

# Researching everyday climate change adaptations: Principles, practice and outcomes



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## **Acknowledgements:**



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## SUSTAINING RENTAL LIFE SERIES NOTE

The Briefing Paper series of the '**Rental housing, climate change and adaptive capacity: a case study of Newcastle NSW**' project seeks to provide readers with access to current research on rental sector adaptation to climate change. Briefing Papers produced by the project team are working documents that provide a forum on theoretical, methodological and practical issues related to climate change adaption in rental housing. The project is funded by the National Climate change Adaptation Facility (NCCARF) for 2012. The publication as a 'Briefing Paper' does not preclude subsequent publication in scholarly journals, books or reports. Unless otherwise stated, 'Rental housing, climate change and adaptive capacity' publications are presented as contributions to debate and discussion and represent our developing thinking about the research. We are hoping that they may facilitate feedback from readers, researchers, renters and housing managers.

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**Researching everyday climate change adaptations: Principles, practice and outcomes****CONTENTS**

<b>1. Summary .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. Introduction: underlying principles of the methodology .3</b>	
<b>3. Talking about practice: interviews and focus groups....</b>	<b>4</b>
Tenant interviews.....	5
Housing manager interviews.....	6
Focus Group discussion .....	6
<b>4. Research outputs: guiding and informing future practice.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>5. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>6. Reference List .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>7. Contacts for further Information</b>	<b>10</b>

**1. Summary**

The theoretical framework of the research project has been outlined in Briefing Papers 1 and 2. The methodological principles and practices also reflect the Asset-based and Pro-poor approaches described in those two papers.

The research process positions the tenant as well as the property manager as active agents in climate change adaptation, and hence provides a space for tenants and property managers to reflect on their existing adaptive and sustainability practices, the barriers to adaptation, and ideas for change to improve the adaptive capacity of the rental sector. This is done through semi-structured interviews with individuals, and focus group discussions which include both tenants and property managers. Thus instead of research 'subjects', tenants and property managers become active participants in the research.

The outputs of the project likewise reflect engagement with tenants and property managers as active agents in climate change adaptation. A community implementation guide and YouTube video clips will enhance tenants' capacity to make innovative adaptive changes in everyday life. A best practice guide for property managers will support property managers, landlords and tenants in working towards a more sustainable and climate adaptive rental sector.

## Researching everyday climate change adaptations: Principles, practice and outcomes

### 2. Introduction: underlying principles of the methodology

This briefing paper is the third in a series of briefing papers about our research project on the adaptive capacity of the rental housing sector. The project seeks to understand the adaptive capacity of public and private tenants by asking:

- What adaptation strategies are tenants, housing managers/landlords currently undertaking?
- What assets do tenants, housing managers/landlords bring to adaptation?
- What are some of the barriers to tenants being able to better adapt?
- How might landlords, renters, governments, non-government organisations and real estate agents work together to strengthen the adaptive capacity of low-income tenants in Australia?

In this paper we examine the methodology and methods used in the project, underpinned by a particular view of the role of research and the researchers.

We know from Law and Urry (2004: 402) that

*... [i]n a complex world there are no innocent 'methods': all involve forms of social practice that in some way or another interfere with the patterns of the physical or the social. They are all part of that world.*

This project is based on an understanding that the research act is performative—“by this we mean that they [methods] have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and

they can help to bring into being what they also discover” (Law and Urry 2004: 393).

Throughout our research we aim to acknowledge the performative effects of the project and set out the research politics and epistemologies that inform the choice of methods and reveal the project as shaping worlds.

This project adopts an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) and a Pro-Poor Asset-based Climate Change Adaptation (PACCA) approach and focuses on the assets of tenants, understood in the broadest sense. Following an ABCD framework, tenants are assumed to be active agents, with skills, gifts and capabilities (Kretzmann and McKnight 1996). One purpose of the research is to strengthen the capacity of public and private housing tenants to adapt to climate change.

