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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Pluralizing climate change adaptation: mapping discourses in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

The experiences and perspectives of all those affected by climate change must inform adaptation for reasons of effectiveness, legitimacy, and justice. Recognizing how different stakeholders characterize vulnerability, impacts, and adaptation is a critical step towards more inclusive adaptation governance. To better capture this plurality, some argue for discursive approaches to adaptation research, yet there has been limited empirical work to identify adaptation discourses in climate-vulnerable countries in the Global South. This study explores the diversity of adaptation discourses in Vietnam, a country heavily affected by climate change. The analysis is based on interviews with stakeholders involved in adaptation including government officials, international organizations, civil society, and farmers. Discourses are differentiated according to three elements: their diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framings. Using this analytical framework, six discourses of adaptation are identified: mobilize the money; order and control; coordinate and integrate; made in Vietnam; prioritize the people; and survive and thrive. Four key insights for adaptation research, policy and practice are discussed. This framework could be applied in any context to compare and analyze adaptation discourses and foster more inclusive and deliberative approaches to adaptation.

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Introduction

The concept of climate change adaptation is contested and political, with multiple understandings of what vulnerability and impacts mean, what constitutes fair or effective adaptation, and whose values and knowledge to prioritize (Eriksen et al., 2015; Moser & Boykoff, 2013; Nightingale et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2007; Thomas & Warner, 2019). How these questions get answered, explicitly or implicitly, entails an enaction of power. This idea is central to a growing field of critical adaptation or post-adaptation literature, which reacts against the framing of adaptation as an apolitical technical endeavour (Eriksen et al., 2021; Sherman et al., 2016; Webber, 2016). For reasons of effectiveness, justice, and democratic legitimacy, adaptation needs to be informed by, and inclusive of, those who are most affected by climate impacts and working to tackle them.

A number of authors have proposed taking a narrative or discursive approach to understanding the plurality of perspectives on adaptation (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2019; Paschen & Ison, 2014; Remling, 2020; Schipper et al., 2021). A discourse is

a shared way of apprehending the world. Embedded in language, it enables those who subscribe to it to interpret bits of information and put them into coherent stories or accounts... Each discourse rests on assumptions, judgements, and contentions that provide the basic terms for analysis, debates, agreements, and disagreements. (Dryzek, 2022, pp. 9–10)

A discourse has its own internal logic, value system of what is important and what may be overlooked, heroes and villains, assumptions and metaphors, and perspective of scale.

Discourse analysis allows us to explore how actors intentionally or unwittingly influence the definition of a problem, set the agenda and form coalitions to exert or perpetuate relations of power (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005).

Dryzek (2010) develops the concept of *discursive democracy*, observing that discourses can play a critical coordinating role in contexts where formal channels for public influence are lacking, such as global governance but also in non-democratic national contexts. He proposes that we evaluate not just how *inclusive* a governance system is (in terms of the range of individuals who participate or discourses that circulate) but how *deliberative* it is (in terms of the quality of communication across the system, for example, the extent to which discourses emerging in the public sphere have influence with power-holding institutions). Stevenson and Dryzek (2014) apply this discursive approach to analyzing how deliberative the governance of climate change *mitigation* is, at the global level; whereas the research underpinning this article examines the deliberative quality of climate change *adaptation*, in Vietnam. This article focuses on the first step of that analytical process: identifying the discourses.

One approach to discursively analyzing adaptation has been to propose typologies of adaptation discourses. These have tended to be developed a priori, distilled from academic literature (Fünfgeld & McEvoy, 2011; Sherman et al., 2016) or identified through analysis of international policy discourse and climate negotiations (Ayers & Dodman, 2010; Moore, 2012), and often structured around a dichotomy or continuum

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(Magnan et al., 2020). Relatively few researchers have conducted empirical work to identify adaptation discourses as invoked by members of the public, policymakers at national or subnational levels, or other implicated actors. Exceptions include Schlosberg et al. (2017) who analyze how citizens' perspectives on adaptation shift following deliberation; Cotton and Stevens (2019) who map public perceptions of adaptation in the UK using Q-methodology; Singh et al. (2019) who use life history approaches to understand perceptions of risk, aspirations, and motivations for adapting to climate change; Remling (2020) who identifies discourses of adaptation and migration in the Pacific based on semi-structured interviews; and Singh et al. (2021) who use frame analysis to examine how 'effectiveness' gets conceptualized and operationalized in the adaptation literature. These scholars all use different methodologies; there is no broadly accepted analytical framework for distinguishing among adaptation discourses.

In this paper, a three-part analytical framework is employed to distinguish and compare how various actors in Vietnam understand and explain adaptation. Vietnam is selected as the case study for this research both due to its status as a developing country that is highly exposed to climate impacts and because, like many of the world's most climate-vulnerable countries, it is not a liberal democracy; thus the findings may shed light on how adaptation and development actors operating in other climate-vulnerable countries that score low on good governance may be able to conceptualize and support a more inclusive approach to adaptation. Deliberative practices and principles have been studied in a variety of contexts, including in China and other authoritarian states in Asia (He et al., 2022; He & Warren, 2011); in Vietnam, researchers have observed changing trends in civic engagement and observed inclusive deliberative processes especially at local levels of governance (Vu, 2017; Wells-Dang, 2010).

