# The discursive politics of adaptation to climate change

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**Abstract**

Adaptation to climate change is a policy objective of rapidly growing importance for development programming across the Global South. This article offers an interrogation of the discursive politics surrounding the term based on insights from post-colonial theory. By employing a theoretical framework rooted in the concepts of imaginative geographies and discursive violence, this contribution seeks to deconstruct how adaptation is being imagined and promoted by development actors in a Global South context. The underlying study adopts a multi-sited, institutional ethnography to critically analyze an adaptation project in São Tomé and Príncipe (STP) implemented jointly by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the national government. The article presents evidence for how agents of development (re)produce an imaginative geography of the country's vulnerability and engage in a discursive violence that renders project beneficiaries vulnerable on the one hand, and seeks to transform them into model adaptation subjects, on the other. It discusses how local residents have been effectively excluded from the project based on their perceived vulnerabilities, and points to critical political theory and "imaginative counter-geographies" as ways in which the disempowering representations of the Global South as vulnerable and the discursive violence committed against its residents can be counteracted.

**Keywords**

**Acknowledgements**

**Introduction: A different look at adaptation**

Since the early 1990s, adaptation to climate change has gradually entrenched itself in the agendas of actors involved in climate governance, including governments, aid agencies, international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). There is a pressing, almost universally recognized need for the world to adapt to the various impacts of a changing climate, such as increasingly frequent and devastating droughts and floods. We must swiftly adapt, it is oft-argued, or we risk paying a very high price for inaction. As a result, we tend to view adaptation as an undisputed imperative for the Global North and the Global South alike. At the level of development praxis, in particular, adaptation is emerging as a guiding principle for programming, with governments, businesses, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) hard at work producing policies, plans, and projects to prepare human populations for the anticipated destabilization of the global climate system (IPCC 2018). Academics, too, seem to have jumped on the "adaptation bandwagon," having produced a flourishing literature on the subject (Brown 2016; Bulkeley and Tuts 2013; Chandler and Reid 2016; Pelling 2011; Taylor 2014; McCarthy et al. 2014; Adger et al. 2006). Over the past 25 years, this intellectual effort on what adaptation is or should be has conceived a myriad of definitions and typologies of the term, as well as of the related concepts of vulnerability and resilience (for example, see: Pelling 2011; Ribot 2014; Brown 2016).

Much of this activity is well-warranted. It should not be disputed that climate change is a real threat to human progress, particularly in the Global South, and adaptation presents itself as a much-needed response to this threat. Therefore, in this article, I do not wish to diminish the importance of climate impacts for local livelihoods in the Global South, nor to reject the

notion of adaptation outright, but rather provide a critical interrogation of the discursive

politics that accompanies the concept. By discursive politics, I refer to "the intentional or

unintentional engaging of policy actors in conceptual disputes that result in meanings

attributed to the terms and concepts employed in specific contexts" (Lombardo, Meier, and

Verloo 2009, 10). Feminist scholars, for instance, have applied this analytical lens to

investigate the use of the term "gender equality," noting that actors tend to fix, shrink, stretch

and bend it in ways to further other goals and policy interests (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo

2010). What I propose here is that a discursive politics approach can help uncover the

specific, often invisible representational mechanisms through which adaptation to climate

change is molded to fit the business-as-usual, neoliberal articulations of local development in

the Global South.

The need for an interrogation of this kind stems from the dominance of positivist approaches

in adaptation theory and praxis (Bassett and Fogelman 2013), which have remained

consistently uncritical of the term's discursive and, consequently, material implications. By

drawing insights from post-colonial theory, which I argue has much to offer for analyzing

externally-driven responses to climate change in a development context (also see: Chaturvedi

and Doyle 2015; Dawson 2013), this paper contributes to the slowly emerging field of critical

adaptation studies (Eriksen, Nightingale, and Eakin 2015; Nightingale 2017; Nightingale et

al. 2019; Symons 2014; Taylor 2014; Tschakert et al. 2016). Within this body of work, one of

the first discursive inquiries into "adaptation" as a concept is provided by Marcus Taylor

(2014) who observes the term has become humanity's "common-sense default assumption"

when dealing with climate change (Taylor 2014, 14). However, as he argues, adaptation is

not some benign, evolutionary process which humanity must undergo to adjust to climate

change but rather a powerful discourse that legitimizes specific forms of depoliticized

governance that leads to technocratic solutions and prevents any meaningful social transformation (Taylor 2014). In a similar vein, Chandler and Reid demonstrate how development (and adaptation as its integral part) has evolved from its original concern with transforming the external world to "the transformation of the adaptive capacities of the subject" (2016, 75). As such, they point to the powerful neoliberal subject-making potential of concepts such as adaptation and resilience. This paper draws on these critical insights and, supported by primary and secondary data, it illustrates how the dominant adaptation discourse facilitates and translates into specific material outcomes for local beneficiaries of international aid.

