ASSAR
Adaption at Scale in Semi-Arid Regions

RESEARCH BRIEF

WHAT SHAPES VULNERABILITY AND RISK MANAGEMENT IN SEMI-ARID INDIA? A FOCUS ON BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO ADAPTATION

Considering how existing barriers and enablers to local adaptation interact and shape adaptation outcomes, thereby identifying critical entry points to enable local, sustainable adaptive action.

KEY FINDINGS

In increasingly connected systems, risks traverse scales, and structural drivers of vulnerability – such as gender- or caste-based hierarchies – intersect with emerging drivers, such as depleting groundwater. There were commonalities across the three sites (located in three different states of India) but discernible variation within their semi-arid regions. These variations were based on local production systems and socio-economic characteristics, and more significantly on state-specific governance regimes, adding to the growing empirics around the political economy of adaptation.

Household risk management strategies were predominantly reactive but draw upon planned development interventions, which are typically government-funded. We found little evidence to suggest people were adapting; most responses were shorter-term coping strategies. There were few examples of forward-facing risk management, either by people or other actors such as the state or civil society. Presently, Indian semi-arid regions are seeing incremental adaptation, which may be insufficient to address the challenges of climate change.

WHAT WAS DONE, AND WHAT WAS NOVEL?

Our paper applies Eakin *et al*.'s (2014) framework of generic versus specific capacity to data from three semi-arid regions in India (Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka) to examine multi-scalar response strategies and their implications on local adaptive capacities and adaptation processes.

The research found that practices currently viewed as good development do not necessarily translate into effective adaptation. Further, building specific capacities to deal with climatic risks is essential to leverage wins through development interventions.

KEY IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Specific capacity to deal with climatic risks was low across the study sites, and we found evidence to suggest that good development does not necessarily translate into equitable, effective adaptation.

Large-scale development interventions, such as subsidised food distribution, are improving household wellbeing, thus building generic capacities. However, socially-marginalised groups (e.g., tribal communities, marginal farmers) tend to fall through these social safety nets, into 'poverty traps' and cycles of debt. There needs to be focussed intervention on these groups to improve their generic and specific capacities.

The framework of generic versus specific capacities is a powerful policy-facing tool to identify entry points for enabling local adaptation. It is also a useful visual representation of an aspirational goal of 'sustainable adaptation'. Future research could test the efficacy of such visuals in motivating policy change towards sustainable adaptive action.

Journal article: Singh, C., Solomon, D., Bendapudi, R., Kuchimanchi, B., Iyer, S. and Bazaz, A. In prep. What shapes vulnerability and risk management in semi-arid India? Moving towards an agenda of sustainable adaptation.

This work was carried out under the Collaborative Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA), with financial support from the UK Government's Department for International Development (DfID) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. The views expressed in this work are those of the creators and do not necessarily represent those of DfID and IDRC or its Board of Governors.

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