

Space, Increasing Human Populations, State and Climate Change: Why the Traditional Adaptation Knowledge Will not Suffice

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Abstract

Many people believe that using the traditional knowledge to help communities adapt to the effects of climate change should be one of the pillars of dealing with climate change particularly in helping them adapt. This note argues that traditional knowledge is no longer relevant for such task given the changes in space occupancy patterns consequent to increased human populations, the form of modern state and scales of projected effects of climate change. The magnitude of consequences being projected has no precedent in human history – so there is really no traditional knowledge about climate change per se.

Introduction

Climate change is certainly one of the most important international debates of this starting 21st century. Within that debate, the question of the use of traditional knowledge to help communities in poor countries to adapt to the new conditions that will result from the climate change is a major component of the strategies being laid out. The inclusion of the traditional knowledge in the adaptation paradigm is that people have always lived with fluctuations of climate and weather patterns within their environments and that they have always adapted to the changing conditions of the environments wherein they lived. This note argues that traditional knowledge will not suffice to deal with climate change effects, at least as if these effects are at the scales that are currently being projected. It argues that people have adapted within cycles that were often reversible; droughts took long time but people knew that one day or the other rain will pour down as well as they understood that massive floods caused by heavy rains would retreat back one way or the other. But, this is not what is being envisaged by climate predictions, which indicate infringements on weather cycles. Also, it is one thing to adapt to an increase of 2°C but a completely other thing to adapt to a change of 5°C. As Desjardins [1] said, new problems emerging from discussions on climate change raise fundamental questions that are about what we as human beings value, what kind of species we are, the kind of lives we should live, our place in nature, and the kind of the world in which we might flourish. These questions require more than simply relying on traditional adaptation schemes, which were dealing with fluctuations within a permanently stable system.

Space and Space Occupancy as Adaptation Means is no Longer Viable

The traditional knowledge will not help buffer effects of climate change firstly because of the constraints imposed on the geographic space and its occupancy. Indeed, surveys conducted in several locations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) indicated that most people viewed flexibility in space occupancy as the most important traditional method to cope with changes in environmental

conditions. When people were stroke by an epidemic or when drought was very severe or land became unproductive, the adaptation method used was mostly moving on to new lands. This pattern is still present today in the persistence of the slash and burn agriculture whereby people move from one piece of land to the next because the productivity in the first one has decreased. But, space as the best adaptation means is no longer a viable option because of the increasing population that has, consequently, led people to become fixed on the geographic areas claimed to be that of their ancestors. Forced sedentary lives combined with increased needs of space due increased populations means that most of these communities will not have other spaces where they can move to cope with effects of climate change.

Modern States and Their Boundaries too Will Not Help

Another factor that will not make the use of traditional knowledge to cope with effects of climate change is the nature of the modern state itself and the notion of sovereignty. Indeed, it is of common knowledge that traditionally, to cope with the changing conditions of the environments wherein they lived, particularly within pastoralists communities, was to trek through known historical paths where water points are located. The modern state inherited from the western civilization has brought with it boundaries that are rigid and would not allow communities to move from one country to another without major obstacles. Indeed, this problem has been often discussed in the African context but solutions proposed have never been implemented as they were supposed to be.

Increasing Human Populations Demand for Other Approaches

There is currently a tendency to believe that some other traditional institutions such as sacred forests, sacred water and traditional taboos could be used to alleviate the effects of climate change and help people adapt. Yes, taboos and the notion of sacred have helped Africans through a diversity of changing conditions in the past. Yet, this is no longer the case: taboos have been washed away because of modern schooling systems, increased commodification and monetization of the

different modes of livelihoods. Again, increased populations in limited space and limited resources are no longer so respectful of the traditional approaches and would not be forced to return back to the ancestral ways of life.

Space, Human Populations, State and Climate Change Need a Shift in Our Thinking

Therefore, changes in the space occupancy, increasing populations as all other forms of the traditional adaptation knowledge will not suffice to cope with the projected effects of climate change. The scales of these projections mean that there is a need for an entire shift in paradigms; and probing on the past, as laudable as that might be, is not sufficient. Variations of weather patterns that traditional societies have coped with were of a different magnitude and adaptation was possible

because of limited spatial occurrence of these variations. What is need if we are to talk about effects of climate change and their effects on traditional societies is a change in our living patterns and our thinking should be shifted too. It should shifted to start laboring what type of land use patterns are needed for communities to cope with climate change, how to mutualize the national spaces and means to deal with a situation that is no longer of the local scale. Global solutions are needed for a global problem; the search for traditional knowledge is good only as it will serve for the building of other forms of knowledge.

References

1. Desjardins JR (2001) *Environmental ethics: An introduction to environmental philosophy*. (3rd edn.) Wadsworth Group.