In the next section, I provide a short review of two key concepts that allow me to interrogate the discursive politics mobilized by the development sector in promoting local adaptation to climate change -- imaginative geographies and discursive violence. Next, following an overview of the study context, I discuss the adopted methodological approach -- a multi-sited, institutional ethnography. In the most substantial part of the article, I conduct a critical analysis of the discursive processes surrounding the implementation of the adaptation project carried out in São Tomé and Príncipe (STP) by the national government and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), with a focus on the local community of Liberdade[1] -- one of its selected beneficiaries. This part will also consider the implications of the discussed processes for local people in the Global South. In the conclusion, I reflect on these implications further and discuss potential ways to resist the disempowering nature of the discursive politics of adaptation.

**Imaginative geographies of vulnerability and the discursive violence of adaptation: A short review**

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*Imaginative geographies: Securitizing climate change in the vulnerable periphery*

The concept of Edward Said's imaginative geography is a helpful starting point for unpacking the discursive politics of adaptation. Said anchors his seminal critique of Orientalism in what he argues is an arbitrarily constructed ontological and epistemological difference expressed in geographical terms as the West and the Orient, which serves to assert the former's political, economic, intellectual, and cultural superiority over the latter (Said 2003). To illustrate how this radical difference comes to be and is perpetuated, he uses the concept of imaginative geography, a discursive device that draws "dramatic boundaries" between the Western world and everything that it is not (Said 2003, 73). As an example, he delivers a discursive analysis of early 20th century historical accounts on colonial Egypt delivered by two key members of the British colonial administration, Arthur James Balfour and Evelyn Baring. Both viewed the colony as a backward beneficiary of Britain's civilizing mission grounded in the view that Egyptians -- similarly to any other subject population and unlike Europeans -- "did not have it in them to know what was good for them" (Said 2003, 37). Said argues that imaginative geographies of this kind lead to various philosophical, rhetorical and psychological results, which constantly work to make the Orient "real" (since the Orient is not a fact of nature) and to meticulously anatomize it into manageable (or governable) parts, culminating into a unilateral exercise of power. In his later work that expands on these ideas, he charts how the reach of the imperial past extends through various Orientalist permutations to the present, citing the portrayals of Islam and the First Gulf War in Western media as key examples (Said 1997; 1994).

Around the same time, Said's ideas on colonialism and imperialism were being adapted to inform post-structural critiques of international development. In his seminal contribution to

this work, for instance, Escobar (1995) notes that the development discourse follows the same principles as colonialism by creating "an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about, and the exercise of power over, the Third World" (1995, 9). Development, in his view, deploys a series of imaginative geographies which generate a clear-cut division between the developed North and the underdeveloped South, in turn giving rise to the production of specific subjectivities and social orders. As he pointedly observes, development literature and admittedly practice tends to create:

> a subjectivity endowed with features of powerlessness, passivity, poverty and ignorance, usually dark and lacking in historical agency, as if waiting for the (white) Western hand to help subjects along and not infrequently hungry, illiterate, needy and oppressed by its own stubbornness, lack of initiative and traditions (1995, 8).

Such subjectivities justify and broaden the scope for external social control. International development -- with its top-down, technocratic approach to pursuing progress and lifting people in the Global South out of poverty -- is, he argues, a clear example of such power (Escobar 1995). Imaginative geographies of development necessarily evoke dramatized and reductionist tendencies (e.g. *all* people in the Global South require help, the West's intervention in their countries is *always* a positive) that seek to create a specific yet fundamentally arbitrary worlds of poverty and trouble. This leads Gregory et al. (2009, 371) to note that imaginative geographies, while purporting to represent the Other, do so only partially, and that as "spaces of constructed (in)visibility," they are used by powerful agents (in this case, Western governments and development organizations) to solidify their neocolonial grip on the periphery.

