

A Clash of Adaptations

How Adaptation to Climate Change is Translated in Northern Tanzania

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Abstract

This chapter explores how the nascent idea of Adaptation to Climate Change is translated in northern Tanzania. By interrogating how non-governmental organisations and other actors in northern Tanzania adapt to the idea of adaptation itself we gain insight into the ways in which a new development paradigm comes into being. Based on fourteen months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork this chapter reveals the politics of adaptation that emerge in the encounter between global ideas of adaptation and what it means for different stakeholders on the ground.

Introduction: on the emerging geographies of adaptation

Since ‘adaptation’ has made its way into the international climate change regime of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) alongside mitigation – as one of the two fundamental pillars of global action – an increasing tone of urgency has come to dominate both the policy and research agenda. While it is acknowledged that adaptation needs to take place at all scales to complement mitigation efforts, it is argued that those populations with the least resources have the least capacity to adapt (IPCC 2001, p. 8). Largely underpinned by the several scientific assessment reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) it is now widely recognised that, in order to cope with the effects of climate change, for many communities in the most vulnerable parts of the world, planned and strategic adaptation planning is not just an option but a sheer necessity (IPCC 2014a). It can be said therefore that the Adaptation to Climate Change paradigm has reached the status of being the *sine qua non* for the survival of the Global South. If we take a closer look at the (expected) uneven distribution of the consequences of climate change worldwide, we are immediately confronted with the stark opposition between the developed world on the one hand, and the developing world on the other (nowadays this distinction is more often subsumed under the Global North versus the Global South). The profound inequality entailed by climate change on a global scale, has led some authors and policymakers to conclude that climate change has become one of *the* defining contemporary international development issues (Tanner and Allouche 2011, p. 1). It comes therefore as no surprise that climate change adaptation has been appropriated by the realm of development cooperation. In addition, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has stated that climate change is the defining human development issue of our generation (UNDP 2007/ 2008, p. 1).

In part due to the Global North’s historical responsibility and concomitant international pressure to compensate and support the Global South in its adaptation pursuit – as outlined by the convention principles (Article 3.1, UNFCCC 1992) – billions of dollars have been pledged for adaptation finance. In response to the anticipated bleak future for the world’s poorest populations – and linking global development targets such as the United Nations 2030 Agenda and its associated sustainable development goals (SDGs) – the related policy imperative has addressed what kind of adaptation policies are needed, and how they can best be developed, applied and funded. Furthermore, a vast body of literature has simultaneously emerged that, although diverse and broad, has largely addressed the basic questions of how and to what extent adaptation can reduce the impacts of climate change (Burton et al. 2002, p. 145). Considering the increasing scholarly engagement with the concept of adaptation, it is striking to find that the majority of studies aim to contribute to a

better understanding of (how to enhance) adaptation, while a glaring absence exists of enquiries into the ideological underpinnings of this question (de Wit 2015, 2017). As such, in part due to the urgency of the adaptation pursuit, questions related to the political economy and thus the structural or systemic considerations about what made people vulnerable to climate change in the first place are by and large left unscrutinised. It is worth mentioning that recently an emerging body of work from the social sciences has called for the need to critically interrogate the discursive framings within which adaptation emerges, or looks at the politics of adaptation in the developing world (see Tanner and Allouche 2011, de Wit 2014, Gesing et al. 2014, Weisser et al. 2014, Arnall et al. 2015, Taylor 2015). Before elaborating on this point let us first briefly explore some potential reasons for the naturalising impetus that drives adaptation.