By adopting an ABCD and pro-poor framework<sup>1</sup>, the research interventions have been shaped by justice principles and a desire to transform and strengthen the adaptive capacity of the rental sector. This briefing paper explains how the methodology enables the research project to reveal assets, potentially transform tenant-housing manager/ landlord relationships, and enhance the adaptive capacities of tenants.

We do this by firstly discussing how assets are revealed through the research methods which focus on everyday sustainability practices and personal as well as sector assets, in

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed exploration of ABCD and PACCA refer to Briefing Papers 1 and 2.

## Researching everyday climate change adaptations: Principles, practice and outcomes

semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

Secondly, the project makes space for more productive and empowering roles for tenants to emerge, to enable tenants to better adapt to climate change. The limited literature in the field thus far tends to position tenants as passive, bound by the regulations of their tenancies and their meagre financial capacity (Toohey and Fritze 2009; Gurrán et al. 2008). With such a starting point it is not possible to see the creative ways that tenants are already adapting to climate change, nor empower them for further action. In this research, tenants are assumed to be active agents with the capacity to adapt to climate change. We position tenants as actors gathered in a web of relations shaped by legislation, relations with landlords or housing managers and the availability of housing.

By positioning renters as active in the research process, the project itself exemplifies the change it aims to bring about. It does this not merely by the way in which research reports are written, but through a strategic and political approach to how tenants are approached or involved in research activities. It is hoped that the actions undertaken as part of the project will continue to ripple out and shift broader perceptions and discourses that continue to characterise tenants as passive. Moreover, by bringing together tenants and housing managers/landlords we aim to explore ways around the split incentive affecting the rental sector.

And finally, our aim is to enhance the adaptive capacity of the rental sector

through disseminating information guides on practical applications for individuals, community groups and housing managers/landlords. The creation of YouTube clips that showcase innovative tenant adaptations will enable ‘learning by viewing’ and continue to enhance tenant adaptation.

Thus each of the methods described below are based on the following:

- the idea of the research as an intervention for change and for empowerment of tenants
- the importance of everyday practice as a site for change
- a continued reflexivity on the part of the researchers.

### 3. Talking about practice: interviews and focus groups

*Understanding changing patterns [practices] of mobility, food consumption, heating, cooling or washing requires methods of enquiry that go way beyond the study of green consumerism, or of the relation between environmental belief and action. Although the theoretical contours of a practice orientation are fuzzy (Reckwitz, 2002 [our emphasis]), the generative potential of such an approach is increasingly clear. (Shove 2010: 283).*

A central component of both ABCD and PACCA approaches is a focus on assets which are the “natural, physical, social, financial and human capital” (Moser 2011:232) that enable people to act and meet their needs:

*... assets are identified as the basis of agents’ power to act to reproduce,*

## Researching everyday climate change adaptations: Principles, practice and outcomes

*challenge, or change the rules that govern the control, use, and transformation of resources (Moser 2011: 232).*

We see these assets as key in facilitating adaptation. Thus a main focus of the research is to reveal individual and sector assets. We do this through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with tenants and housing managers/landlords that seek to map assets and understand everyday adaptations. Due to the constraints placed on this project (both funding and time) we have unfortunately only been able to take up asset-based methods in a limited way.

Research has pointed to the difficulty people have in relating what seems to be a very distant or abstract concept like climate change, to their everyday lives and everyday practices (Barr 2011: 16). Barr (2011: 16) argues that

*... the complexity of climate change necessitates reductions in socio-economically pervasive gases such as methane, carbon or sulphur dioxide. For most people, their relationship with these gases is unconscious and embedded in the practice and materialities of everyday life.*

By devising interview questions that give room for participants to talk about their practices and motives, information sources and barriers to adaptation, the interviews provide space for the messiness of everyday adaptations to be revealed. They leave room for tenants to make connections between practice and climate change.

Moreover, according to Hobson and Niemeyer (2011: 958) people are not always aware of the reasons and motivations for adaptive action. By discussing practice more broadly in terms of sustainability (although still an abstract term), we are open to the diversity of responses around why, for example, people are adopting energy efficiency or water saving practices and what meaning participants place on these practices in regards to climate change.