I propose that this analytical framework, originally developed to analyze how social movements call for collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000), may usefully be applied to any empirical context in which adaptation is discussed or written about. It allows comparison of how different actors involved in planning, devising, funding and implementing adaptation activities understand and characterize the concept differently. This is a critical step for inclusive decision-making. Without it, adaptation actors risk talking at cross-purposes, and certain debates and assumptions that were 'live' in the adaptation literature two or three decades ago might persist in policy and practice.

The analysis reveals six distinct discourses of adaptation in Vietnam, a remarkable plurality of perspectives. Four implications of the findings are highlighted. First, the way many 'experts' explain adaptation often does not resonate with how it is experienced and enacted by those most directly affected by climate change. Second, policymakers and practitioners should be cautious about relying too heavily on dichotomies to characterize debates about adaptation. Third, if adaptation researchers and practitioners are not cognizant of their potential bias towards the 'solutions' they have access to, or expertise in, exploration of more transformational alternative options risks being limited. Fourth, deliberative approaches to adaptation can alleviate some of these risks.

This paper contributes to the literature on international policymaking and local practices of adaptation and development. It also contributes to scholarship on deliberative approaches to climate governance (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2019; Stevenson & Dryzek, 2014) and emerging interest in what a 'deliberative' approach to adaptation might mean (Ayers, 2011; Eriksen et al., 2021, p. 10; Sprain, 2016). How adaptation is understood by the people most affected by, and most closely involved in tackling, climate impacts should be a starting point for researchers, policymakers and practitioners working in this field, not an afterthought.

Methodology and analytical framework

The case study selected for this research is a developing country that is heavily affected by climate change, Vietnam, with a sub-national focus on its Mekong River Delta region. Vietnam is particularly exposed to climate impacts due to its long coastline, densely populated low-lying land areas, and vulnerable infrastructure (World Bank, 2022). Vietnam consistently ranked among the top ten countries most affected by extreme weather events from 1990 to 2018 (Eckstein et al., 2020; Harmeling, 2010). The Mekong Delta in the country's south is a particularly low-lying, densely populated area that the country relies upon heavily for agricultural production and is experiencing rapid industrial development. This region faces climate change effects including more severe storms, flooding, saline intrusion, and drought, effects which are exacerbated – and sometimes conflated with – other challenges associated with economic development, including groundwater extraction and changing flows related to upstream uses of the Mekong River (Boretti, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021).

Vietnam is a single-party authoritarian regime, ranking 131st out of 167 countries in the Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021) and scoring low on measures of good governance, especially corruption control, regulatory quality, and voice and accountability (World Bank Group, 2020). From being one of the poorest countries in the world, *doi moi* reforms that started in 1986 led Vietnam's economy to grow rapidly as it transitioned from a highly centralized model to a market economy (World Bank Group, 2020). While initially raising many citizens out of poverty, this rapid economic development has come at a cost to the environment and has been associated with rising social inequality (Käkönen, 2008; Sasges & Ziegler, 2023). Vietnam receives substantial international finance to support climate action, and the country's climate policies express strong political determination to undertake adaptation (Gverdsiteli, 2023; Neefjes, 2022). These characteristics are by no means unique to Vietnam. Among the top five countries most affected by climate-related losses over the period 2010–2019, for example, were Mozambique and Myanmar (Eckstein et al., 2020), which have multi-dimensional poverty rates of 61.9% and 38.3% respectively (OPHI & UNDP, 2023) and are both classified as 'authoritarian' (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). As such, experiences and lessons from Vietnam have the potential to be illuminating for other geographic and political contexts.

The empirical analysis in this paper is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2018 and 2021 with 55 individuals as part of a wider research project on the extent to which people affected by climate change in climate-vulnerable countries are able to have influence in adaptation governance locally, nationally and globally. Interview participants represented an array of actors involved in adaptation in Vietnam: five officials from the central government ministries including the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE); four provincial government officials from An Giang province; eleven district or commune level officials from An Giang, Vinh Long, and Soc Trang provinces; five members of staff of international organizations including donor agencies; seven members of staff of non-government organizations (NGOs) working on adaptation; five Vietnamese academics; two independent consultants; and sixteen small-holder farmers and landless farm labourers: four from An Giang, six from Vinh Long, and six from Soc Trang. These three provinces were selected as they represent the three hydrological zones of the Mekong Delta: upper, middle, and coastal respectively (Royal HaskoningDHV, 2013). The main source of income reported by farmers interviewed was from rice, vegetables and fruit, with some farmers in coastal Soc Trang also cultivating shrimp. The 55 interviews sought to elicit participants' perspectives on, and experiences of working on, the policy or practice of adaptation and development. The purpose of this interpretative research was not to generalize the

perspectives of these interviewees to the wider population, but to generate rich and context-specific insights about the ways in which adaptation is understood by those involved (Ransan-Cooper et al., 2018, p. 641). The 2018 interviews in Hanoi and An Giang were conducted by the author in person, either in English, or in Vietnamese with the support of a local interpreter. The 2021 interviews in Soc Trang and Vinh Long provinces were conducted by research assistants due to COVID restrictions preventing the author from travelling to Vietnam.