More recently, geographers and scholars in security studies have deployed the concept of imaginative geography when analyzing such climate-related issues as environmental governance and mitigation (Chaturvedi and Doyle 2015), migration and displacement (Farbotko 2010; Baldwin 2012; Narang 2015), conflict (Korf 2011), and activism (Dawson 2013). In one of the most recent applications, Chaturvedi and Doyle (2015, 62) use the imaginative geographies of climate change to illustrate the totalizing discursive process that produces a "global soul" of the undifferentiated mass of humanity collectively affected by its global enemy -- climate. Borrowing from international studies, it can thus be argued that climate change has undergone a process of securitization, understood as "the intersubjective establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects" (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 25). This securitization is not exclusively rational and objective, as suggested by evidence delivered by scientific bodies such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), but also cultural and political, leading to imaginative geographies that produce widespread representations of climate change as a global threat to humanity (O'Lear 2018; Kenis and Lievens 2014). Apocalyptic depictions of climate change pervade popular culture and political discourse and, unsurprisingly, frequently lead to vigorous calls to address the problem so that humanity can avoid the "dystopian end of times" (Williams and Booth 2013, 26; Symons 2014). In the context of adaptation, this usually takes the form of language that creates an urgency to "brace for impact" of climate change. This fear-based populist discourse thus creates a universal consensus around the urgent need for all countries and societies to prepare for impending climate change disasters (Macgregor 2014; Swyngedouw 2010), in turn providing a powerful legitimizing force for adaptation as a policy goal across the globe.

While Chaturvedi and Doyle (2015) use imaginative geographies primarily in the context of climate change *mitigation* to create a dramatized distinction between humanity as a whole and climate as its global enemy, the totalizing effect of imaginative geographies should be further qualified and scrutinized in the context of what appears to have become the development sector's crusade for *adapting* the Global South to the impacts of climate change. Certainly, climate change is a global process in the sense that no place on Earth will manage to avoid its far-reaching biophysical and social impacts. That said, the totalizing rhetoric representing climate change as an imminent, global threat to humanity as a whole stands at odds with the growing recognition that we are not all equally vulnerable to its impacts -- a cornerstone argument of academics and activists concentrated around the idea of climate justice (Jafry, Helwig, and Mikulewicz 2019; Shue 2014; Goodman 2009; Bond 2012; Fisher 2015; Gardiner 2011). And while climate change impacts do not follow regional or national borders, the way we think about them certainly does. At the ontological level, adaptation to climate change replicates what Escobar dubs the Orientalizing path of development through the production of the imaginative geographies of the periphery's vulnerability, considered to be significantly higher than the vulnerability of the rest of the globe. In other words, rather than portraying climate change as an existential threat to all humans everywhere, these imaginative geographies recast its impacts as particularly dangerous for the vulnerable Global South. Thus, just as development studies rely on the ontology of underdevelopment, a concept that legitimizes development intervention itself (Tripathy and Mohapatra 2011), mainstream approaches to adaptation rely on a parallel ontology of vulnerability, which warrants external assistance to those in climate peril. Reproblematized in this way, climate change ceases to be a planetary crisis and instead becomes a threat that a certain part of humanity should help another part of humanity address by virtue of the latter's financial (lack of funds), technological (lack of access to technology), and technical (lack of skills and

know-how) inferiority. If one considers adaptation to climate change an intrinsic part of international development, a field of work wrought with highly disproportionate power relationships as post-colonial and post-development scholars have argued (Kapoor 2008; Ahluwalia 2001), then its propensity for reproducing similarly uneven imaginative geographies is hardly surprising.

*Discursive violence and adaptation to climate change*

If the concept of imaginative geography helps deconstruct how *places* in the Global South are rendered vulnerable, the lens of discursive violence offers to recalibrate the analytical focus to the *people* residing in those very places. Discursive violence does not have a rigid definition, and the term has been used in diverse ways across social sciences from radical political philosophy, post-colonial, feminist, and queer studies, critical human geography, to legal studies. A review of the literature suggests that the way in which discursive violence is conceptualized and used by theorists can be divided into two strictly related iterations. First, the concept is understood in Gramscian and Foucauldian terms as a clash of often contradictory discourses competing for ontological and epistemological hegemony. Sampson (2006), for instance, uses the term interchangeably with "discursive struggle" when she considers the contested representations and ways of thinking about the Northern Irish identity created during the conflict in Ireland. Relatedly, Jiwani (2009) describes discursive violence in the context of race and gender inequality as speech acts that normalize certain ways of thinking over others (also see: Corradi Fiumara 1995). When discussing the near-hegemonic role of the United Nations (UN) in international conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction in the context of gender inequality, Shepherd and Sjoberg (2012, 97) identify discursive violence in the "'trickle down' theory of [UN] expertise," which forecloses the legitimacy of alternative knowledges, ultimately

subordinating the feminine subject and presenting her as irredeemably weak. However, this iteration of discursive violence is perhaps best illustrated by the concept of "epistemic violence" introduced by Gayatri Spivak in her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988, 76). Using the British codification of Hindu law as an example, Spivak deploys the concept to criticize Foucault's lack of recognition for imperialism's complicity in the historical, systemic denial and undermining of non-Western knowledges (Spivak 1988). In consequence, as she argues, epistemic violence naturalizes the West's superiority and dominance over the post-colony and constructs a heterogeneous Other -- a subaltern deprived of agency.

