Rethinking Climate Adaptation Assistance

BY ARPANA PANDEY AND ARATHI RAO

In the final run-up to December’s Copenhagen Climate Conference, adaptation is enjoying a newfound popularity. Adaptation—or strategies designed to cope with climate change—was once a taboo subject. Many environmentalists dismissed the notion, afraid that adaptation would undermine support for mitigation programs aimed at curbing greenhouse gas emissions and halting global warming. Adaptation, they argued, meant we were giving up on our warming planet.

With the growing realization that climate change is occurring faster than expected, however, attitudes have shifted. In 2007, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicted global warming would cause sea levels to rise by between 18 cm and 59 cm this century.¹ The IPCC’s prediction now seems overly optimistic. Climate scientists anticipate a one-meter rise in sea level even if emissions are curtailed. Should emissions continue to increase, sea levels may rise even beyond one meter.² Rising oceans and more frequent and destructive flooding have diminished doubts about the need for climate adaptation programs.

Adaptation advocates also point to climate change’s disproportionate effect on developing countries and island states. The vulnerability of these countries stems both from their geography—countries near the equator and along coasts will experience the most serious effects—and their fragile governance structures, which impede their ability to respond. Al Gore, who won the Nobel Prize for his work on climate change, admitted, “I used to think adaptation subtracted from our efforts on prevention. But I’ve changed my mind.... Poor countries are vulnerable and need our help.”³

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Gore’s sentiment was echoed during the first Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing of the new Congress this past January. In their opening statements, John Kerry, the Committee’s new chairman, and Richard Lugar both expressed concern about the impact of climate change on developing countries, especially their agricultural sectors, and the need for the United States to aid these countries. Since the hearing, the Senate has put forth the Waxman-Markey Bill which would create domestic and foreign adaptation programs. This enthusiasm for adaptation strategies is not limited to the United States. Indeed, across the Atlantic, at a meeting in November 2008, European Union development ministers underscored the need to support poor countries in their efforts to become “climate resilient.”

While global awareness of the adaptation challenge has increased, financial support for a solution still has a long way to go. Although adaptation costs are still being debated today, there is general consensus that the cost of adaptation financing will not be cheap. Oxfam puts the price tag at US$50 billion per year, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) puts it all at US $28-67 billion by 2030.

Yet the international community is having difficulty marshalling these substantial sums. Existing adaptation financing for developing countries comes from two chief sources—official development assistance and multilateral adaptation funds. Developed countries are still grappling with how to support adaptation goals through their development assistance programs. Meanwhile, current resources available for multilateral adaptation funds are only US$300 million—far short of what is needed. In this way, both types of mechanisms are overburdened and short of resources. At the UNFCCC December conference in Poznan, Poland, negotiations failed to increase adaptation funding which does not bode well for the approaching summit in Copenhagen.

Why are international adaptation negotiations stalling despite global recognition of the adaptation challenge? Why is only a pittance of development aid devoted to climate change adaptation when practitioners agree that climate change threatens to undermine the stability and prosperity of poor countries? The adaptation impasse arises on both fronts because of a failure to articulate a clear vision for climate adaptation and distinguish this vision from development. Many climate-adaptive measures, including strengthening health care systems to deal with new disease patterns or providing farmers with drought resistant seeds, can also be considered development activities. The confusion
between development and adaptation has, therefore, given way to an inert adaptation agenda.

Indeed, there is no significant, practical difference between development and adaptation. A strong adaptation strategy does not merely respond to the consequences of climate change, but addresses the underlying causes of a community’s vulnerability to climate change. Yet, this is the logical domain of development aid. Development aid sets out to bolster the economic, political, and social well-being of a country’s people. Such aid supports programs that bring mosquito nets to regions affected by malaria, provide drought resistant crops, and improve access to microcredit. Through programs such as these, development aid can naturally reduce a community’s vulnerability to climate stresses. Mosquito nets offer protection as climate change alters the geography of malaria. Drought resistant crops enable farmers to sustain their livelihoods, even if precipitation levels decrease. Access to microcredit will help people in climate sensitive sectors such as fishing supplement their incomes. Thus, what is needed is not adaptation aid but a new development paradigm—one that strategically addresses climate change.

