

# Climate Change Outcomes in the Rental Sector: Strategies for more-than-adaptation



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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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## 1. Summary

Vulnerability is most commonly described as an *inability to cope* with change, a *lack of resilience*, or a *susceptibility* to the consequences of adverse events.

Others have described vulnerability as the *inability to obtain basic rights or entitlements* to resources in order to cope with change.

The causes of vulnerability can include the more immediate, such as poverty or marginalization. However behind these are deeper causes, such as wider social and economic structures and less tangible factors such as loss of culture, social networks or security.

According to Pro-poor principles, strategies to reduce climate vulnerability need to address more than simply the consequences of environmental change. An approach of 'more-than-adaptation' seeks to ensure that the socially or economically disadvantaged are in a better position than they were before climate change.

Integrating both Asset-based and Pro-poor approaches enables tenants:

- to identify the deeper causes of vulnerability;
- to develop a vision of more-than-adaptation;
- to develop multistranded solutions using individual and community assets.

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### 2. Introduction

*The inability to manage stresses does not fall from the sky. It is produced by on-the-ground social inequality; unequal access to resources; poverty; poor infrastructure; lack of representation; and inadequate systems of social security, early warning, and planning. These factors translate climate vagaries into suffering and loss' (Ribot 2010: 49).*

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, government, NGOs and real estate agents work together to *strengthen the adaptation* of low-income tenants in Australia?

The purpose of this briefing paper is to explore some of the important ideas used in the project: vulnerability and adaptation. These ideas have informed the objectives of the project and its methodology, and will inform its proposed outcomes (policy recommendations, best-practice guidelines, videos and research publications).

*Asset-based* approaches to climate change response emphasise individual

and community *agency*, and *capacities* to adapt, while *Pro-poor* approaches focus firstly on groups identified as particularly vulnerable.

While assets and capacity are associated with *resilience*, the 'capacity' to recover does not necessarily enable any improvement in the overall wellbeing of a community, and may simply entrench longstanding inequities. Hence, Pro-poor and climate justice proponents argue that *improving* conditions for the disadvantaged should be a goal of adaptation strategies rather than recovery to previous conditions.

The capacity to go beyond recovery and to change at a more fundamental level has been described as 'transformability', creating 'a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic, or social (including political) conditions make the existing system untenable' (Walker et al. 2004).

Reducing vulnerability and increasing resilience then becomes a broader project about transformation rather than simply enabling recovery from an adverse event. Moreover assessments of vulnerability begin to focus not only on individual or household 'susceptibility' but on broader structures and relationships which influence the outcomes for people confronting such adverse events.

This project focuses on a group identified as particularly vulnerable – low-income housing tenants – and seeks to position them as agents with the capacity to reduce their vulnerability in this broader sense. This includes, for example, a strengthened capacity to influence landlord-tenant relationships and policy frameworks.

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Vulnerability is a concept often criticized as disempowering and encouraging 'a sense of societies and people as weak, passive and pathetic' (Bankoff 2001: 29). It is therefore important to define it clearly for the purposes of this project.

### 3. Defining vulnerability: Asset-based and Pro-poor approaches

*To counter biases against the poor and marginalized, vulnerability analyses and policies must be pointedly pro-poor (Ribot 2010: 59)*

A Pro-poor approach to climate change adaptation is based on a conception of particular populations as more vulnerable than others.

Responses to risks posed by climate change thus begin, in Pro-poor strategies, with identifying those most vulnerable, that is, those who:

- live or work in the locations most at risk
- lack knowledge and capacity to act beforehand
- face greatest risks when impact occurs
- are least able to adapt (adapted from Moser and Satterthwaite 2008a: 9).

As the above analysis suggests, vulnerability has an inverse relationship with a person's ability to cope or ability to adapt to adverse events. CARE International, for example, defines vulnerability as:

*The degree to which a system is susceptible to, or unable to cope with, adverse effects of climate change, including climate variability and*

*extremes (CARE International 2009: 5, citing the IPCC Working Group 2, 2001. Third Assessment Report, Annex B: Glossary of Terms).*

Adaptive or coping capacities are in turn closely tied to the concept of resilience. Vulnerability then becomes defined as a lack of resilience, *combined with 'insecurity in ...wellbeing'* (Moser and Satterthwaite 2008b: 5-6).