It is obvious that there is a fine line between what constitutes adaptation to climate change and what is generally understood as a ‘conventional’ development issue. Hence the debate about whether adaptation should be treated as additional to, or rather as an integral part of, development has received much attention but is far from settled (for a systematic literature review on this topic, see Sherman et al. 2016). For instance, some authors have argued that it is highly problematic to subsume the one under the other (Cannon and Müller-Mahn 2010); others have emphasised that ‘doing adaptation’ will inevitably feed positively into general development aims or *vice versa* (e.g. Ayers and Huq 2009), which supports the idea that adaptation and development could be tackled in the same way (Sherman et al. 2016, p. 708). However, in a recent critique of adaptation, Marcus Taylor has noted that in the haste to unite development with adaptation, the idea of adaptation that underpins these governing efforts has received relatively little scrutiny. This is in part due, Taylor argues, to the fact that adaptation – with its roots in evolutionary biology – is seen as part and parcel of, and common to, all forms of life. This seemingly natural response entailed by the discourse of adaptation – that treats climate as an externality – provides a fertile ground for a technocratic politics of intervention (Taylor 2015, p. xi). In addition to this evolutionary principle, it will be argued in the following, that there are other ideological underpinnings of this paradigm that tend to *naturalise* adaptation as the only and indispensable way forward. In fact, some of the recent critique that has been directed at adaptation – largely from the social sciences – bears similarities to the body of postcolonial critique of development, such as Ferguson’s ‘anti-politics machine of development’ (Ferguson 1990), or more implicitly, Escobar’s critique of development that conceives of social life as solely a technical problem (Escobar 1995).

Notwithstanding the disputed nature of conceptualisations over adaptation *vis-à-vis* development, in line with Taylor, this chapter forecloses this debate and argues that there is fertile ground to explore adaptation as a new field of development discourse and practice. Not just because it has given rise to an array of complex new knowledge regimes, operating frameworks for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs), adaptation projects, and research institutions etc. that all seek to enhance the adaptation capacities of the most vulnerable populations in the Global South, but all the more so owing to the apocalyptic aura with which this paradigm is imbued. In other words, the adaptation discourse is not just a scientific measurement mirroring a society’s vulnerability to an external climate, but it is also a cultural discourse revealing certain predispositions and values of the knowledge regimes within which the idea has emerged. For instance, we clearly hear the echoes of time of certain Western discourses of ‘tropicality’ and development in which faraway places epitomised danger and ‘otherness’, both environmentally and culturally. It is in a similar vein that geographer Andrew Baldwin has argued that the cultural discourse on climate change and migration operates, in part, as a function of the security apparatus, and can be located within the registers of race (or ‘white’ affect) and difference (Baldwin 2016). By dividing the world into those who can and those who cannot adapt, this imagery is perpetuated by the looming catastrophe of climate change, which renders the Global South once more ‘vulnerable’, disaster-ridden, poverty-stricken and disaster-prone (see Bankoff 2001). Moreover, it is the same discourse that puts the ‘salvation’ of the Global South in the hands of the industrialised nations by sharing their expertise and technology and making funds available. As Bankoff (2001) has

compellingly argued, Western discourses on disasters form part of a wider historical and cultural geography of risk that generates and maintains a specific image of large parts of the world as dangerous places. Drawing on Bankoff's critique of natural disasters as cultural discourse, Table 1 shows that we can meaningfully transpose the table on 'hazard as cultural discourse' to the realm of vulnerability as a concept that renders particular regions of the world as 'adaptation deficient'.

Table 1. Adopted from *Rendering the world unsafe: 'Vulnerability' as Western Discourse* (Bankoff 2001, p. 28).

Concept	Period	Condition	Cure/ technology
Tropicality	17th - 19th/early 20th	Disease	Western medicine
Development	Post-WW2	Poverty	Western
Natural disasters	Late 20th	Hazard	investment/aid
Adaptation	21st century	Climate change (exacerbating a range of societal ills)	Western science Science, technology (expertise) and funds provided by the 'developed nations'

Considering that in many parts of the Global South the Adaptation paradigm is already running its own course as a complex field of knowledge and power, translated by, and embedded within, both existing and emerging institutions, it is a timely exercise to scrutinise the discursive framework within which this paradigm unfolds. As well as to examine the 'truth effects' (i.e. how truth is created in discourse, see Foucault 1980) that it brings into being. Against this background therefore, this chapter seeks to contribute to the emerging body of critical scholarship that explores adaptation not just as a normative concept that asks how people are supposed to adapt to an externally changing environment, but rather how people adapt to the *idea* of adaptation itself. It will do so by exploring adaptation as a travelling idea (Hulme 2009, Weisser et al. 2014, de Wit 2014, 2015) that is continuously translated and interpreted by different actors along its journey in rather contingent and unpredictable ways.