Iterative thematic coding was used to analyze the interview transcripts. While the fieldwork was not designed with the aim of generating a typology or analytical framework of adaptation discourses, it became clear through the process of conducting and analyzing the interviews that adaptation meant subtly, or sometimes substantively, different things to different people. Thus, the genesis of the analytical framework was empirical and inductive, and the process of developing it was abductive. In other words, it evolved recursively, informed not only by direct analysis of the interviews but also by reference to existing theoretical literature including foundational work on environmental discourses (Dryzek, 2022; Hajer, 1995; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005), discourses that have been identified in relation to climate mitigation governance, often from a global perspective (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2019; Hulme, 2022; Stevenson & Dryzek, 2014), and recent approaches to analyzing adaptation discursively, discussed above.

The strongest influence over the development of the analytical framework came not from the environment or

Table 1. Six discourses of climate change adaptation in Vietnam.

	Mobilize the money	Order and control	Coordinate and integrate	Made in Vietnam	Prioritize the people	Survive and thrive
Discourse invoked by	International donor agencies. Government.	Central, provincial, and local government officials.	Larger donors. Central government.	Some NGOs, some international organizations.	Vietnamese and international NGOs. Smaller donors.	Smallholder farmers and farm labourers.
Diagnostic framing <i>What is the problem, where and for whom?</i>	Biophysical phenomenon of climate change. Vulnerable country and population.	Uncertainty of climate information (problem parameters unclear). Decentralization limits government's ability to see and control.	Siloed, fragmented governance not fit for purpose in the face of complex natural and global economic systems.	Not primarily climate change, but rapid unregulated industrial development in Vietnam (development is not inherently benign).	People experiencing vulnerability due to multiple linked socio-economic factors, including and exacerbated by climate impacts.	Unpredictability of weather and markets. Lack of access to money, land, support. (The term 'vulnerable' is rarely heard.)
Prognostic framing <i>What should be done, where and by whom?</i>	Donors to distribute international climate finance. Deliver adaptation programmes.	Top-down government planning. More specific data to help policymakers manage risks.	Regionally and sectorally coordinated governance. Adaptive planning informed by technical expertise.	Not just more climate finance and climate-related projects. Better environmental management and an end to corruption.	Climate-smart development and community-based adaptation led by NGOs, with supportive government policy.	Some wish for more assistance e.g. training or money from government. But main emphasis is self-reliance.
Motivational framing <i>Rationale: why act?</i>	Spend adaptation finance to assist climate-affected areas. At times, restorative justice.	Maintain order, stability, and central government control over Vietnam's development.	Efficiency and effectiveness. Long-term vision of Vietnam as successful economy in a complex global system.	It is political, not just a technical issue. Appeal to ethics. Motivated at times by frustration or indignation.	Appeal to human empathy and social justice. Emphasis on issues of fairness, equity, vulnerability.	Pragmatism. Focus on desired outcomes: income, productivity, stable livelihoods.
Nature of challenge	Financial	Administrative	Governance	Political	Social	Existential
Scale of focus	International	National	National / Regional	National / Subnational	Community	Household

climate literature, though, but from Benford and Snow's (2000) analysis of social movements. Thematic analysis revealed three categories of differences in how stakeholders in Vietnam characterize climate change adaptation: the *problems* they want it to solve (for whom, caused by what); the *approaches* or mechanisms they propose for adapting (implemented by whom, at what scale); and the *rationale* or justifications they put forward for undertaking adaptation (ranging from pragmatism, to self-interest, to various ethical considerations). These three categories were observed to closely resemble the three 'framing tasks' – diagnostic, prognostic and motivational – that, according to Benford and Snow (2000), social movements employ to invoke collective action. These three framing tasks thus form the basis of the analytical framework utilized for identifying and distinguishing between adaptation discourses (see table 1).

This analytical framework has not to the author's knowledge been proposed before as a way of identifying and comparing adaptation discourses. While reminiscent of problem-solution models for policy analysis, such as Bacchi's (2009) 'what is the problem represented to be (WPR)' method, her approach starts with an observed policy 'solution' and asks how it constructs 'the problem'. By contrast, the three-part framework applied here allows for narrative accounts of adaptation that start *either* with the question of what kind of problem adaptation is *or* what needs to be done about it; is not restricted to policy but includes the perspectives of everyday people adapting to climate change, whose discourses are not usually to be found in official policy documents; and emphasizes a third dimension, the motivational framing i.e. 'why is adaptation important?' (not necessarily the same as the diagnostic framing). A critical aspect of this third dimension is its articulation of the underlying principles, such as pragmatism or justice, that an adaptation discourse explicitly or implicitly upholds.

By applying this analytical framework, six distinct discourses of adaptation are identified and described below. Each description, while only a brief summary of the rich qualitative data, offers insights into who invokes the discourse and why, whose interests it prioritizes, to whom it attributes blame or agency, and the extent to which it reacts to the other discourses. Part of the wider research project, but beyond the scope of this article, is to trace how these six discourses include and exclude certain groups and perspectives, influence each other, and contribute to shaping adaptation policy and action.

Findings: six adaptation discourses

In this section, the six discourses of adaptation are presented alongside each other (see Table 1) to compare how they fulfil the three framing tasks, and to highlight other criteria for comparison including each discourse's scale of focus and the main actors that invoke it. Each discourse is then described in more detail. The claim is not that each discourse is unitary, nor that particular actors invoke one discourse to the exclusion of others; many participants invoked more than one discourse, either consciously and strategically, or unwittingly. For example, a participant might indicate awareness of another adaptation discourse by borrowing its metaphors, countering

it with their own perspective, or they might transition between discourses depending on whether they are articulating their organization's or their personal view. This aligns with the idea that we each inhabit multiple identities and discursive positions: 'Discursive psychology accepts ... that any given individual may subscribe partially to several different, perhaps competing, discourses' (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008, p. 488). These discourses of adaptation could be ordered or clustered in various ways, for example, according to which of the three framings they place most emphasis on. In Table 1, they are ordered according to their scale of focus, from the broadest (or 'highest' governance level) on the left, to the narrowest scale (or 'lowest' governance level) on the right.