In fact, Othering and pathologization constitute the second iteration of discursive violence. While it is strictly related to the first one, authors who use discursive violence in this context focus their attention more explicitly on the subjects against whom it is committed. Again, Spivak's (1988, 104) discussion on the subject of (post-)colonial dominance -- a subaltern who "cannot speak" -- is one of the most prominent examples of the deconstruction of Othering. In a similar vein, Aldama (2003, 5) describes discursive violence in the context of feminist and queer studies as "fear-based discourses of otherization and pathologization of subjects whose positions are at the margins and borders of dominant cultural and political apparatuses." Literature is rife with examples of discursive violence perpetuated against marginalized groups, including transgender people (van der Hoek 2011), aboriginal people (Jiwani 2009), people of color (Mitchell 2014), women and asylum-seekers (Fernando 2016), poachers in biodiversity conservation areas (Neumann 2004), and the elderly (Kunow 2016). In the field of legal studies, discursive violence is approached more directly as hate speech against those considered different or unacceptable, leading to theorizations on its relationship with and implications for the freedom of speech (Leezenberg 2015).

Both these iterations of discursive violence provide important analytical insights for the critical discussion on the discursive politics of adaptation that follows. First, at the level of epistemological legitimization, if we accept that adaptation is, from the standpoint of knowledge and best practice, still a contested field, then it becomes clear that the Western-centric understandings of adaptation (and similarly, of resilience and vulnerability) are on a collision course with local conceptions of what it means to be prepared for climate impacts. If anything, the history of failed, top-down development certainly provides supporting evidence for this concern (Ferguson 1994; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Mosse 2011; Rodney 2012; Taylor 2016). In the specific context of climate change and adaptation, these ontological tensions tend to enter the sphere of humans' relationship with nature. For Jasanoff (2010, 235), for instance, "an impersonal, apolitical, and universal imaginary of climate change, projected and endorsed by science, takes over from the subjective, situated and normative imaginations of human actors engaging directly with nature." This imaginary, therefore, eliminates the more experiential or phenomenological understandings of climate change in the Global South, and instead foregrounds those rooted in Western rationality and scientific objectivism (Kythreotis 2012; Taylor 2014). Under these conditions, adaptation efforts are bound to commit discursive violence against those they seek to assist -- those deemed "vulnerable" -- at the level of production and legitimization of knowledge. This iteration of the discursive violence of adaptation helps illustrate the West's tight grip on climate science (produced predominantly in Europe and North America), an arguable vestige of imperial control.

As for the second approach, which focuses on Othering and pathologization, an appropriately geographical definition of discursive violence for the context of adaptation in the Global

South can be borrowed from Jones et al., who describe it as "processes and practices to script groups or persons *in* places, and in ways that counter how they would define themselves" (1997, 394, emphasis in original). States and people in the Global South are represented and approached by the development sector in a very particular mode that denies them their agency to meaningfully participate in adaptation planning, implementation and monitoring without external help. They are therefore Othered, pathologized or -- even more accurately in this case -- rendered vulnerable (Taylor 2014) by being scripted into the homogenous periphery as subaltern subjects requiring outside assistance if they are ever to achieve resilience.

The imaginative geographies of the Global South's vulnerability and the associated discursive violence inflicted upon its residents are thus two interrelated processes that allow us to deconstruct the discursive politics of adaptation, or how this urgent development goal in the Global South is represented, thought, and talked about. While imaginative geographies portray it as place that is extremely vulnerable to climate change impacts, discursive violence helps uncover how this geographically-expressed imaginary affects people and their knowledges. Skeptics will rightly ask about the extent to which representations of this kind are actually damaging. And it is true that discursive difference is only as powerful as its material consequences for those oppressed. However, what clearly unites the critical theorists mentioned above is their recognition that there exists a direct relationship between discursive violence and material violence, wherein the former often paves the way to the latter (Aldama 2003; Mitchell 2014; Said 2003). In other words, they suggest that discourse translates into material outcomes, and it may do so in a highly stratified manner. If that is indeed the case, then how exactly does the discursive politics of adaptation affect the people in the Global South expected to adapt to climate change, and what are its actual material implications? The

remaining part of this article will seek to address these questions by using the aforementioned adaptation project in STP as a case study.