This chapter begins with briefly scrutinising the historical roots of the discursive framings as the background to the ways in which adaptation discourses are currently advancing, particularly as far as sub-Saharan Africa is concerned. My basic argument is that this new type of crisis narration risks concealing the truth effects and political nature of making claims to crisis in the first place (on the financial crisis see Roitman 2014). Furthermore, by employing the concept of a travelling idea, in this chapter I seek to move beyond the mere postcolonial critique that takes adaptation as a 'Western' and 'hegemonic' discourse that is imposed upon the rest of the world, but rather as an idea that is continuously brought into being through encounters, as it is translated by manifold actors and embedded within a range of networks and material-semiotic assemblages. The notion of a material-semiotic assemblage clearly draws on Science and Technology Studies (STS)-inspired approaches and takes as a basic point of departure that ideas themselves cannot travel, but that they always need to be materialised (either in speech, persons or artefacts) before they can be conveyed and put into motion (see for instance Czarniawska 2002 cited by Czarniawska and Sevón 2005). From this more general discussion, I will move to an in-depth and ethnographic exploration of the ways in which the Adaptation paradigm is translated in northern Tanzania. Based on fourteen months of fieldwork, I interrogate the power dynamics that are entailed by this translation process, which leads to conflicting notions of adaptation between the government of Tanzania on the one hand and the Maasai (agro)pastoralists and NGOs representing them, on the other. As such, it will be argued that the Adaptation paradigm deserves critical scrutiny well beyond its normative outlook

(how people can or should adapt), and more attention is needed to the ideological workings (its discursive and material structures) that might empower some actors while disempowering others.

On Africa's horizon: between adaptation and the apocalypse

The ways in which the discourse on adaptation to climate change concerning Africa is advancing can largely be characterised by the language of vulnerability, disaster, hazard, inequality, poverty, and lack of adaptive capacity. Let us consider a few findings from the IPCC assessment reports (specifically, the regional chapters on Africa). In its fourth assessment report, the IPCC stated that:

“Africa is one of the most vulnerable continents to climate change and climate variability, a situation aggravated by the interaction of ‘multiple stresses’, occurring at various levels, and low adaptive capacity. Some adaptation to current climate variability is taking place; however, this may be insufficient for future changes in climate” (high confidence, Boko et al. 2007, Executive Summary).

In its most basic sense it is thus predicted that the current level of ‘autonomous adaptation’ will be insufficient for the expected harmful effects brought about by future (anthropogenic) climate change; hence the need for strategic and coordinated adaptation planning. This worrying trend is asserted in the fifth assessment, in which the IPCC stated:

“Climate change and climate variability have the potential to exacerbate or multiply existing threats to human security including food, health, economic insecurity, all being of particular concern for Africa” (medium confidence, Niang et al. 2014, p. 1202).

“The assessment of significant residual impacts in a 2 °C world at the end of the 21st century suggests that even under high levels of adaptation, there would be very high levels of risk for Africa. At global mean temperature increase of 4 °C, risks for Africa’s food security are very high, with limited potential for risk reduction through adaptation” (Niang et al. 2014, p. 1204).