Mobilize the money

The *mobilize the money* discourse unites a range of actors that distribute, receive, or seek international climate finance for adaptation in Vietnam, including government agencies, donor organizations, and NGOs. While the *diagnostic* framing refers rather generically to the problem of climate change, this discourse is defined as the name suggests by its *prognostic* framing: the proposed 'solution' is climate finance. Proponents often highlight the challenges of mobilizing adaptation finance more than concern about climate-related problems. Representatives of international organizations interviewed referred with frustration to the government's long 'shopping lists' of projects put forward for potential funding, not prioritized strategically according to need. Meanwhile, central government officials highlighted the challenges they face in accessing international climate finance, citing, for example, frequent changes to the Green Climate Fund's rules which generate a scramble to align with whatever this year's theme and selection criteria happen to be, and the inter-ministerial coordination and administrative burden of meeting the demands of climate finance institutions such as the Adaptation Fund.

In fact, given the prognostic framing is relatively uncontested (no one questions the importance of adaptation finance), the 'solution' this discourse proposes sometimes seems to blend with its motivational framing, in other words spending climate finance becomes a rationale in itself. Illustrating this, one provincial government official referred to NGOs' adaptation projects as 'very small' by comparison to large loan-funded projects, and just about 'capacity building, for the farmers, for the women [but] not enough to make ... construction or anything'. He thus reproduces one of the driving priorities for multilateral banks seeking to mobilize adaptation finance: 'bankability' (Thomas, 2023, p. 239). Where a *motivational* framing is explicitly articulated within this discourse, it generally aims to justify to the international community why Vietnam has a particular need for adaptation finance. As such, vulnerability to climate impacts tends to be conceptualized in the aggregate, at the national scale; if vulnerability at the local level is mentioned in any detail, this is often in the context of 'vulnerability mapping' to help determine where to spend climate finance, so the lens is still a national one.

The *mobilize the money* discourse is reflected in Vietnam's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) which sets out national targets for climate action under the Paris Agreement.

Emphasizing the adverse impacts of climate change, the NDC quantifies how much additional finance will be required from the international community for Vietnam to successfully adapt, and its reference to loss and damage implicitly invokes the concept of restorative justice (Vietnam, 2022). Several government representatives echoed the message in the NDC that for Vietnam, adaptation is more important than mitigation: 'Being a developing country, Vietnam considers adaptation more priority than mitigation, because a lot of local people are vulnerable to climate change ... all the important documents from the government emphasize the role of adaptation. Adaptation is ... utmost important', a central government official said. This is partly in reaction to pressure from certain donors for Vietnam to accept climate finance for mitigation rather than adaptation. The concept of restorative justice, attributing responsibility to those countries that have historically emitted more greenhouse gases, was only rarely alluded to by interviewees and this tended to be implicit or off the record, with both donors and recipients of climate finance avoiding assigning blame, instead adopting an 'adaptation as development' rather than 'adaptation as restitution' framing, to use Moore's (2012) terms.

Order and control

The *order and control* discourse is heard among central and provincial government officials. Its name derives from its *prognostic* framing, which sees the central government controlling the country's development and adaptation by providing top-down strategies, decrees and instructions, and requiring lower levels of government to devise plans and report on their implementation (Phuong et al., 2018). This governance paradigm reflects the administrative ordering of nature and society that Scott (1998) describes as a fundamental tool of high modernist statecraft, where the government's greatest concern is how to control the country by making it 'legible'. The technocratic nature of this approach may even result in more emphasis and resources being devoted to planning and reporting than to adaptation action. According to a representative of an international organization, 'because of so many strategies and fragmented mandates ... provinces are forced to formulate so many action plans ... It's crazy ... none of this is fully funded, right, so it's mainly [just] on paper'.

The *order and control* discourse frames adaptation as a technical but above all administrative challenge. Metaphors include 'holding the line' against climate impacts, and floods 'breaking the rules'. The *diagnostic* framing focuses on the lack of scientific information predicting exactly how climate change impacts will manifest. As one independent consultant put it, 'The Vietnamese system of planning has an implicit pretension that you can know the future'. He described provincial authorities dissatisfied with climate and hydrology scenarios generated for 2030, 2040 and 2050 because they were required to develop a plan for 2025. Lamenting the lack of certainty in hydrological forecasting, a provincial government official explained:

We're waiting for that information before we set up agriculture system. It's very easy for us, if you say that from 2050 sea-level

rise will come here, oh, very easy! We'll set up from here to here salt-water system. And we set up here fresh-water system agriculture, very easy ... for example, shrimp farm, or something like that, no problem. But we don't know exactly the information yet.

