

Community-based adaptation and culture in theory and practice

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Introduction

This chapter explores the relationship between culture and adaptation in theory and practice. Our aim is to make clear the important role that culture plays in enabling adaptation, and show how community-based adaptation is well placed to promote, rather than challenge, individual and shared concepts of well-being.

Our intention is to step back from the typical jumping-off point for ‘good development’, which emphasises community participation, and to unpack the relationships between individual well-being, culture, community and adaptation. To this end, we commence with a brief review of the principles of community-based adaptation, before exploring its relationship to notions of the individual, community and culture taken from political philosophy. In particular, we rely on thinking that has emerged from debates over the role of culture and community in the life of the individual that have emerged from attempts to resolve liberal (predominantly individualist) and communitarian (community focused) views of society.

This body of work is instructive as it reveals, first, the importance of culture to individual well-being, and second, the limits that culture places on the freedom of individuals and communities to embrace change. In the final section, the implications of this understanding for community-based adaptation are drawn out through examples of Practical Action’s experiences, demonstrating how the community based approach is able to recognise and respond to the different roles that culture assumes in adaptation.

It should be recognised that this chapter reflects Practical Action’s experiences of adaptation and as such is a first step in exploring the complex relationship between cultures, communities and climate change. However, it is hoped that by

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explicitly identifying the importance of culture, this paper will help NGOs work more effectively in support of communities that are affected by climate change.

Cultures, communities and adaptation

It is the premise of this paper that culture has an important role to play in the process of adaptation. Stavenhagen (1998) suggests three definitions of culture: as capital, as creativity, or as a total way of life. Here, the third view is assumed in reference to culture, meaning ‘the sum total of the material and spiritual activities and products of a given social group... a coherent and self-contained system of values and symbols as well as a set of practices that a specific group reproduces over time and provides individuals with the signposts and meanings for behaviour’ (Stavenhagen, 1998, p. 5).

However, the need to adapt to climate change may pressure individuals and communities into changing livelihoods, lifestyles or patterns of behaviour, potentially challenging existing notions of culture. A series of questions arise: does, and if so how does, a shared culture provide, alter or limit the options for adaptation? How and why do individuals within communities respond to the prospect of changes to their lives and livelihoods? And importantly, what lessons emerge for those working to secure lives and livelihoods in the face of climate change?

Stavenhagen’s definition of culture suggests an important interdependence between groups and individuals. The prospect of the autonomy of individuals being limited by the communally held cultural environment has long been of particular interest to political philosophers, as it forms a focus of the disagreement between the liberal and communitarian schools. Will Kymlicka and Joseph Raz in particular have sought to clarify the nature of the relationship between the individual and their cultural community. Raz and Kymlicka are by no means the only philosophers to approach this issue, which is central to the communitarian school, nor are they by any means the first. See, for example, Van Dyke’s earlier work on the liberal approach to group rights (Van Dyke, 1977), or, earlier still, Hegel’s critique of liberalism and the interdependency of the individual and community (Kymlicka, 2002). Their work offers valuable insights for those attempting to understand the role of culture in the life of individuals and how it relates to the challenge of adaptation.

Well-being and cultural context

Raz (1988) considers the nature of communal living in terms of personal well-being, which he deconstructs via *goals* and *social forms*. A person’s goals are important to Raz’s analysis because well-being is considered from the point of view of the individual. Goals are different from the biological needs of shelter, food and so

forth, and instead incorporate plans, relationships and ambitions, are consciously held, and play an implicit role in the actions and reactions of the individual. Thus, 'improving the well-being of a person can normally only be done through his goals. If they are bad for him the way to help him is to get him to change them, and not to frustrate their realization' (Raz, 1988, p. 291).

