

# SOCIAL LEARNING AND ADAPTATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The need to build adaptive capacity to climate change into project and policy planning is rapidly becoming a core concern. In the UK for example, recent statements by DFID (2004), GNAW (2001) and MAFF (2000) have highlighted the dual role of public sector agencies needing both to adapt their own goals and practices to take account of climate change, whilst also shaping the enabling environment to support the adaptive capacity of private, public and civil sector actors and individuals operating within their spheres of influence.

<http://www.swan.ac.uk/cds/research/ESRC.htm> for details of this seminar and the IPAR series).

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comprise organisations and administrative regimes rather than being held in structures or wielded by individual actors.

Stepping back from assessing adaptive actions to understanding the evolution of adaptive capacity within organisations responds to the need to develop generic capacity to act as a resource from which to build adaptations under uncertainty. Much work in crisis management has sought to push the boundaries of contingency planning by ‘thinking the unthinkable’ (Smith, 2004). Such output oriented responses to the threats of climate change map well onto existing expectations of organisations and can contribute a great deal towards building a proactive stance towards particular scenarios of climate change. But the act of codifying future hazards into defined risk scenarios will never capture every eventuality and can build resistance to accepting and responding to unexpected risks even whilst they are being felt. The complexity of interactions between physical and human systems operating at a global scale but with an infinite variety of local manifestations makes complete coverage of climate change risk impossible – there will always be some residual uncertainty.

Residual uncertainty means that crisis management must prepare the ground for the unimagined as well as planning for the unexpected. We argue here that a contribution towards this aim is offered by complementing an output-oriented strategy with one that focuses on inputs. In this paper we propose that resilient organisations which can cope with the unimagined are likely to have encouraged members to develop diverse social relationships and to allow the opening of informal space beyond corporate control for individuals or sub-groups within organisations to freely experiment, copy, communicate, learn and reflect on their actions. The countervailing imperative of efficiency within organisations, and the tendency for centralised and top-down contingency planning and decision-making are in danger of restricting incentives for experimentation, reducing flexibility and capacity to adapt under the uncertainty of climate change.

The following section develops a language and model for examining relational spaces as places of learning and adaptation within organisations. This is followed by a discussion built around interviews conducted with key informants from the Environment Agency, the Welsh Assembly and Grasshoppers a dairy farmers group.

acknowledging the influence of social institutions in sanctioning and legitim

The space of informal interaction that lies outside of but interacts with formal institutions  
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its constituent individuals. Similarly, networks provide an informal vehicle for the flow of information in an organisation, for lobbying decision-makers, testing out ne54 745.16029 Tm(kers,Tj0.cio





of influence? The education literature suggests that collaborative learning amongst peers can facilitate faster and deeper learning comparET0d5tc0.0703ivTj0ing





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change scenario for which no contingency planning currently exists in the UK, that of warming for a further 20 years to reach a climate similar to that of contemporary south



*“The group is closed. If you do not cope with the group [culture of critical assessments of each others farming practices] then you would leave”.*

It was also acknowledged that the strength of identity and social capital within Team Wales sometimes made new comers feel excluded so that the shadow system did have a negative side. As one respondent said:

*“What happens if you’re not in the grapevine?”*

#### **4.3 Community and learning: a scientific officer’s view from inside the Environment**



At a strategic level the contribution of social relationships in building adaptation adds weight to calls for greater support for social development in organisational and in social life more generally. For organisational management two questions need addressing. First, can informal social relationships be embraced inside public sector organisations or are there intolerable conflicts between the informal social relationships of adaptive capacity and needs for transparency and vertical accountability? Secondly, to what extent might contingency planning to manage risk compromise or compliment efforts to build adaptive capacity to manage uncertainty? Finally, at a practical level what tools exist to facilitate the building and maintaining of constructive social capital and social learning.

The findings resonate with the identification

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