The contingent connection between an adverse event and its impacts on a community is discussed later in this paper, but vulnerability is used throughout the paper as the equivalent of 'susceptibility' of an individual or a community to impacts of climate change.

However, this paper will argue that reducing climate change vulnerability goes beyond simply reducing 'susceptibility', and should instead be concerned with improving (transforming) a range of conditions which produce 'vulnerability'.

Fundamental in this expanded approach to reducing vulnerability is the belief that, for many, 'everyday conditions are unacceptable even in the absence of climate stress' (Ribot 2010: 50). Many such lives, suggests Bankoff, are already a 'permanent emergency' (Bankoff 2001: 25).

It is this kind of analysis which calls for poverty alleviation and livelihood security as a *right* or *entitlement*, where entitlements are 'utilities...over which social actors have legitimate effective command and which are instrumental in achieving well-being' (Ribot 2010: 56). Within an entitlements framework, vulnerability to climate change is defined as 'a lack of sufficient means to

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protect or sustain oneself in the face of climate events' (Ribot 2010: 53).

Similarly, a rights-based approach focuses on the vulnerable as those who have yet to obtain 'the minimum conditions for living with dignity (i.e. ...their human rights)' (CARE International 2009: 8).

A main focus of this research project is on reducing vulnerability through mobilizing and strengthening the assets of the rental sector; however entitlements and rights frameworks point to justice issues not necessarily addressed in Asset-based strategies. The integration of Asset-based and Pro-poor approaches is a key guide for the research project's investigation of *both* the deeper causes of vulnerability *and* the assets available for adaptation in the rental sector.

### 4. Causes of vulnerability

*'Each household is affected by multiscale forces that shape their assets and well-being' (Ribot 2010: 57).*

Vulnerability is influenced by conditions or 'variables' such as 'age, class, occupation, gender, ethnicity and disability' (Morioka 2012: vi).

However these conditions, like 'adverse events' or 'natural hazards', only produce adverse consequences when framed by larger social, economic, political and institutional structures which produce differential outcomes for different groups. Vulnerability, rather than endemic to a particular region or population, is a product of these structures which manifest as poverty, marginalization and depleted resources

in particular places or groups (Bankoff 2010; Howitt et al. 2010).

Another example of proximate rather than deep causes, is the link between vulnerability and a lack of assets (Moser 2011: 232); at this level, important factors in reducing vulnerability include access to and control over natural, human social, physical, and financial resources (CARE International 2009: 5, citing the IPCC Working Group 2, 2001. Third Assessment Report, Annex B: Glossary of Terms). However identifying this link does not identify the deeper causes of a lack of assets and hence of vulnerability.

The causes of vulnerability arise at many levels and over time:

*[V]ulnerability is signified by historical processes that deprive people of the means of coping with hazard without incurring damaging losses that leave them physically weak, economically impoverished, social dependent, humiliated and psychologically harmed... the simple identification of the poor as vulnerable fails to explain how people at the same income level do not suffer equally from disaster (Bankoff 2001: 25).*

A Pro-poor asset-based approach It is only in analysing the causes of poverty or marginalization at a deeper level that vulnerability can be properly described and addressed. Such analysis helps to resolve the deeper causes of vulnerability rather than trying to fix outcomes afterwards (Ribot 2010: 59).

An adaptation approach to climate change which is both Asset-based and Pro-poor needs to identify the causes of depleted assets, or lack of access to resources (vulnerability), rather than

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simply developing an inventory of existing (or missing) assets. Identification of such causes – institutional, political, economic – is part of the collaborative project of addressing obstacles to adaptation (or reducing vulnerability), and of developing and strengthening assets.

Ribot for example points out that farmers may be informed about climate change and adaptation guidelines, but be unable to act on the information because of a lack of capacity – lack of ‘credit, surplus land, access to markets, or decision-making power’ (2010: 58).