Social forms are defined similarly to Stavenhagen's culture, as shared beliefs, folklore, collectively shared metaphors and the like. Social forms pervade an individual's decisions, such that 'a person's well-being depends to a large extent on success in socially defined and determined pursuits and activities' (Raz, 1988, p. 309). Thus, 'a person can have a comprehensive goal only if it is based on existing social forms, i.e. on forms of behaviour which are widely practiced in his society'. Which is to say that goals cannot be selected by an individual in a purely objective manner; the important aspects of one's life are deemed so with reference to social forms. Thus 'engaging in the same activities will ... have a different significance in the life of the individual depending on the social practices and attitudes to such activities' (Raz, 1988, p. 311). This latter point has particular significance for those working internationally on adaptation, as it draws attention not only to the potential inappropriateness of her or his own views on the best adaptation options, but also to the fact that a successful adaptation approach in one location will not necessarily translate to a different cultural context.

Raz's model allows analysis of the mechanisms of social interaction and personal well-being. Importantly, the structure of goals (important life plans) and social forms (culture) helps to place individual autonomy and well-being in a cultural context. Kymlicka (1989) offers broadly similar analysis, but refers to the need to 'see value' in the activities that make up our goals. However, the range of options in which we may see value is limited by the cultural 'context of choice'. Analogous to social forms, the context of choice determines the importance of our actions, as those actions 'only have meaning to us because they are identified as having significance by our *culture*, because they fit into some pattern of activities which can be culturally recognised as a way of leading one's life' (Kymlicka 1989, p. 189, emphasis in original). The phrasing here is evocative of Raz. Interestingly, Kymlicka also offers empirical evidence to demonstrate the interdependence of the individual and society. For example, the practice by oppressive regimes of attacking identity and culture provides evidence of the importance of cultural heritage in providing individuals with 'emotional security and personal strength' (Kymlicka, 1989, p. 193). This points to the power of identity politics, and is the complement of the subjective sense of group membership that is heightened when communities are placed under threat (Cohen, 1999).

The views of Kymlicka and Raz invite tentative answers to the questions raised by Stavenhagen's definition of culture at the start of this section. Kymlicka summarises his overall conception as 'how freedom of choice is dependent on social

practices, cultural meanings, and a shared language'. Accordingly, '[o]ur capacity to form and revise a conception of the good is intimately tied to our membership in a societal culture, since the context of individual choice is the range of options passed down to us by our culture' (1995, p. 126). Similarly, for Raz, well-being is defined in reference to social forms, as it depends 'to a large extent on success in socially defined and determined pursuits and activities' (1988, p. 309). The importance of maintaining well-being or self-respect suggests that adaptation options are limited: not every available option will resonate with local social forms (a truism in even the most laissez-faire cultures). For example, to suggest the use of human waste in composting would be met with abhorrence in some cultures. Yet this approach is commonplace in some communities, reinforcing Raz's view that the same activities have a different significance in different places. However, a more positive reading of Raz and Kymlicka's analyses suggests a productive role for culture, in which social forms and the context of choice define opportunities for adaptation, and suggests that for success, proposed changes should be rooted in or build on local culture.

The above analysis also suggests that individuals and communities will respond to the prospect of change differently depending on how and why change emerges. Kymlicka points out that the importance of community and identity can alter in different circumstances, a fact that becomes shockingly evident when identity politics spills over into violent conflict. The subjective sense of group identity may be reinforced amongst communities that are disenfranchised, face competition for resources or are threatened by existential danger. However, this observation is not the same as suggesting that culture is necessarily resistant to change, and it is wrong to paint cultures as fixed unchanging entities across space or time. Rather, it suggests that changes that are perceived as a threat to culture are likely to be resisted, closing down opportunities for developing the local context of choice. For example, proposing petty trading as a livelihood opportunity for women in some areas of Pakistan, where women's freedom to work outside the home is strongly constrained, is likely to meet with resistance. Moreover, the proposal itself, showing lack of sensitivity to social forms, could constrain future dialogue. Changes imposed from outside should therefore be avoided, and instead the full involvement of communities in the process of adaptation should be promoted: in short, change should be developed from within cultures rather than from without.