*Semi-structured interviews* are a very common methodology used in geographical enquiry because they provide a rich and detailed account of participants' reflections on their practice. Interviews provide a way for tenants to discuss their sustainability practices and identify their many assets through connecting these to their motivations and understandings.

We expect to conduct interviews with both public housing tenants and private tenants distributed across the inner Newcastle and Toronto areas. We also expect to conduct interviews with public housing managers and private managers distributed across the inner Newcastle and Toronto areas.

### Tenant interviews

The tenant interviews are semi-structured, and questions begin by focusing on and using the terminology of sustainability practices and environmentally-friendly practices, in order to allow for a broad spectrum of initial responses. We recognise the power of language to close down and open up possible responses to climate change and thus make space for more

## Researching everyday climate change adaptations: Principles, practice and outcomes

general responses to questions around sustainability practices before asking specific questions on climate change. This allows people to make sense of climate change in their own way and show how they are doing this in their responses to the interview questions.

### Housing manager interviews

Topics covered in interviews with public and private housing managers are different from those for tenants, in order to develop a picture of the broader roles of institutions and organisations in manager approaches to tenant adaptations. In particular, questions for public housing managers additionally focus on the organisation's sustainability program, and its approach to sustainability practices and infrastructure assets along with information networks. Interviews with public housing managers will discuss various barriers to change within the institution and the major opportunities for further facilitating the adaptation of public housing tenants.

Interviews with private housing managers focus on the private rental sector, and assets and issues that affect sustainability in this sector more specifically.

Again, in both interviews with public and private housing managers, terms such as environmentally positive, sustainability, environmentally-friendly habits etc are used to capture the diversity of practices and approaches to adaptation rather than framing the discussion solely around adaptation and mitigation. People do not necessarily make distinction between mitigation and adaptation when they reflect on their

everyday sustainability practice. Our focus is on understanding the capacities (assets) alongside the barriers forging connections between housing managers/landlords and tenants. Focus groups provide this space of connection as these two groups have the opportunity to identify the assets and possibilities together.

### Focus Group discussion

*Focus group discussions are social events and, typically, the range of personalities and perspectives involved, and the dynamic rhythm that develops under the direction of a skilled moderator, generally sustains participation more effectively than the in-depth interview (Goss and Leinbach 1996:*

Focus groups are sites of co-learning and participation that have most commonly been used in market research and psychotherapy studies (Crang and Cook 2007: 90). Members of the groups discuss a particular topic and learn from the experience and input of others. It is important that "...focus groups should be viewed as a performance by all concerned, with participants and researcher all positioning themselves through the group discussions" (Smithson 2000: 116). This is in keeping with the reflexive approach we bring to this project.

We will be offering tenant-only focus groups and housing manager-only focus groups for those uncomfortable with a mixed group, but our main focus is on bringing housing managers and tenants into conversation. Much of the literature

## Researching everyday climate change adaptations: Principles, practice and outcomes

on focus groups points to the importance of keeping the groups as homogenous as possible in order to ensure participants are able to speak freely (Cameron 2005; Goss and Leinbach 1996; Smithson 2008; Smithson 2000). Focus groups comprised only of tenants remove potential power imbalances or inhibitions that might occur between renters and housing managers/landlords. With those who have chosen to take part in mixed focus groups, it is important to note that tenants may potentially attend the same group as their housing manager, and this could affect their ability to fully participate in the group.

The literature points to the role that the moderator and participants play in potentially silencing particular opinions as they are expressed or not expressed in the moment of the focus group (Smithson 2000: 110). These silences and absences will need to be factored into analysis of the “collective voice[s]” (Smithson 2000: 109) that emerge from the focus groups.

At the same time, these mixed groups may be potentially transformative encounters between focus group participants and point to ways of changing tenant-housing manager/landlord cultures.