**Study context**

*The country*

Located in the Gulf of Guinea, STP is the second smallest country in Africa (after Seychelles), both in terms of area and population. A small island developing state (SIDS), it comprises two major islands, São Tomé and Príncipe, and a number of islets, totaling 1,001 square kilometers (see Figure 1). The country has a population of around 210,000, with over 70,000 people residing in the capital city of São Tomé (World Bank 2019). STP's history has largely been tied to agriculture, and its society shaped by the structure and dynamics of a cash crop plantation economy. Portuguese explorers arrived in the islands in early 1470s, an event that would precipitate a period of over 500 years of subjugation to Portugal -- one of the longest experiences of colonial rule in history (Seibert 2006). The region lent itself well to the cultivation of sugarcane, as it benefitted from a tropical climate, rich volcanic soils, and availability of slave labor from nearby Congo and Benin (there was in all likelihood no autochthonous population on the islands before colonization). Owing to its colonial past, the country's official language is Portuguese, and there are also four main and mutually non-intelligible Creole languages in use.[2] Today, STP is one of the most impoverished countries in the world -- its nominal gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is $1,760 USD, and it is classified by the UN as a Least Developed Country (LDC) (World Bank 2017). Over 90 percent of its budgetary spending is financed by foreign aid (INDC 2015).

[Figure 1 near here]

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The archipelago is made up by volcanic islands and islets, with the southernmost one (*Ilhéu das Rolas*) located exactly on the equator. The region's climate is humid tropical with abundant rainfall throughout the entire year, with the exception of the months of June, July, and August, a period of lower precipitation called *gravana* (NAPA 2006; Ministry of National Resources and the Environment 2004). The mean annual temperature is 26 degrees Celsius, with significant regional variation between 27 degrees in the coastal areas and 21 degrees in the mountains, and a high level of humidity throughout the year (Ministry of National Resources and the Environment 2004). The high relief results in a number of microclimates on the island, with the south and south-west receiving the highest amount of rainfall (around 7,000 mm per year) and the north and the north-east displaying a more semi-arid, savanna-like climate characterized by relatively low precipitation (around 1,000 mm per year) (Ministry of Public Works, Infrastructures, Natural Resources and the Environment 2019).

In terms of local climate change impacts, the mean temperature in STP has increased by 0.6 degrees Celsius between 1960 and 2016, with the five warmest years having occurred between 1998 and 2018 (Ministry of Public Works, Infrastructures, Natural Resources and the Environment 2019). The trend has been towards the extremes, with the dry season becoming drier and rainfall increasing during the more humid months (Giardino, de Keizer, and Schellekens 2011; NAPA 2006; Ministry of Public Works and Natural Resources 2012). The mean annual temperature in STP is expected to rise further by between one and two degrees Celsius by 2045-2065 (Ministry of Public Works, Infrastructures, Natural Resources and the Environment 2019), with the *gravana* having already been reported to last up to six months (April to September). As a result of these projections, the Government of STP has identified increasing temperatures, decreasing rainfall, and rising sea-levels as the most

pressing climate risks for the country's development, all with their own (and often related or even compounding) biophysical and social effects on different sectors of the national economy, including agriculture, forestry, fishing, infrastructure, water, energy, and health (NAPA 2006; INDC 2015; Ministry of Public Works, Infrastructures, Natural Resources and the Environment 2019).

*The project*

In order to help address these climate risks locally, the government has partnered with UNDP on a USD $4-million adaptation project funded by the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF) (GEF 2017). The project followed the typical UNDP design pathway which involved a visit to STP by two staff members from the UNDP Regional Service Center for Africa (from here on referred to as "the Regional Office") with the goal of learning about the national vision for the project through discussions with representatives of national institutions and civil society. Once initial funds were secured from LDCF, UNDP commissioned a team of one international and two national consultants to draft the master project document based on consultations with stakeholders and potential beneficiaries in local communities. Owing to the very small size of the country, management and implementation of development aid in STP is heavily centralized and in this case was carried out directly by the UNDP Country Office and relevant government agencies (primarily by the Rural Development Support Center, a branch of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) located in the capital. While local governments (*câmaras distritais*) were not directly involved in project implementation (despite having been consulted during the design stage), UNDP and government staff in the capital were supported by the Ministry's limited network of officers and agricultural extension workers stationed in each district. What should also be underscored is the role of the Regional Office, which oversaw the project throughout design,

implementation and evaluation, providing the government and the UNDP Country Office with technical expertise. This is the main reason why, as admitted by one of the agency's staff members, adaptation projects in different parts of the world bear striking resemblance to each other, as managers rely on templates, previous project documents, and a narrow roster of international consultants approved by UNDP to help design these initiatives.