The kinds of assets required for such farmers to act may be both tangible and intangible, including ‘the material resources of individuals, their social relations, the state of governance, the role of freedoms and choices, and the state of equity’ (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2003: 156). Other adaptation theorists have noted the importance of difficult-to-measure qualities such as trust, social networks and social memory, leadership and vision (Folke 2006: 262).

Most models of human well-being focus on economic indicators (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2003), and the other assets of a community are rarely included in a ‘decision making calculus’ (Adger et al. 2009: 348-349). Moreover, as noted in the 2003 report of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the data which is available on such factors is ‘usually inadequate for analyzing temporal trends or for comparing one part of the world with another’ (156): ‘such factors as freedom of choice, security, and health, will require a new generation of models’ (165). A Pro-poor asset-based approach to climate change adaptation identifies the

relationship between these factors and the capacity to adapt.

The corollary of identifying deeper causes of vulnerability or lack of assets is identifying those existing assets which are vulnerable (Moser and Satterthwaite 2008a: 33), for example as a result of loss of social networks or changed policy frameworks.

In some cases, it is the losses themselves which need to be mapped. Historical cultural and symbolic losses can reduce a community’s capacity to adapt (Adger et al. 2009: 349). Such losses include loss of identity, health losses (for example through enforced changes to diet), loss of self-determination, influence and ‘order in the world’, and opportunity losses as people become ‘so...focused on trying to fix the injustices of the past that it is hard to focus on moving forward and seizing opportunities’ (Turner et al. 2008: 5). For low-income housing tenants, marginalization, long-term unemployment and economic or housing stress may contribute to what has been described as the ‘hidden limits to adaptation’ (Adger et al. 2009: 340)

An example of the consequences of a loss of social networks or good governance, is the absence in particular communities of coordinated planning for future disaster. ActionAid reported on several such cities in which, for example, there has been a lack of community preparation to limit flooding:

*Effective community-based pre-disaster measures to limit damage require levels of trust and cohesion – community social capital – that are often not present. (Moser and Satterthwaite 2008a: 11).*

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In addition to historical loss or increasing vulnerability of social and cultural assets, there may be a failure to recognize already available assets, such as the specialized knowledge of marginalized populations who are not invited to participate in planning and decision-making:

*...problematic is the failure to recognize women's individual and collective capacities for recovery and reconstruction as community leaders, neighbourhood networkers, producers, gardeners, rainwater harvesters, and monitors of flood-prone rivers. This means that their resources, capacities, assets and hard-won knowledge about how to make life safer for their families and live with risk are all ignored (Moser and Satterthwaite 2008a: 12).*

The mapping of assets, asset vulnerability and losses, along with broader investigations of the causes of vulnerability, can contribute to multistranded adaptation strategies that are 'embedded in the larger ecological and political-economic environment' (Ribot 2010: 58).

### 5. Multistranded approaches: More-than-adaptation

*'[A]daptation'...cannot be limited to treating incremental effects from climate change so as to maintain or bring people back to their pre-change deprived state... (Ribot 2010: 50)*

A first response to reducing vulnerability to climate change and increasing resilience is to 'fix' the physical capital of a community and develop preparedness, for example by:

- installing protective infrastructure and complementary risk-reduction measures
- supporting better-quality buildings; assisting those who live in the most dangerous sites to move to safer sites (adapted from Moser and Satterthwaite 2008a: 29-30).

Similarly, coastal communities are advised to maintain spaces for emergency access and shelter, to plan ahead for evacuation, develop transport and communication strategies, and ensure that infrastructure can withstand an emergency (Gurran et al. 2008: 32)

However climate justice proponents argue for adaptation approaches which go beyond resilience defined simply as asset protection or 'recovery' and, instead, seek to improve the long-term conditions of those who are most vulnerable (Prowse and Scott 2008: 43).

