

## RESEARCH BRIEF

# TRANSFORMATION, ADAPTATION AND DEVELOPMENT: RELATING CONCEPTS TO PRACTICE

Focusing on transformation and its association with adaptation to climate change. In recent years, there has been growing discussion of ideas and perspectives on transformation, giving rise to some confusion around identifying what the term means when applied to the adaptation field. We aim to help researchers and practitioners relate different interpretations of transformation to practice by proposing a typological framework for categorising forms of 'non-incremental' change that focuses on mechanisms and objectives.

## WHAT WAS DONE, AND WHAT WAS NOVEL?

This paper sets out ideas developed both from a review of existing academic literature and from collation of the findings of a set of regional diagnostic studies of climate change adaptation actions in semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia. We used these insights to propose that there are three basic questions that move us toward a descriptive understanding of an adaptation activity and its connection to ideas around transformation:

1. *What type of change process is occurring (or envisioned)?*
2. *How does it relate to the drivers of risk?*
3. *Is the change limited to climate change adaptation?*

We used these questions to frame a set of typologies on 'mechanisms', 'target outcomes' and 'the object' of change that help differentiate the multiple ways the term is used. We reflected on how these typological distinctions interconnect with broad conceptions of transformation in the adaptation literature. We developed a framework that aims to help researchers and practitioners assess how and to what extent the mechanisms and objectives of an adaptation action are potentially constitutive of transformation.

## KEY FINDINGS

The term "transformation" is out there in the public realm, and multiple interpretations are already used. This is perhaps an expectation not a definitional problem. Academics sometimes use a non-controversial word when their interpretation of it means something that is inherently controversial and challenges embedded values. The granularity of categorising adaptation responses can be beneficial when applying transformation thinking to practice because it provides clarity around the objectives of the adaptation response and around the larger change sought.

Accepting plural perspectives of what transformation is does not remove the need for a critical approach to adaptation. The term transformation generally has a positive connotation, but in almost all cases the *warmth* of this term masks a critical issue that the types of fundamental change that it embodies are likely to have complex and multi-faceted implications, and outcomes that could change with time and with changing conditions.

## KEY IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

In this article, we attempt to chart an analytical course, through the various different ways the term transformation is being used in relation to climate change adaptation. Such differences are likely to be amplified further still as actors with different interests and visions apply the term in practice when planning or evaluating interventions.

Through our framework we hope to promote structured and critical thinking in the design, implementation and analysis of adaptation and development actions with potential for transformation. This could help reduce the risk of negative impacts on vulnerable or marginalised people, as well as ensure that societal and systemic implications around the breadth of change of a specific transformation are better understood from the outset.



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