impacts of climatic change for some specified time in the future, usually 2025 or 2050, to the underlying factors that determine participation in adaptation action. The



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[Economics and Cost \(11\)](#)

[General Climate Ethics \(17\)](#)

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[Media Coverage of Climate Change \(3\)](#)

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[August 2010 \(1\)](#)

[July 2010 \(1\)](#)

[June 2010 \(2\)](#)

large majority of science assessments as well as policy debates portray adaptation as something that is orchestrated, if not imposed, mainly through projects; they assume a linear, largely self-limiting trajectory that results in readily identifiable, discrete, and formalized adaptation actions that are summarized in lists or inventories, are easily implemented, and subsequently incorporated into existing development plans (Schipper 2007). While such an approach may facilitate the execution and evaluation of adaptation strategies, it obscures the very processes and learning activities that shape adaptation in the face of complex risks and uncertainties.

The major obstacle to encouraging participation (and to a certain extent recognition) is that our existing methodological toolbox is sparsely equipped to assist (social learning) processes that enhance adaptive capacity. More problematically, very few tools have been created for and with vulnerable populations to initiate and sustain such adaptive and anticipatory learning processes, in other words learning about the future before impacts are apparent, especially at the community level. Although growing interest exists to 'move beyond the identification of risk and contribute directly to adaptation decision-making' (SBSTA 2006), existing vulnerability and capacity assessment tools seldom view adaptation as a socio-institutional process that involves a multi-faceted, cyclical way of thinking and learning to anticipate and respond to a variety of stressors. As emphasized by Downing (2007), the goal is to enhance competence in adaptation, as a process, and to adapt well, not to be well adapted. One member of the Red Cross/Red Crescent climate change group expressed his unease during COP 13 as follows: 'Even if we had the anticipated \$300 million from the Adaptation Fund today, we would not know how to use them as we don't have the slightest idea how adaptation as a process works' (Suarez 2007).

An effective adaptation process hinges upon the ability of social actors and livelihoods to be flexible in their decision-making. It involves social learning that considers the dynamics of social institutions rather than pursuing a linear impact-driven trajectory. Moreover, a process-oriented and resilience-enhancing adaptation approach reverses the deterministic notion of presumably vulnerable groups as passive victims by highlighting people's strategic responses and agency and facilitating the creation of new knowledge and action. Yet, emerging discussions at COP 14 move into the direction of adaptation indicators, essentially metrics to monitor and evaluate whether or not adaptation is successful. This seems in stark contrast to a process-oriented understanding of adaptive capacity that is centered on the ability to deal with change and disturbance. Such an ability depends to a large extent on the capability of individuals and their social networks to learn from mistakes and through knowledge sharing as well as their ability to innovate (Adger et al. 2003; Armitage 2005; Fabricius et al. 2007).

### III. Inequality in the Tipping Point Metaphor

Learning under climatic uncertainty is more than a collection of tools and techniques. It requires processes of reflection and critical engagement and the realization that trade-offs are inevitable. Yet, much of the proposed adaptation actions lack a nuanced analysis of vulnerability, the distribution of risks, and an individual's, household's, or community's capacity to change and adapt to these risks. Liverman (2008) argues that powerful narratives of dangerous climate change underestimate certain geographic regions (such as African drylands) to the benefit of other regions, mainly colder and coastal ecosystems. Such unequal spatial geographies, also reflected in the relative abundance of adaptation funds for small island states, are directly linked to current debate on so-called tipping points. The debate (e.g. Schellnhuber and Held 2004; Kemp 2005; Lenton et al. 2008) portrays zones where global warming could trigger 'dangerous' abrupt climatic changes, such as the West Antarctic Ice Sheet and the Amazon forest. Danger is defined from an earth systems perspective, focusing on biophysical systems and the sources of anticipated changes. Impacts and adaptive actions from human systems are largely ignored.

What is needed most to strengthen adaptation as envisioned in the Bali Action Plan is to consider thresholds or tipping points with respect to livelihoods of the most vulnerable and to encourage anticipatory (forward-looking) learning that offers less harmful alternatives to 'learning by shock', a reactive response to disasters when they have already happened. Equity and justice in the adaptation debate remind us of our collective responsibility to consider most constructive and inclusive ways to avoid shocks and to assist the most vulnerable to actively shape their future rather than being helpless victims of its unforeseen consequences.

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February 2010 (2)  
January 2010 (1)  
December 2009 (3)  
November 2009 (1)  
October 2009 (8)  
September 2009 (2)  
August 2009 (4)  
June 2009 (1)  
May 2009 (1)  
April 2009 (2)  
February 2009 (1)  
January 2009 (5)  
December 2008 (2)  
October 2008 (1)  
August 2008 (1)  
July 2008 (3)  
June 2008 (3)  
May 2008 (1)  
April 2008 (1)  
March 2008 (2)  
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