What can be gleaned from these scientific calculations is that the Adaptation paradigm is predicated upon the fundamental distinction between the climate – that operates as an external variable on the one hand – and society with its alleged internal adaptation logic on the other. This Cartesian dichotomy denies the basic idea that humans (society, culture, language etc.) are not just *outside* their climates, but rather an integral part of it. Thus, through this separation, as Taylor also argues, climate change is isolated from the ongoing processes of social and ecological transformation that construct our lived environments (Taylor 2015, p. xiii). What follows from this representation of the climate as an ‘intelligible’ but complex and technocratic problem, are the managerial solutions offered to us by trained experts, predominantly found in the developed, or ‘advanced’ nationsⁱ. For instance, according to the IPCC, Africa is expected to face an ‘adaptation deficit’ that needs to be tackledⁱⁱ:

“There is increased evidence of the significant financial resources, technological support, and investment in institutional and capacity development needed to address climate risk, build adaptive capacity, and implement robust adaptation strategies (high confidence). *Funding and technology transfer and support is needed to both address Africa’s current adaptation deficit and to protect rural and urban livelihoods, societies, and economies from climate change impacts at different local scales* (Niang et al 2014, p. 1204).

In other words, expert discourses convey that Africa’s future, as far as climate change adaptation is concerned, does not look very bright. These predictions by the natural sciences – which are further translated into policy guidelines, can even be characterised by an *apocalyptic imagery and vocabulary* – everything that is being said and visualised about Africa and climate change appears solely in terms of crisis, terror, fear, extinction, doom and decay, deficit, vulnerability etc. Against this background, I share Kirsten Hastrup’s critique, which is directed to both natural and social sciences, that “(..) *climate is no longer seen to make places but rather mostly to destroy them*” (Hastrup 2015, p. 146).

The solution that has followed from this supposition of a state of ‘deficiency’ has been the construction of an ‘adaptation imperative’ (Ban Ki-moon 2009, WRI 2010-2011; Wisner et al. 2012). Common phrases that we hear are “*For many in Africa adaptation is not an option but a necessity*” (Niang et al. 2014). In brief, the only pathway to salvation is by welcoming the expertise, money and technologies of the developed and technologically more advanced nations. It will be argued that what follows from this all too familiar and repetitive story about Africa’s ‘crisis’ echoes historically produced discourses, which in the context of my research in Tanzania has led to a reproduction of certain questions and scientific misconceptions. It is important to note however, that on the African continent this vulnerability discourse is not necessarily supported by the African delegates to the international climate change negotiations, themselves. For instance, allow me to share my encounter with Brian, an experienced climate change negotiator for the African Groupⁱⁱⁱ (to assure anonymity names of informants have been changed). Trained as a climatologist and working for the Botswana government for 28 years at the Ministry of Environment, he has been part of the negotiations since the very inception of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997.

“Although science tells us that we are the most vulnerable, it is usually because the measure of vulnerability is based on infrastructural development and development at large. But at the same time, we haven’t actually talked about how resilient we are to climate variability. I think Africans tend to be very resilient to climate variability! I tell my counterparts in Europe that in a lot of African countries, particularly in the Savannah, people are used to staying six months without rain, eight months without rain. They probably only have about between 40 and 100 days of rain a year. That shows a level of resilience to me, we know a lot of droughts, climate shocks that we go through. And because of all of that I think we should be blowing our trumpet in terms of resilience!” (Interview during the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) in Arusha, 2013).

Brian’s account resonated with many of the NGO representatives in northern Tanzania, speaking in the name of the Maasai communities who live in such semi-arid regions where drought, climate variability and uncertainty are common. By probing some of the counter voices and narratives that have emerged in northern Tanzania, the following account will give insight into the intricate and contested trajectories of adaptation and the ways in which it is translated by different actors. Whereas the government of Tanzania sees the Maasai both as environmental destroyers as well as the most vulnerable people in the face of climate change, the NGOs representing them argue that they are *masters* of adaptation instead. Finally, an insight into the grassroots voices brings to our attention the fact that adaptation is not serving the interest of all actors in the translation chain. In the following I bring to the fore a few dissenting voices that generally find no resonance on global platforms – and serve as ‘tokens’, or fulfil a symbolic presence of the subaltern – that often get silenced and ‘black-boxed’ all along the way. I found it striking to observe that the fiercest opposition to this new discourse on adaptation came from the grassroots. Is it not paradoxical that the greatest resistance to this new paradigm comes from the very people that it seeks to aid? I will explore this paradox by analysing some of the different voices that have emerged in the adaptation community in Tanzania.