Moving beyond first response strategies to supporting and strengthening the long-term resilience of a community requires a more complex definition not only of vulnerability as discussed above, but of resilience. One way of more deeply defining resilience is that proposed by Deborah Bird Rose for the natural environment. She distinguishes between:

- anti-resilience – where humans oppose or seek to suppress Nature's own resilience, for example through constructing dams, establishing plantation forests
- engineered resilience – in which humans try to force Nature to behave as they wish, for example through suppression of fires in national parks, reclaiming

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damaged land for recreational purposes

- resilience facilitation – the observation and facilitation of Nature's own processes of resilience, which may include leaving a place alone (Bird Rose 2004: 48).

In applying these definitions to human climate change adaptation, it can be seen that asset-based approaches without Pro-poor principles fall short of resilience facilitation. For example, beyond the identification of existing social capital as an asset or 'input' to climate change strategies, there may need to be structural changes (Ennis and West 2010), which address obstacles and facilitate long term capacity in a number of social, environmental and economic areas (see for example Roelvink and Gibson-Graham 2009 on the application of Bird Rose's definitions of resilience to the economic sector).

Such an approach to climate change adaptation offers opportunities which go beyond the co-option of assets in pursuit of a single objective. Heltberg et al suggest that:

*...addressing human vulnerability to risks associated with climate change may offer opportunities for development and poverty alleviation through no-regrets pro-poor adaptation interventions (2009: 89).*

Similarly in post-disaster environments, '[r]econstruction is a period in which either entitlements can be re-negotiated to improve the capacity and wellbeing of the poor, or poverty and inequality can be entrenched through the corresponding reconstruction of

vulnerability' (Moser and Satterthwaite 2008a: 7).

Climate justice and Pro-poor Adaptation researchers and practitioners thus extend the normative concepts of adaptation and resilience. In this way they reflect the broader approach of 'more-than-useful' geographies::

*...figuring out the kinds of questions that need to be asked...around particular issues; shedding light upon hitherto overlooked issues...; questioning and/or updating the (perhaps limited) constructs, norms, assumptions and rationales which are taken-for granted when approaching certain issues ...(Horton and Kraftl 2005: 133-134).*

Pro-poor climate change adaptation strategies examine the relationships between the vulnerable and other key actors, as well as regulatory and policy constraints, and develop adaptation methods which will 'go far beyond reducing risk with respect to climate events' (2010: 64). The goal of such strategies is 'more-than-adaptation'.

Even at the level of material assets, improvements can address multiple disadvantage:

*For instance, better-quality housing, infrastructure and services greatly reduce a range of hazards – including exposure to many disease-causing agents (pathogens)... (Moser and Satterthwaite 2008a: 9)*

In Pro-poor adaptation strategies there is an opportunity to re-negotiate the conditions and entitlements of the vulnerable in a range of mutually reinforcing areas which produce more-than-adaptation.

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A more-than-adaptation approach is consistent with Moser et al's call for 'asset *accumulation*' rather than simply asset protection, and the interconnected citizen rights, institutional accountability and governance required to support such accumulation and strengthen resilience (Moser and Satterthwaite 2008a: 8).

Integral to the process of identifying and resolving multistranded vulnerability is 'the positive and intelligent participation of those most at risk' (Bankoff 2001: 30). Place-based and participatory approaches to adaptation, 'take into account people's detailed knowledge of their social and production systems and the risks they face' (Ribot 2010: 63). (Refer also to Briefing Paper 1).

It is those most at risk who are best able to describe multistranded disadvantage in their lives and communities, 'the outcomes we wish to avoid' (Ribot 2010: 60), and potential solutions.

## 6. Conclusion

A participatory Asset-based approach, coupled with Pro-poor and climate justice principles, works with vulnerable groups in order to:

- *extend vulnerability assessments* beyond immediate causes (poverty, location, gender, ethnicity or age) to include a wider range of key actors, and deeper structural and policy issues
- *extend visions of resilience or adaptation* to include improvement in a range of existing conditions of vulnerable populations
- *identify solutions* to deeper causes of vulnerability and those assets of the community which will help to realize this wider vision.

An integration of these two approaches – Asset-based and Pro-poor – may make possible a future for low-income tenants which is more-than-adaptation to climate change.

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