

ACHIEVING EFFECTIVE ADAPTATION POLICY AND PLANNING: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE VULNERABILITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Climate change poses an ever increasing and momentous threat to humanity and the natural systems on which we rely. In order to respond to this threat, communities across the globe need to be resilient to unprecedented change while adapting to new realities. A significant part of this preparation relies on the ability of planners and policymakers to ensure that their communities are resilient, with high adaptive capacity – beginning by reducing vulnerabilities. Despite this knowledge, communities continue to face challenges unprepared.

This research explores the factors that perpetuate vulnerability to climate change and the risks it poses to not only those directly affected, but to the entirety of the human system. Vulnerability continues to have a significant impact on the overall resilience of communities; therefore, it is essential to understand the opportunities for the planning profession to equitably ease the transition into an uncertain future and the barriers to this goal. In order to do so this research takes a scholarly narrative approach, reviewing interdisciplinary sources in order to gather an in-depth understanding of the many multifaceted aspects of climate change vulnerability.

Through the inception of this research several paradoxes were stumbled upon:

- Firstly, despite the consistent belief that the opposite is true, communities are not actually adapting to climate change, nor are they adequately resilient for the amplitude of climate change effects.
- Secondly, no one, scholars or otherwise, can agree on exactly how to achieve effective adaptation and resilience, significantly hindering any meager attempt to prepare for the future.

- And lastly, vulnerability to climate change is consistently misrepresented as an issue of physical location or risk, and if, by chance, the social aspects of vulnerability are acknowledged, any responsibility policymakers have for addressing these aspects of risk are nimbly evaded by neoliberal perceptions of humanity's socio-economic system.

The planning profession's history is rife with evidence of its fallibility; colonialism, racism, and displacement of marginalized and vulnerable populations have all played significant parts in the shaping of our cities. The profession itself has soberly acknowledged these injustices and reconstructed its theory in an attempt to create a planning practice that is equitable, advocating for the vulnerable and taking a deeply participatory approach. However, as endearing as this transition has been – planning theory does not often translate into practice and reality, particularly in the face of climate change.

Planning for climate change continues to be approached through predominantly technocratic means, continuously discounting the ample evidence that adaptation to climate change begins by addressing vulnerability and the social stressors that perpetuate it. In order to truly prepare for climate change, planners and policymakers need to consider how such evidence can be used to inform policies which support resilience and adaptation by consciously addressing the social aspects of vulnerability to climate change.

While there is no simple or clear path to plan for climate change, there are actions planners can take right now to ensure that communities themselves have the tools and knowledge to be resilient. This research begins to unearth these actions, offering suggestions, discussing various barriers to effective adaptation policy, and, most importantly, aims to facilitate critical thinking about vulnerability to climate change by offering unique insights on this disconnected, yet essential subject.