

# The Power of Climate Change

knowledge politics, adaptation follies and  
ontological frictions

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# Knowledge politics, adaptation follies & ontological frictions

- Climate change research dominated by a search for more complete knowledge and integration across disciplines.
- Desire to predict and manage change (“local people do not understand changes in their environments”). (**knowledge politics**)
- Scientific assessments have been very poor at motivating action. (**adaptation follies**)
- People around the world are insisting on the value of their ways of being for addressing the climate crisis. (**ontological frictions**)

# Transformative science

- Asking questions that open up climate change debates to new forms of scrutiny (O'Brien 2013, 2016)
- Re-appropriating climate change from technical approaches (Ojha 2013)
- Vital for re-imagining nature-societies and thus our ways of being within the climate crisis (Blaser 2012, de la Cadena 2010, Nightingale 2018)



Glacial lake outburst flood in Humla District, Nepal  
Considered at low risk of GLOF by LAPA process

# Technical Fixes: Adaptation Planning

- Climate justice concerns – emissions vs. impacts
- Global apparatus to support adaptation, especially in the Global South
- New political economy of adaptation emerging—‘double/ triple wins’
- Assessments of biophysical hazards and who is most at risk from them

Most research asks, ‘how to adapt?’

***We ask, ‘how does adaptation realign the relationships between people and their resources?’***

# Nepal's adaptation challenges

- Third Pole
- Long history of global concern over Nepal's environment
- Infrastructure challenges—roads, electricity, access to water
- Large population highly vulnerable to biophysical risks



# Adaptation Follies

- Never innocent interventions into making people less vulnerable.
- Involve significant realignments of people, their resources, economies and ecologies.
- New relationships entangle in pre-existing ones.



An unmaintained greenhouse

A cider press without electricity



Photo: Andrea Nightingale



Photo: Pema Norbhu  
Lama Tsumpa



## Beyond technical fixes

- Who becomes authorized to govern change?
- Who is required to make changes on the ground?
- Who has knowledge of change?
- Adaptation to what, of what, by whom?

# Boundary Making: governing change

Power and politics within climate change difficult to 'see'.



Boundary-making as an analytical approach:

- **Governance**—Who / what requires governing? Who has the right knowledge and authority to govern?
- **De-colonising nature-societies**—how do ways of knowing create divides between society and nature?
- **Production of subjectivities**—new social hierarchies of 'knowing' and 'vulnerability'

# Nepal

- Resource governance always been a focus of rule
- History of violent political change
- New jurisdictional logic to the state
- Climate change is one among many pressing issues politically



Newly elected municipality leaders 2017



Aftermath of protests in Kathmandu 2006

# How to make sense of change?

- Complexities of Nepal belie prediction (similar elsewhere)
- Need to understand how power and politics operate within the climate change domain
- Focus on boundary making as moments of transformation (or entrenchment)
- Struggles over governance, nature and subjectivity bring to light domains of change

# Climate governance

- NAPA to LAPA
  - Global to national actors
  - National NGOs to local adaption plans of action
- Urgency

“...one year from now will be too late, we need action now...” (2010)
- Institutional choice (Ribot 2003)—  
local user groups, local state,  
new groups



# Boundary making—climate governance



Sign board for drinking water LAPA program in Mugu District, west Nepal (now defunct)

- Governance as a relational concept—authority-recognition
- New kinds of authorities emerging with climate programs and political change
- Problems with overlapping authority
- Resource governance a key site of struggle