Culture and community-based adaptation

The community-based adaptation approach implicitly acknowledges these principles. However, it is our belief that explicit reference to the role of culture is necessary to ensure that this inherent strength of community-based adaptation is

delivered in practice. Community-based adaptation has been defined as a process focused on those communities that are most vulnerable to climate change, based on the premise of understanding how climate change will affect the local environment and a community's assets and capacities (Huq and Reid, 2007). It is rooted in the local context and requires those working with communities to engage with indigenous capacities, knowledge and practices of coping with past and present climate-related hazards. The difference between a community-based adaptation project and a standard development project is not principally in the intervention, but in the way the intervention is developed: not what the community is doing, but why and with what knowledge. The aim is to enable the community to understand and integrate the concept of climate risk into their livelihood activities in order to increase their resilience to immediate climate variability and long-term climate change. Community-based adaptation is essentially an action research approach to the problem of climate change impacts on livelihoods.

By seeking to work with communities to identify local problems and locally appropriate solutions, community-based adaptation can naturally build on social forms (working with cultures) and provides an opportunity to extend the local context of choice (effecting change from within, through dialogue and developing a local understanding of the challenges of climate change). Rooting the process of adaptation in communities allows important communal practices and collectively held metaphors or sayings to be identified and used to facilitate change from within, rather than attempting to force change from without. In particular, cultures that lack a tradition or history of adaptation (to climate or other environmental challenges) require an approach that builds from existing social forms and is sympathetic to local notions of well-being. This may be more or less of a challenge depending on how radical a transformation is required and whether the existing cultural context of choice is narrowly defined or deeply entrenched.

The role of culture outlined here indicates the need for a nuanced approach to adaptation that is grounded in a highly developed appreciation of local social dynamics. It may be that situations are encountered 'where "local culture" is oppressive to certain people' and may rob the most vulnerable within a group of a voice (Cleaver, 2001, p.47). However, an understanding of culture can also help to transcend a simplistic view of power relations as oppressive, and instead point to the complex role that power holders play in well-being and the entry points that they offer into communities (Ensor, 2005, p.266). Community-based adaptation demands that a line is walked between the 'we know best' and 'they know best' positions (Cleaver, 2001, p.47) by seeking to work within cultures to build and develop dialogue on the challenges of climate change. As Twigg notes in the context of disaster-resilient communities, success will see the approach to adaptation become a shared community value or attitude. However, reaching this point also

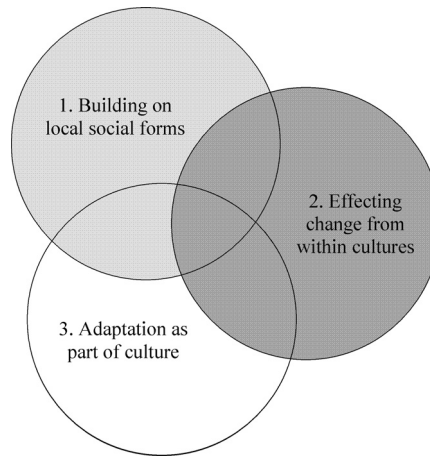


Figure 14.1 Culture can play multiple roles in community-based adaptation.

requires an enabling environment – a ‘political, social and cultural environment that encourages freedom of thought and expression, and stimulates inquiry and debate’ (Twigg, 2007, p.26). Engendering such an environment may be a key challenge in the process of moving community-based adaptation beyond isolated development projects and into institutionalised policy frameworks.

Experiences of culture and adaptation

This section reflects on the framework presented above, using examples from Practical Action’s experience to illustrate how community-based adaptation can be successful when it builds on existing social forms and effects change from within cultures, and where communities are well versed in the need for adaptation to harsh environments. These three elements are the central implications of the analysis of culture, well-being and adaptation, but do not operate in isolation from each other. As Figure 14.1 illustrates, these dimensions can overlap when the process of adaptation is played out.

Figure 14.1 highlights the need to understand the cultural context when considering approaches to adaptation. In particular, the overlaps between the circles are instructive: cultures without deeply entrenched cultural norms and that have experience of adaptation may still be more responsive to approaches that recognise rather than challenge important social forms (overlap between circles 3 and 1). Similarly, adaptive cultures may be best served by approaches that effect change through seeking to extend the local context of choice, which (however flexible) will still have limits (overlap between circles 3 and 2). The identification of important social forms may be sufficient on its own to suggest adaptation options, or can be used as a starting

point to build change from within cultures (overlap between circles 1 and 2). The following sections explore these approaches with reference to Figure 14.1.

