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3 **Politics of climate change: discourses of policy and practice in developing countries**  
4

5 **Editorial**  
6

7 The past twenty years has witnessed a momentous surge in interest in the idea of climate  
8 change. Much of this growth is due to the field of climate science, which has produced  
9 compelling evidence to show that human actions are significantly changing the composition  
10 of the atmosphere, which is altering the functioning of the climate system (IPCC, 2007). It is  
11 also attributable to the tens of thousands of organisations, networks, companies, consultants  
12 and advocates concerned with a host of climate change-related response issues, ranging from  
13 energy and infrastructure, to risk management and reduction, to community-based adaptation  
14 that have been spawned as a result. Many of these actors are supported by major financial  
15 investments. For example, in March 2010 the UK Department for International Development  
16 (DFID) announced that it would be investing £50 million in a new programme, the Climate  
17 and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN), to “help developing countries navigate the  
18 challenges of climate change”. This trend is set to continue with tens of billions of dollars of  
19 climate finance pledged by the international community over the next ten years (COP, 2009).  
20 In this way, climate change has become “one of *the* defining contemporary international  
21 development issues” (Tanner and Allouche, 2011, 1).  
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33 Studies of contemporary climate change from greenhouse gas emissions and land use changes  
34 originated in the natural sciences-based literature and the science-based institutions of the  
35 United Nations, particularly the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This  
36 purely physical framing of the climate change issue adopted by the IPCC has dominated  
37 policy-making since the mid 1980s (Hulme, 2007) and associated concepts – most notably  
38 ‘mitigation’ and ‘adaptation’ – have quickly garnered legitimacy in international debates  
39 (McNamara and Gibson, 2009). However, in recent years, mounting efforts by the  
40 international policy community to link climate change interventions to human development  
41 goals that reduce poverty and promote equity have been challenged on the grounds that they  
42 systematically underplay critical cultural, socioeconomic, historic and political dimensions of  
43 human societies (Gaillard, 2010, Mercer, 2010, Marino and Ribot, 2012, Farbotko and Lazrus,  
44 2011). Mike Hulme, founding director of the world-renowned Tyndall Centre for Climate  
45 Change Research, has taken up this theme, writing in 2007 that a re-examination of climate  
46 change as a cultural concept is urgently required, one that starts with contributions from the  
47 interpretive humanities and social sciences, particularly geography, and is informed by  
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3 understanding of how knowledge, power and scale interact (Hulme, 2007). This is important  
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5 because “the dominating construction of climate change as an overly physical phenomenon”  
6 readily allows it “to be appropriated uncritically in support of an expanding range of  
7  
8 ideologies” (p.9).  
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11 This Themed Section aims to address this concern by increasing understanding of how the  
12 idea of climate change, and the policies and actions that spring from it, travel beyond their  
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14 origins in natural sciences to meet different political arenas in the developing world. Earlier  
15 work by scholars to draw attention to the political dimensions of climate change has focussed  
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17 on the political economy (Tanner and Allouche, 2011) or the ‘everyday’ political realms of  
18  
19 societal perceptions and social institutions (Artur and Hilhorst, 2011). The approach taken in  
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21 this edition primarily concerns the climate change phenomenon as a discursive concept  
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23 operating across international, national and sub-national scales. Discourse, as it is understood  
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25 here, is concerned with the interweaving of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1979), and the  
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27 messages, narratives and policy prescriptions that emanate from this intersection (Adger et al.,  
28  
29 2001). From an analytical perspective, discourse is the set of social mechanisms through  
30  
31 which the constructivist challenge has been levelled at positivism (Wilson, 2006). Discourse  
32  
33 is particularly pertinent to the study of climate change because it provides a framework that is  
34  
35 sensitive to the political construction and use of scientific knowledge. This is particularly  
36  
37 timely given that international and national efforts to implement climate change mitigation  
38  
39 and adaptation measures are coming under intense inspection by media, civil society, and a  
40  
41 wide range of governmental and private sector interests (Anon, 2010).