# Knowledge politics

East Nepal adaptation program



Tea plantation

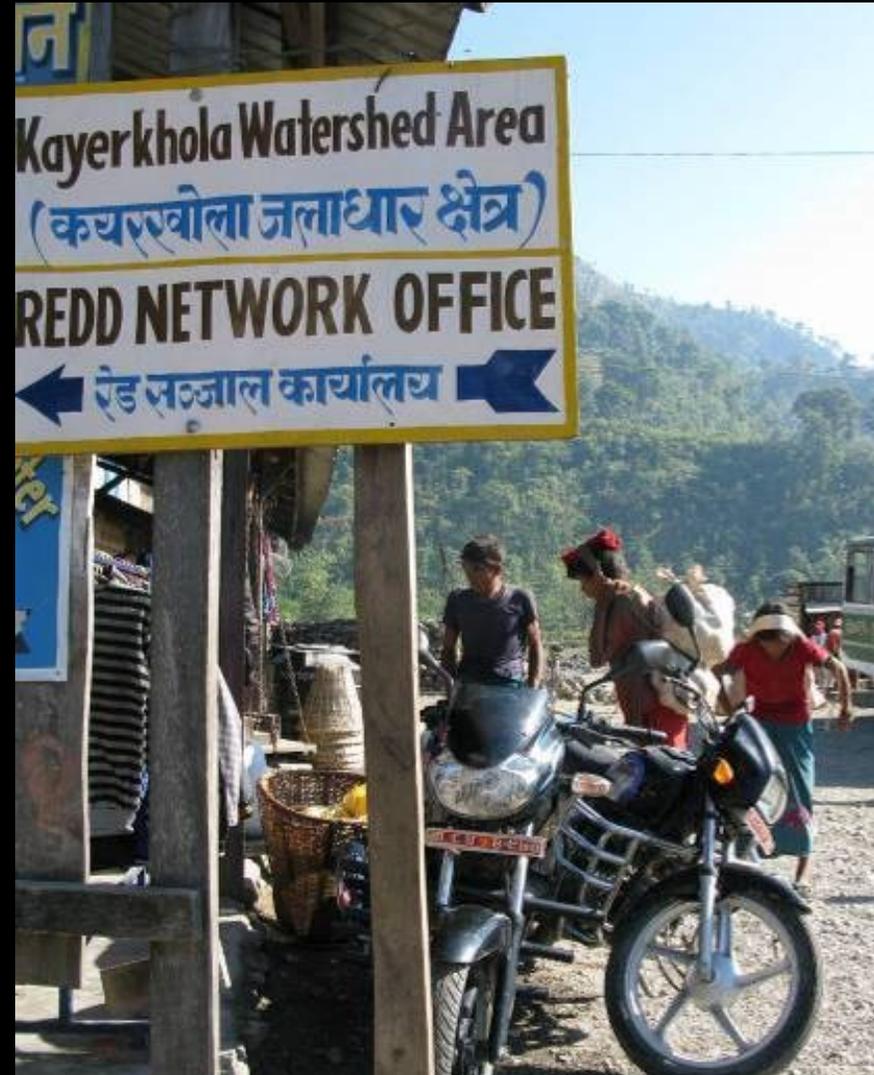


Handmade paper factory

- Use of NGOs to ‘teach’ people about climate change
- Promotion of adaptation activities
- No one knows what ‘adaptation’ should be
- Openings for new experts to emerge— and assertion of old ones

# REDD+ and Community Forestry

- Community forestry user-groups as implementing local institution
- Bringing local people into global markets
- Investing the global community in local people's resources
- Creating 'carbon experts' at the local level



# Nature-society boundary making

- REDD+ produces new resources—carbon
- Redefining how people understand their relationship to their environments
- Tensions with other ways of knowing and using the forest
- Re-assertion of bureaucratic control over forests



# Ontological frictions (ways of being)

- Knowledge politics assert some ways of knowing and being as hegemonic over others
- Within climate change this is a multi-scalar process
  - Global knowledge informing local practice
  - National experts (re)asserting technical knowledges over local experience
  - Local experts emerging vs those with other embodied ways of knowing
- These dynamics intersect with existing relations
  - Desires to control new programs—competition for authority
  - Attempts to reshape environments--new nature-society boundaries
  - New forms of exclusion—new subjectivities

# Climate Subjects

- Climate programs are creating new kinds of social boundaries
- Intersect with older forms of inclusion and exclusion
- New vulnerabilities
- Adaptative capacity



Young boy bringing fodder home



# Everyday climate change

- By looking at subjectivities and frictions we connect the everyday, lived realities of climate change with wider scale political economic and environmental change.
- Crucial for inspiring new understandings and committed responses to the climate crisis

Traditional  
water taps,  
east Nepal



Winter  
dryness,  
east Nepal

# Spaces of transformation?

- Bringing new actors into global processes—NGOs, District authorities, local people
- Flows of investment into the global South
- Social movements organizing to resist market integration of resources



**Need to confront climate change with contested politics, frictions over ways of knowing and being, and everyday action to imagine new ways of being in the world**

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# Boundary-making

Dynamic processes of exerting authority and recognizing it.  
Relational emergence of **governing** (Lund 2016, Fraser 2008)

Divides between **society and nature** are not fixed. Defining what is 'in' and what is 'out' shape how we treat the environment (Haraway 1991, de la Cadena 2010)

**Subjects** are the ambivalent effects of power. There is always some resistance to dominant power (Butler 1998)

# Production of new subjectivities



- Subjectivity is the 'effect of power in recoil' (Butler 1998)
- A performative understanding of the operation of power
- Needing to understand the repeated contexts and actions through which social difference emerges



Climate efforts are a potent context

# Boundary making and transformation

- Boundary-making captures an emergent, dynamic understanding of socionatures.
- Connects between our desires to manage change and politics, with the influence of the non-human. Links between micro-politics of the everyday and wider scale political economies.
- Helps explain how change happens—what are the moments wherein transformation can occur?