Changing the Development Paradigm for a Changing Climate

Currently, the development aid landscape is frenetic, littered with adhoc efforts to help countries cope with climate challenges. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), for example, maintains a climate change adaptation program tasked with gathering information on the climate, its variability, and expected climate change. Once potential outcomes are understood, USAID can attempt to make economic development projects resilient. They have, moreover, created a Climate Change Adaptation Manual to help missions and development partners ensure that their projects function as designed, even as the climate changes. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) “mainstreams” adaptation concerns into their development work, meaning they strive to integrate climate risks into their programming. Both these strategies of “climate-proofing” are tantamount to retrofitting. The process of assessing climate change outcomes still remains largely divorced from planning development programs. These programs are instead evaluated after-the-fact in light of climate considerations and tweaked where development gains cannot be sustained in the face of global warming.
Absent from these efforts is a central, concerted push to address climate change systematically, from start to finish. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon characterized climate change as the “defining challenge of our time.” Organizations such as USAID and UNDP are best positioned to assist countries as they adapt to climate change since their work already helps to reduce the sources of climate vulnerabilities. But nowhere in their mission statements do they even mention this “defining challenge,” nor how to address it as an organization. By contrast, the World Bank has begun to acknowledge that development must be revisited in the era of climate change. Indeed, their upcoming World Development Report 2010 is entitled Development in a Changing Climate: Making Our Future Sustainable, and champions “climate-smart development.”

The effects of climate change are real and irreversible. The development aid community is already operating in a rapidly changing context, and must wake up to this reality. The development paradigm must be forward-thinking and take into consideration the impacts of climate change on areas such as health, agriculture, and governance. This can be accomplished with increased communication and coordination among climate scientists and aid practitioners. Armed with the relevant information, practitioners can then work together to formulate development programs. This sequencing, in which climate change impacts are assessed first, will give rise to development programs that inherently meet adaptation goals. This new model can add value across the spectrum of development, particularly in the areas of health and agriculture.

Climate change will have significant implications for public health. It will, for example, alter the geography of diseases such as malaria and affect the availability of fresh water and food. Also, climate change will increase the severity and frequency of extreme weather events such as heat waves, floods, storms, fires, and drought. These challenges can be best managed through improving basic health care infrastructure as part of development programs. Biologists, climate physicists, and public health care practitioners should consult with each other over climate issues and share implications for public health, in order to address these concerns holistically. For example, a comprehensive approach might involve building new hospitals with emergency care facilities on the second floor in potential flood-zones to avoid flooding caused by rising sea-levels.
Changes in weather patterns will also affect agricultural yields. Some countries could see reductions in agricultural output, particularly regions already suffering from food insecurity. In the Sahelian region of Africa, warmer and drier conditions have led to a reduced length of the growing season and, subsequently, detrimental effects on crops. Adapting to these changes will require better water and crop management. Much of current research in agriculture has focused on genetically altered seeds that can withstand drought conditions. Conversations with climate scientists would show, however, that efforts need to be focused on increasing soil fertility and crop diversification. A holistic examination of the impact of climate change on agriculture would more clearly inform the objectives of future development projects.

Climate change poses a grave threat to development. Climate adaptation must be integrated fully into the creation and implementation of development strategies. Participants in December’s climate summit in Copenhagen should, therefore, not merely call for a robust multilateral fund for adaptation but also for a full reassessment of development aid. The United States, meanwhile, should revisit its own development programming as it looks to expand international adaptation programs.

-Samantha Raneri and Elizabeth Sterling served as lead editors for this article.

NOTES

4 “Adapt or Die,” The Economist
5 http://pdf.wri.org/weathering_the_storm.pdf
6 http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/environment/climate/policies_prog/vulnerability.html
7 http://www.undp.org/climatechange/adapt/mainstream.html