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43 In the field of environment and development, a concern with how people imagine human-  
44  
45 climate interactions and therefore begin to build images or narratives about particular groups  
46  
47 of people, geographical places or periods of time is not new (cf. Furedi, 2007, Endfield and  
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49 Nash, 2002). Some scholars view these types of cultural conception as hegemonic, in the  
50  
51 sense that they dominate thinking and structure institutional arrangements. For example,  
52  
53 Bankoff (2001, 19), examining the historical roots of the ‘hazard’ discursive framework,  
54  
55 argues that “tropicality, development and vulnerability form part of one and the same  
56  
57 essentialising and generalising cultural discourse that denigrates large regions of the world as  
58  
59 disease-ridden, poverty-stricken and disaster-prone”, thus justifying Western intervention.  
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61 Others scholars, however, see a greater plurality of images and narratives in which discourses

can become powerful, but never completely hegemonic (Hilhorst, 2001). This approach, for

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2  
3 example, is used by McNamara and Gibson (2009) who show how the dominant  
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5 representation of people living the Pacific as ‘climate refugees’ by the international climate  
6  
7 change community has been resisted by the islanders themselves, many of whom do not  
8  
9 accord with the action of ‘fleeing’ as part of their vision for the future.

10  
11 The papers presented in this Themed Section reflect both the hegemonic and more pluralistic  
12  
13 positions outlined above. The articles are mostly case study-based and focus on sub-Saharan  
14  
15 Africa and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), which are considered to be amongst the  
16  
17 most vulnerable regions to climate change in the world (Christensen et al., 2007). The articles  
18  
19 are organised around three interlinked themes. The first theme concerns the *processes* of  
20  
21 rapid technicalisation and professionalisation of the climate change ‘industry’. According to  
22  
23 Escobar, development has “fostered a way of conceiving of social life as a technical problem,  
24  
25 as a matter for rational decision and management to be entrusted to the group of people – the  
26  
27 development professionals – whose specialised knowledge allegedly qualifies them for that  
28  
29 task” (Escobar, 1997, 91). The effect of these processes is that the terms of the international  
30  
31 development debate are substantially narrowed as “the separation between ‘expert’ and ‘local’  
32  
33 knowledge and intellectual distance between donor and recipient is maintained”, and  
34  
35 potentially critical discourses are co-opted (Kothari, 2005, 428). Similarly, climate change  
36  
37 ‘experts’ operating within international policy circles have been criticised for utilising an  
38  
39 increasingly ‘managerial’ approach to climate change policy, and therefore narrowing the  
40  
41 boundaries of what can be viewed as legitimate social action in response to the problem  
42  
43 (Skoglund and Jensen, 2013, Few et al., 2007). These concerns are taken up in this issue by  
44  
45 Sasser (2013) who shows how one particular managerial ‘solution’ to the climate change  
46  
47 problem that focuses on demographics and population control has had the effect of  
48  
49 “narrowing understandings of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) issues for  
50  
51 women through the technicalisation of [their] rights”. Weisser *et al.* (2013), also in this issue,  
52  
53 further develop this theme by demonstrating how ‘expert-defined’, ‘mechanistic’  
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55 interpretations of climate change adaptation operating in international policy circles are  
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57 understood, contested and reinvented by multiple actors operating at national and sub-  
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59 national levels.

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The second theme deals with the ideological *effects* of the climate change industry, which is ‘depoliticisation’. This term is most associated with Ferguson (1994, xv) who likened development in Lesotho to an ‘anti-politics machine’, “depoliticising everything that it