We approach focus groups as a space in which to mobilise an ABCD approach, to reveal the assets of stakeholders in the rental sector and to increase participants’ understanding of what is possible in rental housing. In focus groups, participants are asked to map personal and sector assets and may learn more from other people’s

responses about what is possible in rental housing.

*The interactive aspect of focus groups also provides an opportunity for people to explore different points of view, and formulate and reconsider their own ideas and understandings (Cameron 2005: 159).*

Approaching focus groups as potentially transformative research engagement, which can change assumptions, ideas and opinions, is consistent with our methodological approach. Participants can challenge and question the views of other participants, providing an opportunity for people to encounter diverse opinions and ideas (Cameron 2005). Creating this opportunity for dialogue is seen as an important role of the project in that focus group participants may then be able to jointly identify what is needed to enhance the adaptive capacity of the rental sector. We approach focus group participants as “active co-researchers or participants rather than passive subjects” (Smithson 2008: 362).

#### 4. Research outputs: guiding and informing future practice

The research outputs of the project aim to continue the work of transformation by enhancing the adaptive capacity of tenants and the rental sector more broadly. This is done in two ways.

Firstly, we aim to create a best practice guide for housing managers/landlords that has been informed by the responses from tenants and housing managers during interviews and focus groups. The guide will be useful for both public and private housing managers

## Researching everyday climate change adaptations: Principles, practice and outcomes

and will provide an ongoing source of information on how to facilitate tenants' adaptation.

Similarly, a community implementation guide will be written for tenants and community groups that details the types of changes that can be made to homes and showcases some of the innovative tenant adaptations already occurring in inner Newcastle and Toronto. New insights into the types of practices that are being undertaken by tenants will be shared. Both of these guides will be made available on the website of the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS), and be disseminated to participants and other interested groups. This reflects the emphasis of the project on everyday practice as the place where significant innovation and change can take place.

Secondly, we will facilitate 'learning by viewing' by creating video clips that showcase innovative tenant adaptations. Very few YouTube clips have been made in Australia that specifically show what tenants can do to enhance sustainability in their homes. These clips will reach a broader audience than the guides, being made publically available on YouTube. The clips will be made in the homes of the tenants who participated in an interview and/or focus group.

The videos will be designed to enhance understandings of what is possible in rental homes, be informative, present tenants as active, and further educate other tenants/ housing managers/ landlords about possible ways they can make rental homes more sustainable. They will also be accessible via Facebook and the CURS website and

this link will be disseminated to participants and community groups, NGOs and other interested parties before the completion of the project.

If people are able to see others making sustainable changes to their homes, see how easy these changes can be, then they may be encouraged to change their own homes (Lane and Gorman-Murray 2011). Key questions in theories of climate change mitigation/ adaptation and in social theory are: how do people begin environmentally sustainable habits and routines? How do they change their everyday practices to better adapt to climate change? (Shove 2010: 283). These are some of the questions that will guide the production of the video clips. It is hoped that these clips will enhance the adaptive capacity of the rental sector by increasing the amount of information available to tenants in social media.

### 5. Conclusion

We cannot predict the number of people who will participate in the project, or whether these participants will be prepared to engage in productive dialogue to transform tenant-housing manager/ landlord cultures. As Hobson and Niemeyer (2011: 957) explain:

*...questions of how to stimulate and sustain an array of positive collective and individual responses [to climate change] remain contentious and challenging.*

We cannot know in advance the impacts of our interventions and whether they will cause the improvements to the adaptive capacities of the rental sector that we would like to see.

## Researching everyday climate change adaptations: Principles, practice and outcomes

However this paper has sought to ground the research methodology and methods within the political framework and reflexive approach which drives the project. It also explains how the research methods have been designed to address our aims to identify assets, identify barriers to adaptation, and enhance the adaptive capacities of tenants. Through interventions which engage with the everyday practices of tenants, and with housing managers, we expect this project to reveal assets, potentially have a transformative impact on tenant-housing manager/landlord cultures, and enhance the adaptive capacities of the rental sector.

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**Researching everyday climate change adaptations: Principles, practice and outcomes**

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