In terms of project vision, the initiative aims to increase the resilience of rural livelihoods to climate impacts in thirty local communities in six out of seven districts of STP, the capital district of Água Grande excluded (see: Figure 1). This is to be achieved through three distinct components that seek to: (1) increase the capacity of national institutions in the context of climate risk management, (2) introduce climate-proof infrastructure and resilience-enhancing livelihood practices, and (3) implement various adaptation strategies at the community level (UNDP 2014). Specific activities promoted by the project include, among others, building greenhouses to boost agricultural productivity, rehabilitating decrepit irrigation systems, and establishing agricultural processing centers to foster the production of value-added products (e.g. tomato paste). As such, it can be largely considered an agricultural development initiative.

*The local community*

The community of Liberdade is one of the thirty communities selected to participate in the adaptation project. In many ways, it is emblematic of the country's low level of development and high vulnerability to climate change impacts. Located in the northern district of Lobata, considered the driest and thus the most prone to droughts (UNDP 2014), Liberdade is home to around 160 families, the vast majority of which base their livelihoods on rain-fed subsistence agriculture (the average plot size is 1.5 hectares). The main local crop

has historically been maize, although residents have started to rely increasingly on sugarcane (which is more drought-resistant and can be used to produce a marketable alcoholic drink called *aguardente*). The cultivation of alternative crops, such as lima beans, tomatoes, chili peppers, cassava, sweet potatoes, and peanuts is also on the rise (CATAP 2016). Until the 1990s, Liberdade formed part of one of STP's largest plantations (*roças*), which boasted a system of regularly maintained irrigation channels. Today, the two decrepit channels that remain still carry water to a small number of fields in Liberdade's immediate surroundings. The effects of rising temperatures and decreasing rainfall are already being felt by smallholders. The drought of late 2015 led to widespread crop failure throughout the district, and undermined the production of maize, in particular. That year, according to local accounts, there was only one harvest in Lobata as opposed to the usual two.

## Methods: A multi-sited institutional ethnography

This study can be described as a multi-sited, institutional ethnography. Multi-sited ethnography is not an uncommon approach (see: Coleman and Hellermann 2013; Marcus 1995), and the appeal of this method for geographers largely stems from its emphasis on linkages of meanings, practices, connections, associations, and relationships across different sites and scales. Importantly, one strand of this new methodological trend has come from science and technology studies (STS), where researchers "seek to trace the ways in which scientific knowledge travels beyond the boundaries of the laboratory and is rearticulated and reproduced in new settings" (Hine 2001, 72). Since adaptation to climate change tends to be considered a highly technical (if not a scientific) term by policymakers and development professionals, the study's multi-sitedness allows one to deconstruct the mechanisms which transplant such understandings of the concept from the Western metropole to rural contexts in

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the Global South (Weisser et al. 2014). Thus, conducting fieldwork in multiple settings bound by the thread of the adaptation project enables a critical evaluation of how adaptation travels across space and time to be conceptualized, problematized, and acted upon in different contexts across scales.

Institutional ethnography is a method that studies communities of practice such as organizations (Gellner and Hirsch 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Watson 1999). It is particularly relevant for investigating how technical concepts (e.g. 'adaptation') manifest themselves locally. This is because organizations such as UNDP act as the bridge between global climate governance regimes (e.g. the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, or UNFCCC) and local contexts, as it is in their offices that abstract concepts are translated into material forms such as project outcomes, outputs and activities. The institutional ethnography approach involves extended periods of participant observation and day-to-day contact, allowing to capture this translation more comprehensively than through reliance on semi-structured interviews and document analysis alone. Fieldwork conducted at the Regional Office and the UNDP Country Office in STP have enabled a thorough analysis of what adaptation means to development professionals and how they understand the circumstances and needs of individuals who are to benefit from adaptation aid.