On sedimented practices: how Adaptation entangles old power struggles

An inherent feature of the structural logic of international development aid is that new or fashionable paradigms inevitably shape and inform the on-the-ground landscape of development organisations. This process by which organisations set, and continuously reframe, their development goals in accordance with international standards – a process of co-optation (Fisher 1997) – has similarly led in northern Tanzania to the emergence of a true ‘adaptation community’. Many of the regional NGOs and CSOs that were originally established, for instance, to fight for the rights of indigenous peoples, or for the protection of land rights or sustainability have by now also embraced the adaptation to climate change discourse. In northern Tanzania, where many NGOs can be found, the lexicon of development issues that preceded adaptation comprised issues such as,

‘livelihood resilience’, ‘poverty reduction’, ‘reducing vulnerability’, ‘adaptive environmental management’, ‘strengthening customary leadership institutions’, ‘natural resources management’, and ‘coping strategies’, all of which lend themselves fairly well to a relabelling of projects in adaptation planning in the drylands. In addition to the structural logic of development aid that informs the translation of adaptation into new projects, there is also something inherently flexible to the idea of adaptation itself. As Ben Orlove concluded in the context of his study in Peru:

“Because of its loose, multifaceted quality, the term “adaptation” allows the organizations to continue working in areas in which they already have expertise: small-scale technical assistance in one case, disaster relief or water development in others. It also lets them to function in a familiar world of projects, in which they submit and receive proposals, manage budgets and personnel, run and evaluate projects themselves, and produce reports and other briefings” (Orlove 2009, p. 158).

The concept of adaptation is, in its broadest sense, thus remarkably open and prone to strategic hijacking by varying actors and serving different purposes. For instance, what I found in Tanzania was that – particularly for political leaders – climate change came in handy as a scapegoat to cast highly contentious issues such as land grab away, and consequently explain the vulnerability of local communities in terms of climate change (de Wit 2014). Moreover, the ways in which adaptation is recast reveals deeply entrenched convictions – that for a long time have been grounded in scientific misconceptions – of government officials that represent the Maasai herders as having an irrational relationship with their cattle, and thus being culpable of degrading the very environment in which they live. Over time these ideas have not only perpetuated processes of ‘ethnic othering’ but have also provided a theoretical foundation for rangeland management systems that advocated either the reduction of livestock numbers, total abandonment of pastoralism, raising livestock in sedentary settings, commercial ranging or the privatisation of rangeland resources (Igoe 2002, McCabe 2003). In other words, the history of perceptions of the relationship between the Maasai pastoralists with their cattle and their environment has been fraught with controversy. And currently, while the travelling idea of adaptation is revitalising these very same misconceptions and prejudices of the Maasai as ‘backward’ and in need of education (from the side of policymakers and the government), it is the same idea that has given way to a counter narrative that will be elaborated on below. In order to understand the translation of adaptation we need a brief socio-political contextualisation of this region, and an insight into the historically produced antagonistic relationship between the national government on the one hand and the agropastoral Maasai on the other, to which I will now turn.