1 touches”, by depriving the subjects of anti-poverty interventions of their history and politics.  
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4  
5 More recently, efforts by donors to incorporate new approaches and techniques that attempt  
6 to reverse the top-down hegemony of development agencies, such as participation, have  
7  
8 similarly come under attack (cf. Cooke and Kothari, 2001, Hickey and Mohan, 2005). This is  
9  
10 evident from the large body of case studies showing how ‘one-size-fits-all development  
11 recipes’ that focus on concepts that everyone can ostensibly agree on, such as  
12  
13 ‘empowerment’, deflect attention away from the political reforms needed for structural  
14  
15 change (Cornwall and Brock, 2005, Botchway, 2001). Recently, Felli and Castro (2012) have  
16 argued that the high-profile Foresight Report on Migration and Global Environmental  
17  
18 Change (Foresight: Migration and Global Environmental Change, 2011) has shifted  
19  
20 analytical attention away from the socioeconomic and political context to refocus it onto the  
21 individual’s qualities and his or her ‘capacity to adapt’. Similarly, this Themed Section  
22  
23 argues that a focus on climate change by researchers, policy-makers and practitioners can  
24  
25 deflect attention away from underlying political conditions of vulnerability and exploitation  
26 towards the nature of the physical hazard itself, be it drought, flood or some other  
27  
28 environmental perturbation. Kelman (2013), for example, argues in this issue that, in the  
29  
30 context of SIDS, the fundamental challenge that islanders face is not so much the hazard of  
31 climate per se, but why SIDS peoples often do not have the resources or options to resolve  
32  
33 climate change and other development challenges themselves, on their own terms.  
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36 The third theme concerns the institutional *effects* of an insufficiently socialised idea of  
37  
38 climate change, which is the maintenance of existing relations of power or their  
39  
40 reconfiguration in favour of the already powerful. Climate change mitigation and adaptation  
41 are complex, contested concepts that have spawned a wide range of policies and interventions  
42  
43 across the developing world, ranging from infrastructure development, to agricultural  
44  
45 extension, to resettlement of populations considered to be at risk of climate-related hazards  
46 (Kelman, 2010). The flexibility of the mitigation and adaptation paradigms might be  
47  
48 considered by some as a sign of the concepts’ strengths. However, as pointed out by Hulme  
49  
50 (2007), such properties also endow them with a near ‘infinite plasticity...a malleable envoy  
51 enlisted in support of too many rulers” (pp.9-10). In this issue, Arnall (2013) and Kothari  
52  
53 (2013) demonstrate how these processes have come to pass in the cases of Mozambique and  
54  
55 the Maldives respectively. The authors show how climate change is being used in their  
56  
57 respective countries to validate the re-emergence of past unpopular social policies, some of  
58  
59 which might actually exacerbate vulnerability. The focus in both instances is on involuntary  
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3 resettlement, an intervention that has received growing interest from the international policy  
4  
5 community either as a potential climate change adaptation measure or as exemplifying a  
6 failure to adapt to climate change (Bogardi and Warner, 2008, Warner, 2011). However, as  
7  
8 the papers demonstrate, resettlement is a deeply political process that raises fundamental  
9  
10 questions about state-rural relations, and often results in unequal distribution of costs and  
11 benefits amongst relocated persons.  
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15 It is not the intention of this Themed Section to deny the seriousness of contemporary,  
16 human-induced climate change, nor the threat that it poses in different regions of the world.  
17  
18 Rather, the aim is to demonstrate the multifarious ways in which climate science, as well as  
19  
20 the international community that has built up around it, is both a set of political processes in  
21 its own right as well as the producer of political impacts in developing countries where its  
22 policies take influence, whether these effects are intended by the actors involved or not. This  
23  
24 suggests that greater scrutiny of the discursive and political dimensions of mitigation and  
25 adaptation activities is required, with more attention being directed towards the policy  
26  
27 consequences that governments and donors construct as a result of their framing and  
28  
29 rendition of climate change issues. Such an approach will require constant questioning of the  
30 underlying epistemological and ethical assumptions underpinning and framing these debates,  
31  
32 such as those relating to the ongoing discussion on global environmental change and  
33  
34 migration (see Nicholson, 2013, this issue). It will also entail development of new  
35  
36 methodological approaches, drawing upon ideas such as actor network theory and the concept  
37  
38 of 'translation', to understanding climate change's imprecise but contested associated  
39  
40 practices (Weisser et al., 2013). In this way, we might start to build a richer, more rounded  
41  
42 picture of what contemporary climate change is, and what impacts it might have on people's  
43  
44 lives, in developed and developing countries.  
45

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