Building on local social forms

Key concerns around climate change in the upland regions of Nepal are soil erosion, landslides and flooding, which have increased as poor forest management and the clearance of trees on sloping land have combined with increasingly severe rainfall. In affected communities, Hinduism and Buddhism provide strong and long-standing social forms, framing and informing individual and communal life. Both religions have close links to nature, suggesting an entry point for developing natural resource management responses to climate change. In Hinduism it is regarded as a sin to destroy the banyan and the closely related peepul or bodhi trees (*Ficus religiosa*), which are sacred and associated with temples. Rivers are also sacred and importance is attached to keeping water sources clean through the protection of trees and plants at the spring or source. In Buddhism avoiding harming nature is a central concept, suggesting synergies with biodiversity conservation and building environmental resilience.

Whilst religious beliefs and practices are a core part of the local culture and value system, they have not translated into a wider demand for conservation or natural resource management. In working with the local communities, Practical Action has been able to frame soil and tree management in terms of their religious value, generating an environment in which the community is receptive to tree planting and new land management techniques. By adopting an approach that resonates with local social forms, the intervention has been readily adopted, with the effect of empowering people to protect their assets and resources and reinforce their livelihood security in the face of increasing rainfall variability.

Similar lessons are found in the very different context of the pastoralist communities of north-eastern Kenya. Living in areas where rainfall is below 250mm in a normal year and crop cultivation is not feasible, a tribal culture has evolved over centuries built around livestock breeds that are capable of surviving through grazing and browsing the sparse vegetation. Social status, activities and roles by gender and age are all based on the finding of water and pasture for livestock, through patterns of seasonally based nomadism. Community and family resilience to disasters (droughts, El Niño-related floods and tribal conflict) is increased through diversity of livestock and herd management, based on the differing preferences for grazing and needs for water of goats, sheep, cattle and camels. Social identity for pastoralists is strongly linked to livestock, even when individuals move out of their local social groups through education. It is common for such people, even though they may be city-dwellers, to own large herds that are managed by family members.

Several factors have impacted over decades to threaten the viability of pastoralist livelihoods. However, experiences of climate variability, manifested in increased length and frequency of droughts, floods and disease, have increased the vulnerability of these communities to the point of threatening the viability of a culture and livelihood that is in tune with a very harsh environment. In recent years, a succession of crises precipitated by severe droughts has led to high death rates in livestock, and has forced large numbers of pastoralists into settlements as displaced persons. Traditional coping strategies based on systems of livestock gifts and loans have been eroded through the massive loss of herds. With small remaining herds, there is a real problem in terms of livelihoods, particularly for young unmarried men, who would have had the role of warrior–herders in remote camps. The Kenyan education system, which values agriculture and settled existence, further undermines pastoralist values. So, as education becomes available to more families as they settle close to schools, this further erodes the tribal society's coping mechanisms: as children attend school instead of learning their role as herders, vital environmental knowledge is not passed on. This in turn erodes the status of elders as keepers of traditional knowledge because traditional knowledge is no longer seen as relevant.

Community-based adaptation efforts have differentiated between the newly settled communities and those who remain as livestock keepers. The newly settled communities include the most vulnerable members of society – female-headed households and the elderly. A central adaptation challenge here is to identify new livelihoods that can fit into a strongly value-laden society. Moreover, alternatives must be appropriate for groups that possess very few resources, limited in the best case to a donkey and a few goats. Discussion with the whole community, including elders, revealed options including donkey-based small businesses development, such as carrying water and other goods using donkey and carts and cultivation and marketing of aloe for export.

Women are the traditional donkeys handlers within pastoralist society, making donkey-based haulage an attractive option as it is both livestock-based and open to women. Wild aloe harvesting was an activity carried out by women in the nomadic camps but is now prohibited as aloe is a protected species. Aloe cultivation, however, enables those in settlements to continue this work. Both of these interventions have therefore sought to capitalise on existing social forms and have been well received by the whole community as a result.