The northern part of Tanzania is home to a spectacular abundance of wildlife and biodiversity hotspots. As such, Maasailand and the wider region have been exposed to a range of transnational conservation paradigms, and policies that have travelled to Tanzania before. The most tangible effect of the conservation agenda has been the long history of land grab at the expense of local communities that used to dwell in these areas. As anthropologist Benjamin Gardner recently put it: *“It is not unreasonable to read the history of the Maasai in East Africa as one long land grab in the name of global conservation and national development”* (Gardner 2016, p. 19). It drives too far to elaborate on this complex history in the context of this chapter, but for the moment it will suffice as the background against which we need to understand the emerging dissenting voices that oppose the adaptation to climate change paradigm. Terrat village, where I carried out a large part of my research has not been exempt from conservation policies. The village is located on the outskirts of Tarangire National Park, which became a game reserve in 1957 and was ‘upgraded’ to a national park in 1970. The designation of Tarangire as a national park remains a painful memory for people who were evicted (Igoe and Brockington 1999, Igoe 2002). During the wet season Terrat faces a large wildlife influx, which means that cattle must compete for grasses and water with the wild animals (see Figure 1). While the wild ungulates graze and give birth in Terrat, the Maasai cannot enter the national park with their herds, which is highly problematic during the dry season, because the most important water sources are found inside the park. Against this background, it is not

surprising that many herders in Terrat found climate change an all too easy explanation for the increasing lack of water and pastures in their vicinity, they rather said that it was due to overpopulation and the politics of land use.

Figure 1. Wildlife dispersal in the wet season into Terrat, a village on the outskirts of Tarangire National Park, northern Tanzania.

Let us now consider a few different voices that have emerged in the adaptation to climate change community in Tanzania. During one of the many conferences on climate change that I attended, where stakeholders from different communities were present, a government official (the leading climate-change negotiator for Tanzania) gave a very clear statement concerning his ideas on the adaptation future for the Maasai:

“I think that due to the current condition we should have a collective desire for change. These people [the Maasai pastoralists] may not change without educating them. This training is so important to them; they should get the education so that they can do the productive livestock keeping. Keeping the livestock depending on the availability of pastures. And we witness the conflict that occurs between pastoralists and farmers when the pastoralists try to get pasture or water for their livestock. As I said: I don’t think that these people could move from one place to another if they could have been given education. I think all of that could not have happened if they only could get that education. They should realize that there is no other way for the society to survive, except by accepting the experts from the private sector and the government’s effort” (Public hearing ‘Have you heard us’? November 2011, Dar es Salaam).

We clearly hear the echoes of time in which older scientific paradigms emerged that have been similarly infused with ideas of pastoralists being the main cause of overgrazing, environmental degradation, poaching, overstocking and poor resource management. Old scientific paradigms and Western misconceptions about the Maasai as destroyers of the environment and about pastoral inefficiency continued to shape rangeland policies that advocated for the total abandonment of pastoralism, a sedentary life, reduction in herd sizes or the privatisation of rangeland resources (Igoe 2002, McCabe 2003, Sachedina 2008). Today the Government of Tanzania as well as the media are perpetuating the discourse that the Maasai are causing global warming and have exceeded the ‘carrying capacity’ of their land. In a basic sense, the notion of carrying capacity denotes the prejudice about the Maasai as having too many cattle and being irresponsible dwellers of their environment. As also became clear during an interview that I had with a senior climate change negotiator that worked at the Vice-President’s Office (VPO) in Tanzania for the ‘adaptation programme’. When I asked him about the adaptation options for the Maasai he exclaimed:

“Do you know the figures of the carrying capacity? The Maasai have really exceeded this number! They think that they can wander around the whole country. You should go to the ministry of livestock and get the numbers, because this is really a great problem that we have in Tanzania” (Interview with a government official at the VPO, March 2013, Dar es Salaam).

It is remarkable to observe that when speaking about adaptation and pastoralism, instead of pointing to sustainable solutions, the policy vocabulary is regularly cast in terms of ‘perpetrators’ and highlights the irresponsible ways in which (Maasai) pastoralists relate to their environment. Moreover, the desire to radically change the lifestyle of the Maasai, as expressed by the government official above, is a widely shared opinion among government officials in Tanzania (de Wit 2017). In the National Adaptation Programme of Action, which is the official policy paper that guides long-term adaptation policies in the country, it is stated that the existing number of cattle in Tanzania has already surpassed the normal carrying capacity in most areas (URT 2007, p. 7). The proposed solutions for the pastoralists include:

“The change of land use patterns, education of farmers and livestock keepers, sustainable range management, control the movement of livestock and advocate zero grazing” (URT 2007, p. 22).