The *motivational* framing focuses on the efficacy of action more than the urgency or severity of the problem. This discourse allows no room for doubt about the authority and capability of the government. Any limitations to adaptive capacity are attributed to deficiencies in available information. While provincial authorities want detailed climate predictions to inform their adaptation plans, the central government is concerned about accessing information on what is happening in the country's 63 provinces, a challenge that has beset the government since decentralization began in the 1980s (Lindskog, 2015). Local NGOs are often framed as supplementary arms of government, valued for their ability to access information or deliver services in remote locations, thus enhancing the country's legibility, and the government's ability to order and control it. In the words of a central government official:

Actually, at the central level ... in terms of policy issues, we're quite overview [sic]. Sometimes [the official feedback system] cannot provide all the information that we need. NGOs are very strong on that part. They implement the projects at the grassroots level. They can see what happens there, in their view ... so one way to get information from grassroots level, NGOs play very well that part.

Coordinate and integrate

The *coordinate and integrate* discourse brings together a 'discourse coalition' (Hajer, 2003) of international development organizations and central government agencies with an interest in the sustainable and climate-resilient development of Vietnam's Mekong Delta. Informed by, for example, the Mekong Delta Plan (Royal HaskoningDHV, 2013), and explored since 2014 at a series of high-level Forums supported by a working group of donors including the World Bank, Netherlands, Germany and Australia, this discourse is articulated in an emerging policy framework supporting an integrated regional approach to climate-resilient planning and economic development, such as Resolution 120 (Vietnam, 2017). *Coordinate and integrate* presents itself as a new approach to adaptation in Vietnam, and more broadly to governance in the face of emerging challenges, drawing on ideas about 'good governance' and 'nature-based solutions'. In some ways, it is framed as a counter-narrative to the *order and control* discourse, with ideas like 'living with floods' recasting the nature-society relationship as one where humans should not be seeking to control nature. Although, as an NGO representative told me, the Vietnamese term *lũ đẹp* meaning 'beautiful/useful flood' reflects the fact that farmers in the Mekong Delta have always recognized the value of seasonal flooding for soil quality and fish stocks, as also discussed by Luu et al. (2022) who trace four successive periods of flood-water management policies in the Mekong Delta, and link the fourth to Resolution 120.

The *diagnostic* framing of this discourse holds that decentralized governance makes it difficult to pursue a strategic approach to development in the context of climate change

and globalization. Vietnam's decentralized system results in 63 provinces being incentivized to compete with each other for resources from the central government, the private sector, and international actors (Thomas, 2023). The *coordinate and integrate* discourse frames that as economically inefficient and ineffective for transboundary adaptation. 'The Mekong Delta is one system. That natural system doesn't care about which part is this province, which part is other province, and which part is related to which ministry' a central government official explained. Besides the need for coordinated governance to counter inter-provincial competition, this discourse similarly highlights the challenge of sectoral siloes and turf wars between departments, where responsibility for climate change is split across three main Ministries: the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) is officially in charge of Vietnam's commitments under the UNFCCC and coastal management; the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) is responsible for agriculture, forestry, rural development, irrigation, and disaster management; and the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) leads on 'green growth'.

The *prognostic* framing promotes a long-term vision, taking an adaptive management approach that keeps options open rather than following fixed plans, and ensures governance is both geographically coordinated (across provinces) and sectorally integrated (across departments). This discourse holds technical expertise in high regard but disagrees with the *order and control* discourse's inclination to postpone action until more precise forecasts are available: 'I think we've got way more than enough science ... it actually quite frustrates me' a staff member of an international organization declared, referring to the government's frequent emphasis on the need for more or better science before adaptation plans can be drawn up.

The *motivational* framing of the *coordinate and integrate* discourse is portrayed as representing a modern, better-informed approach, appropriate for a middle-income country looking to transition successfully from low to high middle-income status by shifting the focus of its agricultural and industrial production from quantity to quality. The discourse frames its goals in pragmatic rather than ideological terms, presenting adaptation as a useful lens to encourage the long-term, integrated development planning necessary for Vietnam to be competitive in a globalizing economy. While upholding the idea that adaptation must not be reduced to piecemeal or incremental efforts, instead requiring fundamental transformations at the systems level, the big picture perspective and regional scale of this discourse means it risks paying limited attention to adaptation challenges at the local scale.

Made in Vietnam

The *made in Vietnam* discourse stands out in terms of its *diagnostic* framing which contends that climate change is actually not the main problem. This discourse presents itself as a counter-narrative, especially to *mobilize the money*, by asserting that development does not always equate to progress and, in fact, climate finance may be diverting attention away from underlying and more pressing issues. Proponents are concerned that the problem-solution storyline of adaptation may

be unwittingly or intentionally misleading, using the biophysical phenomenon of climate change as a scapegoat to divert blame to the international community for problems driven primarily by unfettered development and poor environmental management in Vietnam. This discourse was invoked by various individuals working on adaptation for local and international organizations, including Vietnamese and international staff, although foreigners tended to be more forthright and explicit while others alluded to such matters in hushed tones, reflecting the risk that their comments might be construed as critiquing government policy or identifying corruption. Emotions associated with this discourse included frustration, anger, or even resigned laughter.

While climate change is exacerbating some environmental problems, the sea level is rising in millimetres per year whereas land in Vietnam's Mekong Delta is subsiding by centimetres per year due to groundwater extraction and changing uses of the Mekong River upstream which results in altered water and sediment flows (Minderhoud et al., 2017). 'I think there are huge environmental issues that are undoubtedly being, or will be exacerbated by climate change, but that's about 10 percent of the problem', said a staff member of an international organization, '90 percent of the problem is good or not so good environmental management'. Proponents of this discourse from Vietnamese non-government organizations lamented the disingenuous blaming of climate change for recent fatal flood events in central Vietnam in 2018, as if they were purely weather-related and thus either unavoidable or to be blamed on global emissions, when in fact extreme rain was forecast and, in their view, many of the worst impacts could have been prevented with better management of hydropower reservoirs and communication to warn and protect downstream communities from 'forced release' of water (Al Jazeera, 2018; Luu et al., 2018).