For those still able to be livestock keepers, Practical Action's work has explicitly focused on securing livelihoods that are the key element of a deeply entrenched local culture and value system. During a severe drought in 2006 community elders strongly expressed a need for support to enable their livestock to survive. As it was clear that development work could not continue if livestock mortality was

very high, fodder (rather than food aid) was proved as a response to the extreme conditions. The success of this intervention has been reinforced through the provision of basic animal health care training for community-selected individuals. As a result, survival rates of livestock during drought and floods have improved, herds have been maintained, and a few people have been able to earn a new livelihood as animal healthcare workers.

Each of the strategies outlined above are versions of those illustrated by circle 1 in Figure 14.1, in that they not only build on existing social forms but support and respond to the needs of the local culture. As a result they have been welcomed by the communities involved. However, a key challenge that remains in the Kenyan context is finding new livelihood options for young men in the warrior age group that build on social forms and resonate with their need to demonstrate courage and strength. Options for adaptation will need to identify and retain those aspects of their traditional activity that are key markers of social status – even if confrontational displays of strength are no longer an option. Failure to recognise and work with the traditional needs of this group risks disenfranchising and alienating a key section of society who may, in the worst case, seek to reinforce their identity through recourse to violence. Strategies to address this issue lie in the intersection between circles 1 and 2 in Figure 14.1, building on important existing cultural markers but in such a way as to extend the context choice and effect a change that is acceptable within the community. Ensor (2005) discusses a successful example of this strategy, in which female genital mutilation is recognised as a key signifier of social status for all generations of a girl's family. In this example, an alternative to the traditional rites of passage was developed, known as 'circumcision by words'. The approach retains all the important cultural elements of a traditional coming of age ceremony, but without damaging and dangerous cutting.

The strength and depth of the ties between the pastoralist livelihood and culture mean that the broader question of livelihood viability in the face of climate change is also tied to cultural survival. Pastoralism will depend on the government of Kenya developing an institutional and policy framework that recognises and seeks to support, rather than undermine, pastoralist peoples' culture and values.

Effecting change from within

In Pakistan, Practical Action has been working with a partner, RDPI, with a formerly pastoralist society in the Thal desert region in Punjab between the Chenab and Sindh/Indus rivers. Until 50 years ago, the area's population lived in scattered hamlets of six to ten households comprising one extended family, owning large herds of camels (up to 600 animals) grazing a wide area of desert scrub, with each

hamlet lying close to a well-based water source. In the 1960s–70s, huge irrigation channels were developed by the government, drawing water from the rivers to open up the land to agriculture. Grazing lands which had been a common property resource were taken and people were encouraged to grow wheat and grain: as the availability of grazing land diminished, there was little choice. Perceptions of climate change in this region are that rains are less regular, and that seasons are becoming harsher. However, it is hard to separate climatic impacts from those due to the ecosystem disruption caused by the transition to agriculture. While agriculture has brought increased wealth for some communities, rising input prices and increasingly erratic rainfall patterns are leading to high levels of indebtedness for many farmers. In the last ten years many community members have migrated to towns in search of employment, leading to the desertion of hamlets by all except the elderly.

Traditionally, livelihoods were based around sound natural resource management and many customs and sayings linked to the weather were used to regulate behaviour. For example, in a study of local knowledge on climate, members of several villages talked about the emergence of the Sohal star as an indication that the severity of summer was coming to an end, and how sighting it would determine the change of seasons and a change of activities. This knowledge does not apply to a crop-based livelihood, and is no longer seen as relevant by younger generations, who prefer to listen to the radio for their weather forecasts.

Although in some years agriculture yields a good income, it is becoming less viable. Alternative rural livelihood options are not obvious. Through a process of identifying cultural values, community-based adaptation has focused on raising awareness of traditional knowledge of sound environmental management. Changes in lifestyles and livelihoods have been brought about through a process of discussing the value of planting trees that were once employed for multiple uses: for fruit, fodder and fuel. Similarly, by reawakening an appreciation of the value of the camel in withstanding drought through the revival of traditional festivals of camel dancing, the status of the camel has been revived. In the process, those with land that has not yielded well have been encouraged to allow their land to revert to natural desert vegetation that is suitable for grazing. These adaptation strategies are predominantly circle 2 approaches (Figure 14.1), in which the focus is on extending the context of choice beyond existing options (migration). By reviving traditional knowledge and the festivals that celebrate and communicate it, acceptable and appropriate alternative livelihood strategies have re-entered the communal consciousness and thus the context of choice.