It is important to point out that for the agropastoral Maasai, mobility is their most important adaptation strategy. Therefore, what for the government is translated as solid adaptation strategies – so that they can control the movement of the herders – are for the Maasai rather the *antithesis* of adaptation (see also de Wit 2014). The fact that these paradigms (which were informed by colonial, and later Western range ideas based on ‘productivity’ and ‘efficiency’) overlooked complex social relations of production, exchange networks and reciprocal ties of Maasai systems (Homewood and Rodgers 1991 cited in Bwagalilo and Mwakipesile 2012, p. 11), attests to widely-held prejudices of policymakers that see the Maasai as backward, careless planners. As mentioned earlier, these deep-rooted conceptions reappear over and over again, as they are given new life through the Adaptation to Climate Change paradigm. The irony of conservation discourses is that it is predicated upon the fundamental idea that nature needs to be protected from the irrational Maasai, which ultimately legitimises the creation of national parks and the eviction of Maasai from their traditional grazing lands.

Dissenting voices: the emergence of counter narratives

Largely informed by international discourses, the Maasai agropastoralists are perceived to be the most vulnerable community to the effects of climate change (URT 2007). However, many Maasai (from the grassroots, and the NGOs who represent the Maasai), are of a different opinion. In fact, they argue, the Maasai are rather *masters* of adaptation. Pastoralism is a livelihood *system* that should be understood in its full complexity, within which livelihood diversification like crop production and wage labour (Leslie and McCabe 2013), but foremost mobility and a large herd size, are the key coping mechanisms for cattle to survive during severe droughts (see Goldman and Riosmena 2013). In addition to the government official mentioned above, it is interesting to consider the account of an influential Maasai NGO worker who – with more than 25 years of experience in the field of development in the drylands – opposed the statement of the government official as follows:

“Climate change is not new in Africa, especially for pastoralists. They are masters of adaptation; they have key strategies and knowledge. You don’t need to tell them about climate change, this is not new to them. They will tell you! The only problem is the laws and policies in our country. Our government is ignorant and there is a big knowledge gap. (...) All we need to have acknowledged is that the livelihoods of pastoralists is a system, and that mobility is part of it. (...) Our leaders are very embarrassed. 52 billion dollars are collected in Ngorongoro Conservation Area and people are dying of hunger! One Maasai man saw that the water in his vicinity was gone, so he followed a pipe and saw that the water was being used to flush the toilets of tourists. One flush of a toilet is enough to keep a Maasai family alive for two days! Tourists need glittering toilets. Then the Maasai man rightfully complained: “and then they tell us about conservation”.

In other words, this NGO worker turned the argument around and effectively communicated that it is not the Maasai who need to be educated, but rather those in power who need to understand that pastoralism is a highly complex and strategic system in which mobility forms the lifeblood of adaptation. Considering the historical continuity of the hijacking of scientific misconceptions by those in power – usually at the expense of the pastoralists’ interests – I believe that we can understand the newly coined term ‘masters of adaptation’ as an explicit move to counter the victimisation of pastoral communities. During interviews with development brokers the term ‘masters of adaptation’ was frequently mentioned to characterise the agency of pastoral livelihoods, and it also featured in newspaper articles (representing CSO voices), as well as in policy briefs and conference reports. We have to understand this discourse in opposition to the Maasai being portrayed as ‘reckless wanderers’ in need of education, a concept that emphasises agency and denotes a more sophisticated environmental understanding and sustainable livelihood instead. The emergence of this counter narrative is not to say that we can discard the need for adaptation support altogether, but it rather invites us to take seriously the alternative strategies that are employed to

contest hegemonic discourses, and thus should prompt us to “listen to, rather than speak for” the grassroots communities (see also the work of Hodgson 2011 a, b).