Others have observed similar attribution of extreme events to climate change despite evidence to the contrary, such as landslides in Nepal (Forsyth & McDermott, 2022, p. 5), and warned that many projects that purport to be supporting adaptation may actually constitute 'maladaptation' by contributing to climate change or exacerbating vulnerabilities (Eriksen et al., 2021; Work et al., 2019). In the words of a Vietnamese NGO staff member,

They say that it's disaster. They say that they don't understand why it happened. The farmers often didn't know the root cause ... But we know. The scientist people, NGOs, we know, because of cutting the forest, building too much construction ... It is human-made.

This view was epitomized in a reference by a representative of an international organization to the ubiquitous product label: 'We love to blame climate change or China or both, but so many of these problems are *Made in Vietnam*'¹.

The discourse's *prognostic* framing is less coherent than its diagnostic framing. Various proposals are suggested, some contradictory, from resisting corruption and transforming the political-economic system, to relying more on expert-informed technical management, but few proponents sounded optimistic about the likelihood of an imminent change to this powerful system. The *motivational* framing of the *made in Vietnam* discourse emphasizes the importance of questioning

authority and challenges a more mainstream belief in Vietnam's entitlement to continue the rapid economic growth of its recent past whatever the consequences; the latter being summed up by a central government official as follows: 'Vietnam is a developing country. There is always a trade-off between economic growth and environmental protection. You might have to burn the future for a bit and focus on the short-term'.

Prioritize the people

The *prioritize the people* discourse is invoked by NGOs, both international and Vietnamese, and some international organizations who support community-level development. Its *diagnostic* framing highlights the social nature of climate change, emphasizing concerns about poverty, inequality, and human vulnerability, pointing out that communities are having to adapt to multiple challenges, not all of which are climate related. For example, drier soils may be caused by altered patterns of precipitation or by water upstream being diverted for hydropower. For the poorest and most marginalized, it is rarely important or possible to determine whether events are climate-related. As a representative of an international organization put it,

For the local people in Vietnam, they live there for, you know, a decade, and they see ... floods and storms. And of course they say flood now is more extreme, and storm now is stronger than before, but they don't say it's because of climate change ... Of course we, as a development partner, and the scientists or experts, we capture with the global trend, and we use all the climate change language. [But] when we come to do the training for the local people on a set of skills and identify the risks, I think mainly we're still talking about disasters.

Although this discourse favours terms like 'grassroots' or 'bottom-up', its *prognostic* framing assigns agency to three main groups: it offers an empowering account of the people most affected by climate change, seeking to put them in the driving seat of adaptation decisions and action, while simultaneously emphasizing their vulnerability; it assigns NGOs an important role in identifying needs, implementing adaptation interventions, and speaking to policymakers on behalf of vulnerable communities; and it calls on governments to provide a supportive policy environment and roll out nationwide adaptation programmes. Thus, while sympathizing with the *made in Vietnam* perspective that underlying problems are multifarious, this discourse nonetheless articulates a clearer sense of a 'solution', reflecting an interest in accessing funding for adaptation. In fact, one NGO representative mentioned that they find it easier to ask local authorities if they can come and discuss local climate impacts, rather than problems with economic development, because climate change is 'less sensitive'.

To resolve the tension between needing to define their work as adaptation in order to qualify for climate-related funding, while also recognizing that affected communities are tackling many different challenges, some proponents of this discourse redefine the term 'adaptation' as broader than just adaptation to climate change. 'The local people have been living in the Delta for many years, and they already adapt themselves by

one way or another', explained an employee of an international organization, 'but they also adapt to the market, right? So not only to the natural condition, but also the actual development.' An international NGO representative reflected:

[e]verything now becomes the combination of man-made adaptation and economic development, also power development, also risk management, communication, a lot of things. So, it means that climate change adaptation now is no more just 'climate change adaptation', but also 'climate change and complexity of the situation adaptation'

The *motivational* framing of this discourse alludes to principles such as participation, equity, resilience, and supporting those who are vulnerable. Of the six adaptation discourses identified in this paper, this one has the most in common with vulnerability-based framings in the adaptation literature (Remling & Persson, 2015) or 'development as adaptation' (Sherman et al., 2016).

Survive and thrive

The *survive and thrive* discourse is heard among smallholder farmers and farm labourers in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. This discursive community, like the others described above, is far from homogenous and should not be interpreted as reflecting a unitary 'local voice' or 'local knowledge'. Nevertheless, common themes can be identified. This discourse is characterized by first-hand, day-to-day experience of the challenges of pursuing rural livelihoods in the face of variable, unpredictable and extreme weather on crops, livestock, assets and infrastructure. Proponents were generally aware of climate change from the media, but also conscious of gaps in their knowledge including limited understanding of the details of how climate impacts are likely to play out in their geographic locations and what they might need, or be able, to do to prepare, respond and adapt.

