

# Beyond Adaptation: The Political Ecology of Climate Change in the Bolivian Amazon

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How may we understand the relationship between the discourse of climate change adaptation and Bolivia's state-led, large-scale industrial development projects? The recurrence of extreme climatic events in Bolivia has sparked debate within the country about how to best minimize vulnerability and adapt to ecological change. One of the legislative pillars constituting the Morales administration's overarching policy framework on climate change is Law No. 300, the Framework Law of Mother Earth and Holistic Development for Living Well (*Vivir Bien*). Defined as "a civilizational and cultural alternative to capitalism based on the indigenous worldview" that "signifies living in complementarity, harmony and balance with Mother Earth and society," *Vivir Bien* is to be realized in part by reducing the conditions of risk and vulnerability of both the environment and the Bolivian people. This law also creates a new regime of climate change institutions, one of which is the Plurinational Authority of Mother Earth (APMT), to facilitate the integration of climate change adaptation strategies into development programs and projects of both the central state and municipal governments (Estado Plurinacional 2012). Despite this progressive discourse, however, it remains unclear exactly how the Morales administration plans to translate the philosophy of *Vivir Bien* into practice. Meanwhile, the state has grown increasingly reliant on large-scale industrial development projects that are deeply entrenched in capitalist social relations of production.

It is important to apprehend the work that "adaptation" is performing as a type of development discourse in Bolivia. My analysis suggests that adaptation is being used to legitimize neoliberal governance, and encourages activists and researchers to recognize adaptation's inherent limitations and develop new ways to represent socio-ecological change. It is useful to foreground Marcus Taylor's (2015) political-ecological critique of adaptation, which holds that adaptation as a "framing device" is fundamentally limited because it is predicated on the Cartesian separation of "external climate" and "internal society." This dichotomy inherent in the adaptation discourse allows "climate change [to be] parsed out and isolated from the ongoing processes of social and ecological transformations that construct our lived environments...What is missing in such representations, however, is that humans do not stand outside their environments but are active protagonists in their ongoing production" (xiii). Taylor suggests that this dichotomous conceptualization renders climate change legible to neoliberal forms of governance, paving the way for top-down technocratic and managerial interventions. By infusing the debate over climate change with questions of power, production, and representation, we can gain a more integrated and comprehensive understanding of the relationships that underpin social

and ecological change. It must be asked how this analysis might inform different political and social actions that go beyond adaptation.

The unprecedented flooding in Bolivia's lowland department of Beni in 2008 and 2014, which displaced tens of thousands of families and devastated the agricultural sector, offers a window through which to understand "vulnerability" to flooding as a simultaneously ecological *and* social phenomenon. A relational account of vulnerability complicates the question of "adaptation" because it reframes climatic change – in this case, abnormal rainfall patterns – as but one element in a web of simultaneously biophysical and social forces that unevenly produce security and precarity across the landscape. Since the advent of colonialism in lowland Bolivia, the specific configuration of political and economic power relations between the white elite and the indigenous population lent to an organization of production and exchange in which the elite, via processes of dispossession of indigenous and peasant populations, came to command the means of production and accumulate wealth. The establishment of a private property regime, the consolidation of landholdings by the elite, and subsequent the creation of a "free" wage labor force were fundamental to this process. This pattern of accumulation and dispossession intensified through the twentieth century, as the liberal nation-state and the increasing role of transnational capital promoted the consolidation of landholdings and the industrialized production of agricultural commodities destined for international markets. By identifying the historically and geographically specific processes that have given form to the contemporary configuration of wealth and poverty across the landscape, this analysis de-naturalizes and thus re-politicizes the concepts of vulnerability and adaptation.

The democratic election of Bolivia's first indigenous president, Evo Morales, in 2005 represented a historic opportunity to reorganize the social organization of production in favor of the country's indigenous population and reverse the legacy of centuries of colonial and neoliberal governance. Yet the logic of capitalist development and the influence of foreign corporate interests over the national political economy have only heightened in the past decade, undermining rural livelihoods and destroying peasants and indigenous communities' capacity for genuine climate resilience. Paradoxically, the Morales administration's large-scale industrial development interventions are being promoted under the rubric of "adaptation." In the 2015 Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC), presented at the 21st Conference of Parties (COP), for instance, food sovereignty and energy security are identified as key objectives for making society more "sustainable" and "resilient" in the face of climate change. The state's push for the expansion of the agro-industrial frontier and the construction of hydroelectric mega-dams in Beni exposes how the government is mobilizing its stated environmental concerns to justify an extractivist and export-oriented development model. Such a model marks the extension of the structure of access to and control over environmental resources that has prevailed in the country since Spanish colonialism. In this way, adaptation in the Plurinational state can be understood as itself responsible for reproducing the unequal distribution of security and vulnerability across the nation's landscape.

In conclusion, the discourse of adaptation – whose appearance as “green” and environmentally friendly but whose epistemological structure externalizes nature and thus rationalizes technocratic intervention – works to mediate the contradictions at the heart of the Morales administration. Collapsing *Vivir Bien* and capitalist industrialization, “adaptation” offers the state a discursive coherence with which to legitimize its development strategy. In this way, “adaptation” has become an increasingly important part of the Morales administration’s efforts to validate and maintain its rule. It is thus crucial to destabilize “adaptation” and the epistemological foundations on which it rests. There is an identifiable need for independent research that de-naturalizes and re-politicizes the narrative of climate change adaptation, allowing alternative visions of development and social transformation obscured by its discursive parameters to come to light.

## Bibliography

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