[Figure 2 near here]

Figure 2 demonstrates the research design. Fieldwork lasted over seven months and involved participant observation in three sites (the Regional Office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; the UNDP Country Office in São Tomé, STP; and Liberdade) as well as semi-structured interviews (36 with development practitioners and 20 with community members) and desk-

based document analysis. The seven-month immersion period, while relatively short, allowed for sufficient data saturation for the purposes of this study. Participant observation was carried out by undertaking an internship at each of the two UNDP offices and conducting multiple visits to Liberdade over the course of three months (between three and five times a week, spanning from two to six hours). Interviewed development practitioners were identified via online research and snowball sampling, and included employees of UNDP, government agencies, aid agencies, international organizations, and development NGOs with presence in Ethiopia or STP (see Table 1). They were approached by the author either in person (UNDP staff) or over the phone or email (development practitioners unaffiliated with UNDP). Interviewed residents of Liberdade were identified and approached in person by the gatekeeper who was requested to select as representative a sample of the community as possible with regards to age, gender and main occupation. Interview details, including participant affiliation, interview location, language, date and duration are presented in Table 1. Following transcription, interview data, field notes, and relevant documents were uploaded to NVivo Pro (2015) software for analysis. The study adopted an applied thematic analysis approach, which aims to increase the consistency and transparency of qualitative data, with the ultimate goal of increasing internal validity (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). Data analysis followed a mixed inductive-deductive approach, which involves loosely defining a conceptual framework before conducting fieldwork (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012).


[Table 1 near here]


It should be underscored that despite adopting an institutional ethnography approach, this study encountered a range of limitations related to access and language. First, entry barriers made accessing certain people and information impossible due to formal and informal

restrictions, particularly at UNDP offices. While I was involved in most project-related meetings at the STP Country Office, my appointment as intern was insufficient to allow participation in strategic meetings at the Regional Office in Addis Ababa. Second, linguistic differences were a major constraint, with data collection often relying on third-party translation. Three translators -- a male UNDP intern and two female UNDP permanent staff members -- assisted in interpreting interviews with development practitioners and community members from Portuguese, Cabo-Verdean Creole and French into English (with three exceptions, interviews with women were conducted with a female interpreter). Interpreters were present during the interviews, and transcription involved their translations only.[3] It should be noted that both translators were officially affiliated with UNDP, though their relatively low standing within the organization and the project itself did not visibly affect the power balance between the interviewees and the interviewers. The translation of documents from Portuguese and French and of one interview conducted in Italian was carried out independently by the author.

**STP: Vulnerability in the making**

*The imaginative geography of STP's vulnerability*

That STP is imagined as a highly vulnerable place comes as no surprise, and is typical of how other SIDS, particularly those belonging to the aforementioned LDC group,[4] are often portrayed in various development and popular contexts. The UNFCCC, for instance, recognizes SIDS as a "special case" warranting particular attention of the international community (2005, 2). This is justified by the fact that despite being the least responsible for causing climate change,[5] they are bound to be impacted by it the most while having limited institutional, financial and technical capacity to successfully adapt. With regard to STP, an analysis of practitioners' views, project documents (e.g. marketing materials), and local

project activities reveals a specific development culture that drives the production and reproduction of the imaginative geographies of the country's vulnerability.

[Table 2 near here]

First, an analysis of thirty-four[6] interviews conducted with development professionals in Ethiopia and STP provides key insights into this culture and its role in securitizing climate change at the national and local levels. Out of all the participants, only one -- an employee of a STP-based NGO -- expressed skepticism towards prioritizing climate change as a major development challenge for the country (see Table 2). Fourteen professionals, while avoiding any radical language, considered climate change as a serious issue and enumerated specific, negative climate impacts for STP and the Global South, particularly rising sea levels, declining fisheries, destruction of infrastructure, climate-related diseases, ecosystem failure, and reduced agricultural productivity due to droughts. A further ten participants used a more urgency-laden narrative compared to the first group. Table 3 includes examples of expressions used by these practitioners. The last group of nine development professionals were arguably the most concerned about climate change and its impacts among all the interviewed individuals, creating -- in the words of one of them -- "doom-laden" narratives. Themes of life and death, catastrophic representations of the post-climate change future, and calls for adapting to climate change as an indispensable condition for survival, with a rapidly approaching deadline to do so, intertwine within this group of responses. Thus, combined with the second group described above, practitioners who explicitly describe adaptation to climate change as a matter of urgency constitute over half (nineteen out of thirty-four) of the interviewees, illustrating the degree of securitization of climate change in their respective professional circles in Ethiopia and STP.