The *diagnostic* framing highlights multiple inter-linked challenges, including unpredictable weather, extremes such as heat, floods, drought and disease, fluctuating prices, access to land, and access to markets including frustration with having to rely on middlemen to determine the value of products. Many of the economic challenges such as fluctuating prices and access to markets were felt to have been exacerbated following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. A key feature of the diagnostic framing is that proponents do not see particular value in trying to distinguish which of these challenges are directly climate-related and which are not, nor in attributing blame for them. This resonates with Ensor et al.'s (2019) point that adaptation research and policy should ask 'what are the most significant changes taking place in people's lives?', not just 'what are the impacts of climate change?'. It is notable that the concept of 'vulnerability' was rarely heard within this discourse.

In fact, the *survive and thrive* discourse is defined less by its diagnosis or prognosis and more by its *motivational* framing, as its name reflects. Common motivations articulated by proponents include looking after their families, maintaining stable and successful livelihoods, optimizing productivity and income, having fair access to stable markets, and avoiding risks. There is some variation in terms of how they assign

responsibility for action: whether they consider it up to households to survive and thrive autonomously, or if they expect local authorities to provide support. The citizen-government relationship, if alluded to, is sometimes framed in paternalistic terms with the government issuing rules and providing assistance, while sometimes it is framed as a conflict, with ordinary citizens pursuing and adapting their livelihoods *despite* government policies or guidance, for example where land is zoned for rice but farmers prefer to grow more profitable crops, or where a government directive requires farmers to leave land fallow once a year for reasons of sustainability, but they choose to grow a third rice crop. It was rarely framed as a negotiable social contract, nor were ideas of social justice explicitly invoked.

Of the three framing tasks, the *prognostic* framing gets the least emphasis. Proponents of this discourse are under no illusion that there is a straightforward ‘solution’ to these multiple challenges, nor do they generally have ready access or a sense of entitlement to external finance – climate finance or otherwise – to help them address these problems. ‘Adaptation’ is not a term they use much themselves, and if asked to define it, they offer a range of definitions, including adapting to the markets or coping with extreme weather events. Overall, this adaptation discourse calls for perseverance and self-reliance in the face of multiple, unpredictable and ongoing challenges.

Discussion

This analysis reveals a remarkable plurality of adaptation discourses in Vietnam, including multiple framings of the *problems* that people want adaptation to tackle, for whom, at what scale (by no means always climate-related); multiple assumptions around what *approaches* are appropriate and what counts as ‘adaptation’; and multiple *justifications* as to why adaptation is needed and for whom, ranging from more pragmatic to more ethical rationales. The research offers empirical evidence in support of critical adaptation scholarship that calls for recognition and exploration of the plurality of meanings and ontologies associated with adaptation (Eriksen et al., 2015, 2021; Nightingale, 2017). Four significant implications for adaptation research, policy and practice are discussed here.

First, there are major disparities of power and representation between these six discourses. The findings reveal that the way adaptation is conceptualized by many ‘experts’ – including international development practitioners, government officials, and NGO representatives – often does not resonate with the experiences and priorities of those people most directly affected by climate impacts. Given that donors, governments and development agencies wield administrative, linguistic, and financial power, this is deeply problematic; yet it is reflected in the fact that, despite households and communities being the most negatively affected by climate impacts globally, only a tiny portion of total climate finance reaches them directly (Garschagen & Doshi, 2022; Soanes et al., 2017). For example, the concept of ‘vulnerability’ – central to the problem definition in many international and academic debates about adaptation, especially in discussions about where adaptation finance should be spent – was used very little in interviews

with so-called ‘vulnerable’ people. International decision-making on adaptation must reflect and address the lived experiences, challenges, interests, and values of the people most at risk from climate change. International actors involved in supporting adaptation in climate-vulnerable countries need to be aware of the discourses of adaptation that they are upholding, endorsing, encouraging, and at times even requiring others ascribe to.

Second, adaptation is a multi-faceted concept; researchers, policymakers and practitioners should be cautious about relying on dichotomies to characterize debates about adaptation. Some familiar dichotomies of adaptation arose in the early 1990s, such as ‘spontaneous vs. anticipated’ and ‘autonomous vs. planned’, whereas others have emerged more recently or continue to have currency, such as ‘incremental vs. transformational’ and ‘maladaptation vs. adaptation’ (Magnan et al., 2020). Some stem from a donor or scientific perspective, failing to reflect the perspectives of the people most affected; for example, debates about whether adaptation should be ‘stand-alone’ or ‘mainstreamed’ derive from the call for international climate finance to be ‘new and additional’ rather than diverting or re-badging aid needed for other development goals (Scoville-Simonds et al., 2020). As Table 1 shows, the six adaptation discourses differ markedly not only in terms of how they address the three framing tasks, but also along sub-dimensions under each framing task, such as their scale of focus, to what extent blame is central to their storyline, and whether they lean towards a more pragmatic or more justice-oriented rationale for action. While dichotomies can be an appealing and convenient way to convey complex ideas, and to characterize tensions between discursive communities such as climate scientists and development practitioners, the reality is of course more nuanced. The heuristics, or rules of thumb, that practitioners commonly apply to guide adaptation decisions ‘if not reflected upon, can easily become our blind spots in decision-making’ (Nalau et al., 2021, p. 8). A risk of relying too heavily on such heuristics is that they could come to shape policy, determine action, and exclude other potential understandings and options. This highlights the need for an analytical framework that is multidimensional, balancing awareness of complexity with the need for applicability in the real world.

