

**Researching everyday
climate change adaptations:
*Revealing assets,
transforming relationships
between tenants, housing
managers and landlords,
enhancing adaptive
capacities***

**Briefing
Paper
FOUR**



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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.

Briefing Papers are available in electronic format and may be downloaded from the Sustaining Rental Life website:

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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 aims to be transformative in providing an opportunity for participants to reflect on their own adaptive practices and the barriers to adaptation, and to contribute ideas on ways of enhancing adaptive capacities in the future. Focus Groups which include tenants and housing managers will enable shared reflection and generation of ideas about improving tenant/housing manager/landlord relationships, while the discussions themselves make a contribution to changing these relationships. Thus instead of research 'subjects', tenants and property managers become active participants in the research and the change.

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.

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2. Introduction

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

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

These questions come out of an understanding of public and private housing tenants (as well as their landlords and housing managers) as active agents (Mee 2009) with the capacities, skills and assets that can assist in their ability to adapt to climate change. 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 where tenants' assets include their skills, gifts and capabilities (Kretzmann and McKnight 1996). The purpose of the research is to identify and mobilise the capacity of public and private housing tenants to adapt to climate change.

In adopting an ABCD and Pro-poor framework¹, the research has been shaped by justice principles and a desire to transform and strengthen the adaptive capacity of the rental sector. This briefing paper scopes the ways in which the methodology of the research project aims to reveal assets, transform tenant/ housing manager/ landlord relationships, and enhance the adaptive capacities of tenants.

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.

We acknowledge the performative effects of the research project and make explicit in this paper the relationship between research politics and epistemologies, and our choice of research methods.

We do this by firstly describing the ways in which the use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups reveals assets which focus on everyday sustainability practices, and both personal and sector assets.

Secondly, we note that by approaching tenants as active rather than passive, we aim to shift how tenants see themselves and how they are perceived more broadly in order to make space for other productive and empowering subjectivities to emerge and enable

¹ For a detailed exploration of ABCD and PACCA refer to Briefing Papers 1 and 2.

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tenants to better adapt to climate change.

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 we aim to explore ways around the split incentive² affecting the rental sector.

And finally, our aim is to enhance the adaptive capacity of the rental sector through disseminating best practice and community implementation guides that provide practical applications for individuals, community groups and housing managers or landlords. The production of YouTube clips that showcase innovative tenant adaptations will enable 'learning by viewing' and continue to enhance tenant adaptations. 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.

² The split incentive arises when investment by a landlord in upgrading a rental property, for example by installing solar panels, is seen as primarily benefiting the tenant, for example through reduced energy costs.

3. Revealing assets and talking about practice

Understanding changing patterns 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), 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) and enable people to act and meet their needs:

... assets are identified as the basis of agents' power to act to reproduce, 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. While the constraints placed on this project (both funding and time) limit the extent to which we can take up asset-based methods, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with tenants and housing managers/landlords will seek to map assets and understand everyday adaptations.

Research has pointed to the difficulty people have in relating what seems to be a very distant or abstract concept like

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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 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 practice. Interviews offer a way for tenants to discuss their sustainability practices and identify their many assets through connecting these to their motivations,

understandings and describing their everyday practices.

We expect to conduct interviews with public housing tenants, private tenants, public housing managers and private managers in 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 responses. We recognise the power of language to close down and open up possible responses to climate change and thus make space for more 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 discussed in tenant interviews, 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 approach to sustainability practices and infrastructure assets along with information networks. Interviews with public housing managers discuss various barriers to change within their organisation and the major opportunities

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for housing stock and staff in further facilitating the adaptation of public housing tenants.

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

Again, in interviews with both 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. Not only are the distinctions between adaptation and mitigation in everyday practice fuzzy, but we want to understand the capacities 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, barriers and possibilities together.

Focus Groups

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: 117).

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 share and 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). In this research project, focus groups are used as a space for people to come together to reveal assets, identify barriers and discuss the capacity of the rental sector.

Much of the literature 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). We will be offering 'tenant-only' focus groups and 'housing manager-only' focus groups for those not wishing to participate in a mixed group, but our main focus is on bringing housing managers and tenants into conversation.

The option for tenants to attend and participate in focus groups comprised of only tenants acknowledges the potential power imbalances or intimidation that might occur between renters and housing managers/landlords. Even for those who have chosen to take part in mixed focus groups, it is important for the researchers to be aware 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

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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 spaces of encounter between tenant-housing manager/landlord cultures.

4. Transforming tenant-housing manager/landlord cultures

This research project attempts to transform tenant/ housing manager/ landlord cultures in two ways. Firstly, the project positions tenants as active rather than as passive (Mee 2009), capable of enacting change, albeit in constrained circumstances. It should be noted that 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; Gurran 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.

By repositioning renters as active in academic work, our approach potentially reinforces an alternative characterisation. We assume 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). The act of writing in research is one way in which this can occur. However it can also take place through the strategic use of discourses

and research politics that attempt to change the ways a particular group is approached – changing the way categories are performed into being through practice. We perform tenants as active through our research and hope that this performance might continue to ripple out and shift broader perceptions and discourses that currently characterise tenants as passive.

Secondly, the focus groups provide a potentially transformative space, where tenants and housing managers engage in dialogue on the assets of renters and the rental sector. We approach focus groups as a space in which to mobilise an ABCD approach to map the assets of participants and the rental sector and to increase tenants’ and housing managers’ understanding of what is possible in rental housing. In focus groups, participants are asked to uncover assets by mapping personal and sector assets and may learn from other people’s responses about what is possible in rental housing.

Approaching focus groups as potentially transformative research engagements means understanding that the research moment can change assumptions, ideas and opinions: “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). Participants can challenge and question the views of other participants, providing an opportunity for people to encounter diverse opinions and ideas (Cameron 2005). We approach focus group participants as “active co-researchers or participants rather than passive

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subjects” (Smithson 2008: 362). Creating this dialogue is seen as an important opportunity for focus group participants to identify particular recommendations for enhancing the adaptive capacity of the rental sector.

5. Enhancing adaptive capacities

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

Firstly, we aim to create a best practice guide for housing managers and landlords which 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 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 describes the types of changes that can be made to homes and showcases some of the innovative tenant adaptations already occurring. 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 project Facebook site ‘Sustaining Rental Life’, and the website of the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS), and 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 be publically available on YouTube and thus reach a broader audience than the guides. 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.

It is expected that if people are able to see others making sustainable changes to their homes, and 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. The clips have the potential to enhance the adaptive capacity of the rental sector by increasing the amount of information available to tenants in social media.

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6. Conclusions

This paper describes the research methodologies and politics that have informed the research design and how these relate to the aims of the research project. We cannot predict the number of people who will participate in the project or whether these participants are 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 research and whether it will produce the improvements to the adaptive capacities of the rental sector that we would like to see.

However, this paper seeks to show the ways in which the research methodology has been designed to address our aims: to reveal assets, identify barriers to adaptation and enhance the adaptive capacities of tenants. We have sought to design our methodology in a way that engages with the complexities of studying everyday practices and climate change, a problematic task. However, we can *hope* that this research project will reveal many assets, transform tenant/housing manager/ landlord cultures and enhance the adaptive capacities of the rental sector.

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