However, as in northern Kenya, climate change adaptation in this region will require government policies that support local culture and traditional land uses that are environmentally appropriate and work with the climate.

Adaptation as part of culture

It is important to recognise that just as some cultures may be deeply and narrowly defined and thereby resistant to change (or certain types of change), in others adaptation and flexibility are or have become part of life (circle 3 in Figure 14.1). This can be seen to an extent in the Kenyan pastoralist system, in which flexibility has emerged as a necessary strategy to exploit a harsh environment, but is constrained within strong cultural norms. The precarious and marginal livelihoods of sandbank dwellers in Bangladesh have engendered a more fundamental adaptability. Bangladesh is the floodplain for several large rivers flowing from the Himalayas. The rivers change their course annually during the monsoon season when vast areas of the country are routinely submerged. Whilst the flow of these rivers is projected to increase as glaciers melt under the influence of climate change, even at present it is not unusual for large areas of land to disappear on one side of the river, while new sandbanks emerge on the other. Despite this, the banks support a very marginalised population who, due to population growth, are forced to live on the erosion-prone banks of large rivers. Erosion results in community members losing most of their assets (and of course their land) several times in a decade, forcing them to relocate. For these sandbank-dwellers, resilience and adaptability are key survival skills, and have become, perhaps, part of their defining culture.

Practical Action has worked with these communities to identify key vulnerabilities and develop technologies that build on practices already in use in similarly affected communities so that resilience is increased and livelihoods strengthened. For example, fish is a key ingredient in local diet, but during the monsoon season, the river's flow is too strong for local fishing boats. Flood water however creates additional temporary water bodies, giving the opportunity for fish cultivation. By training people to construct cages from bamboo and netting, families are enabled to breed fish for food and income generation. As floods worsen and longer period of inundation are experienced, the planting of crops is delayed. By developing floating vegetable gardens – a practice prevalent in coastal regions – using locally available materials, seedlings can be reared ready for planting as soon as flood waters recede. Practical Action's experience of working with these communities has been that their lack of resources and limited government support, information and infrastructure has left them with a cultural context of choice that is neither deeply entrenched nor narrowly defined. Rather, they have embraced adaptability as a part of their cultural response to their harsh environment. The people have shown themselves to be open to developing new practices and livelihood options that strengthen their coping strategies. Note, however, that whilst this suggests a context that is receptive to changes in livelihood strategies, strong cultural forms still need to be recognised: reflections on Practical Action's experiences

in Bangladesh highlight how ‘pre-existing [formal and informal institutions and patterns of behaviour] should not only be acknowledged, but incorporated into policy or project design and approach, rather than bypassed or challenged.’ (Lewins et al., 2007, p. 33) Adaptation interventions must acknowledge that even in the most flexible societies, the mechanisms of change will inevitably be framed by a cultural context that may be the entry point for interventions (intersection of circles 3 and 1 in Figure 14.1) and offer opportunities for change (intersection of circles 3 and 2 and the intersection of circles 3 and 2 and 1).

Conclusion

Community-based adaptation is well placed to work with a fuller understanding of the relationship between culture and adaptation. The analysis presented here provides insights into the interplay between culture, well-being and adaptation, and offers potentially overlapping options for action: through building on social forms, through extending the context of choice and effecting change from within, and by recognising and capitalising on the adaptability inherent within culture. The examples illustrate that by seeking to work with communities to identify local problems and locally appropriate solutions, community-based adaptation can naturally build on local social forms. Rooting the process of adaptation in communities allows important communal practices to be identified and used to facilitate change from within, rather than attempting to force change from without. Whilst some cultures exhibit a readiness to embrace change, others lack a tradition or history of adaptation and require an approach that builds from the existing cultural context and is sympathetic to local notions of well-being. It is our hope that by better understanding the underlying and ever-present relationship between culture and adaptation, those working with communities affected by climate change will be in a position to capitalise on the inherent ability of community-based adaptation to support a process of change that both addresses the climate challenge and maintains individual and collective well-being.

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