Let me conclude by bringing one voice from the grassroots to the fore, which – as became clear throughout my research – represents a larger group of Maasai from the grassroots. The following quote summarises the opinion of Adam, a Maasai herder who participated in one of the climate change workshops. From his account and his tone of voice it was clear that he was very annoyed with the rhetoric around climate change, and expressed his anger at the government of Tanzania instead:

“The government in this country is using a lot of money to protect animals like giraffe, elephant, but it does not even use a single shilling to protect a person known as the pastoralist. We are in danger of being chased away by the government in our land where we have been living on for several years. So how will this strategy help us so that we are going to have assurance of our land, which we are using for pastoralism? Because for me the big threat to pastoralists is not climate change! The big threat is that the government is going to take away our land and increase vulnerability to pastoralists. To me this is the issue. To me climate change is not the issue.”

Adam’s account illustrates that vulnerability for people at the grassroots brings highly contested issues to the fore that have more to do with structural issues related to the (global) political economy than with climate change as such. Thus we need to understand what adaptation means for different people, and so gain insight into the politics of land use. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, it appears that climate change is increasingly serving as an all-explanatory framework for all societal ills in Africa (de Wit 2017). This tendency has rightfully been criticised by scholars such as Mike Hulme as some sort of neo-environmental determinism in which climate is elevated as the single and predominant determinant of social life, in an otherwise complex matrix of causal relations (Hulme 2011). Against this background therefore, we need to be increasingly wary of representations that depict Africa’s vulnerability or adaptation deficit as being predominantly induced by (anthropogenic) climate change, and instead bring complexity and locally embedded intricacies back into the picture.

Concluding remarks

This chapter began with a critical deframing of the ways in which global adaptation discourses are advancing, and argued that its current framing sparks an old and repetitive story about Africa being in crisis, which reinforces the dependency relations between developed nations (Global North) and the developing world (Global South). From a critique of the techno-scientific framing of adaptation and the managerial solutions that are consequently proposed, I moved to an exploration of how the idea of adaptation is translated in northern Tanzania. In this brief translation journey I have tried to show how a ‘clash of adaptations’ can occur in a context where adaptation means different things to different actors, and that for those in power it can be employed as a resource to pursue their own interests. This should remind us that notwithstanding the alarming climate change predictions that are constructed globally, we must keep listening to those voices at the fringes of the world, for whom adaptation might mean something more complex than solely being a matter of a changing climate. Therefore, we should not only pay attention to the question of how people across the globe should adapt to climate change, but also how the ideological underpinnings of this question can be brought to light. In this chapter I have demonstrated that instead of following the common trend that embraces the need for adaptation at face value, critical scrutiny of the emergent politics of adaptation can reveal the truth effects and conflicting interests that the idea of adaptation brings into being. Furthermore, the main problem with treating adaptation as the new and overweening determinant of social life inducing vulnerability is that it hides crucial political questions that have produced inequalities in the first place. Giving insight into the translation through which Maasai from the grassroots express their unwillingness to accept climate change as a new hegemonic

explanatory framework, reveals that – as they argue – it is not the climate they fear, but the politics of land perpetuated by their own government.

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ⁱ It is worth mentioning that in the latest IPCC assessment reports and the UNFCCC there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of the social sciences and the role of indigenous knowledge in understanding adaptation responses (United Nations 2016). Moreover, there is a general growing awareness of the need to incorporate “alternative epistemologies” that are rooted outside climate science (Jasanoff 2007).

ⁱⁱ The adaptation deficit is defined as: “The gap between the current state of a system and a state that minimizes adverse impacts from existing climate conditions and variability” (IPCC 2014b).

ⁱⁱⁱ Traditionally, Parties to the United Nations are organised into regional groups, but for the climate negotiations other groupings also exist for political purposes, such as the Least Developed Countries (LDC) and Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) etc.