Third, perhaps unsurprisingly, it appears that adaptation actors often put forward a prognostic framing that matches the tool or service they are best placed to provide or use. In the case of *mobilize the money* this is climate finance; in the case of *order and control* it is government policy and regulation; for *prioritize the people* it is community-based development projects and policy advocacy. Literature on the science-policy interface warns adaptation practitioners against steering climate-affected communities towards the particular ‘solutions’ they have expertise in, thus limiting the potential for finding more expansive and transformational adaptation pathways (Lacey et al., 2015). Kaplan’s (1964, p. 28) ‘law of the instrument’² is no doubt at play: ‘It comes as no particular surprise to discover that a scientist formulates problems in a way which requires for their solution just those techniques in which he himself is especially skilled’. Lacey et al. (2015) argue that adaptation researchers and advisors, like doctors,

have an ethical obligation to support decision-makers to recognize the breadth of adaptation options available rather than peddling one particular approach. While a solution-oriented perspective sounds appealingly pragmatic, adaptation discourses that focus on the importance or efficacy of their proposed solution seem less inclined to problematize or critically analyze the nature of the problem. By contrast, those adaptation discourses that highlight the multifarious nature of the problem – or whose motivational call to action emphasizes the diagnosis more than the prognosis – may be more conducive to reflexivity, deliberation, and potentially transformational approaches.

Fourth, actors often invoked more than one discourse of adaptation, sometimes strategically, at other times unwittingly. This is consistent with the idea from discursive psychology that an individual's internal discursive landscape is plural and not without conflict. Just as climate observations are constantly being updated and risk levels changing (sometimes suddenly, as tipping points are reached), people's values, priorities and frames get reformulated and negotiated. Thus, adaptation planning processes need to be adaptive and deliberative in order to accommodate dynamic inputs of climate knowledge and values; there can be no quick 'technical fixes' (Nightingale et al., 2020). Is it possible or necessary to reconcile competing discourses of adaptation? On the contrary, Eriksen et al. (2021, p. 12 emphasis in original) invite us to embrace 'ontological pluralism', declaring that 'opening up the ownership of adaptation knowledge to *effectively* include marginalized groups [and] deliberation of conflicting interests and assumptions behind what is legitimized as "good adaptation" within currently dominant ideological frameworks' will be critical 'to achieving more inclusive and innovative adaptation'. If adaptation decision-makers are not aware of their implicit assumptions and have not considered other perspectives, dominant discourses are likely to prevail. Breaking down the concept of adaptation into the three components of the analytical framework presented in this article offers a way of structuring deliberations to reflect on unarticulated perspectives and highlight marginalized interests. While fair and effective adaptation requires negotiating both plurality and entrenched worldviews to reach collective decisions, the observation that people accommodate multiple discourses indicates a potential for discursive allegiances to shift and common ground to be found.

Conclusion and future research directions

This article has shown how the proposed three-part analytical framework – comprising the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framings that underpin different understandings of adaptation – can be applied empirically to identify and compare six distinct adaptation discourses in Vietnam. Four implications of this analysis were then discussed, namely: the need for adaptation researchers and practitioners (in particular international actors supporting adaptation in the Global South) to consider whether their understanding of adaptation resonates with those most affected by climate impacts; to avoid relying on dichotomies of adaptation; to be wary of a tendency

to select the adaptation 'solution' that most closely fits their knowledge and experience; and to embrace ontological pluralism and deliberative approaches to adaptation.

This framework may be applied to analyze any other contexts in which climate change adaptation is discussed or written about, from community group deliberations to policy documentation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Many countries in urgent need of adaptation are ranked low in terms of good governance. By applying the analytical framework in a one-party state, and revealing a diverse array of adaptation discourses articulated by state and non-state actors, this study has shown that political context need not be a barrier to this analytical approach. Besides individual country case studies, rich potential avenues for future research using this framework include comparing discursive landscapes of adaptation, for example, the extent to which adaptation discourses that might be thought of as 'international' or even universal (such as those articulated by climate finance institutions, the IPCC, or scholars from the Global North) resonate with individuals and institutions in the Global South, or the extent to which marginalized adaptation discourses are able to achieve influence in other geographical locations and among more powerful actors.

This analytical framework may also inform adaptation deliberation and decision-making. Policymakers and practitioners inevitably come to planning processes with unspoken assumptions about whose problems adaptation needs to tackle, what type of options can be considered, and what principles should inform decisions. Breaking down people's perspectives on adaptation into their diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framings may offer potential for finding common ground. The three framing questions that underpin this framework need to be made explicit because how they are answered will influence what challenges are made visible, what adaptation actions get taken, and how the costs and benefits are distributed.

A better understanding of what adaptation means to the people most affected by climate change is critical for more effective and legitimate adaptation policy and practice, and should be central to any conception of adaptation justice. The analytical framework presented in this paper provides a foundation around which to forge more deliberative approaches to adaptation. The goal of deliberative adaptation governance is not to achieve consensus on what adaptation means and exactly what adaptation measures to take, but to support more inclusive and democratic approaches to generating adaptation knowledge and decisions, and thereby more effective and just adaptation outcomes.

Notes

1. The label *Made in Vietnam*, denoting a domestically manufactured product and proudly reflecting the country's rapid economic ascent, might now be interpreted as alluding to Vietnam's risk of getting stuck in the 'middle-income trap' if unable to transition to a higher value, environmentally sustainable services economy.
2. Encapsulated in the adage 'if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail' which has been attributed to various authors including Maslow and Twain.

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