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[Table 3 near here]

This vulnerability discourse perpetuated by development professionals with regards to STP and the Global South in general stands in sharp contrast to other small island states such as Tuvalu. For instance, through a critical analysis of the climate change discourse in the country, Farbotko and Lazrus (2012) demonstrate how local civil society actors resist the vulnerabilizing depictions of Tuvalu as an experimental space of climate change impacts and of Tuvaluans as the world's first climate refugees. However, they also note that the government does mobilize a vulnerability discourse as a call for international action, as was the case during the 15th UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP15) in Copenhagen. This is in line with what seems to be the official government discourse of climate change in STP, and project-related documentation and other official sources are illustrative of how this discursive vulnerabilization of the country unfolds. In 2004, STP's President addressed the UN General Assembly with the following words:

> As an island nation, São Tomé and Príncipe continues to see our very existence threatened by global warming. Our shorelines erode, our national territory shrinks as the seas rise. Is my small country to end up nothing but a tiny volcanic peak sticking up above the waves with the last of our people clinging to the land left unclaimed by the rising sea?

> [Fradique de Menezes, President of São Tomé and Príncipe
> 24 September 2004, UN General Assembly 59th session]

Similarly, notable are the following paragraphs from STP's First National Communication --

a document which the government submitted to the UNFCCC Secretariat as part of its

obligations under the Convention (Ministry of National Resources and the Environment

2004, 4, translated from French by the author):

> São Tomé and Príncipe, an isolated archipelago in the Gulf of Guinea
>
> surrounded by a perpetually-changing world, will certainly not escape
>
> the economic, social, cultural, and environmental upheaval that global
>
> climate change will entail. […] A small island country with a coastal
>
> population, São Tomé and Príncipe is put in direct danger of global
>
> warming due to which the country risks losing more than half of its
>
> socio-economic infrastructure.

The references to an unstable climate and an uncertain future in both instances are evident.

While the motivations for representing the country, and indeed the whole African continent

as "the biggest victim of the adverse effects of climate change" cannot be determined with

certainty in this case, such depictions have an important side-effect of perpetuating STP's

international image as decidedly incapable of delivering effective responses to climate

impacts (Ministry of National Resources and the Environment 2004, 4, translated from

French by the author). Importantly, these sources not only constitute formalized

interpretations of climate change by the state and its partners, but form the basis on which the

country has so far built its response to its impacts, the adaptation project being a prime

example of this response.

The imaginative geographies of STP's vulnerability are constantly produced and reproduced

throughout the life of the project through various sites and events. For example, Figure 3 is a

poster prepared by UNDP for the 1st Climate Change Fair of STP organized as part of the

project's public outreach component in December 2016. Given the low awareness of climate change in STP at the time, the event was conceived to inform the public about the importance of adaptation to climate change and thus to legitimize the adaptation project locally. Here, the need to adapt is produced through the discourse of urgency mirrored by practitioners' responses. In addition to responsibilizing Santomeans through a call for individual action, the poster goes further in creating in its audience a fear of potentially being left behind if they do not act. By doing so, it seeks to portray STP as a highly vulnerable place and to create a specific kind of subjectivity centered around the concern about climate change on the one hand, and identify it as a grave issue requiring immediate action by citizens (and not just the state), on the other (Agrawal 2005; Peet, Robbins, and Watts 2011).

[Figure 3 near here]

Another example of this ongoing process of vulnerabilization is a consultation meeting in Liberdade which was organized by UNDP and its partners to gauge the community's interest in product processing. The meeting was conducted in a sizeable shed that accommodated around 80 village residents. A project staff member started off the meeting precisely by talking about climate change and what it would mean to local livelihoods. She spoke about the need to change and to adapt to future droughts, as otherwise the community would inevitably suffer failed harvests. Because climate change is an almost completely extraneous term to Liberdade residents, it needed to be represented as a serious threat to their livelihoods in order to legitimize the project's presence and ultimately create a consensus on the choice of solutions, in this case -- product processing.

It should be noted here that in order to demonstrate the country's vulnerability, development professionals and written accounts tend to emphasize the biophysical impacts of climate change. Critical adaptation scholars have long argued that overreliance on exposure in discussions on adaptation pathways downplays the role of socio-economic vulnerability, the levels of which are highly differentiated within the affected populations (Ribot 2010; Taylor 2013; Popke, Curtis, and Gamble 2014). By empowering climate at the cost of social complexity and inequality, this reductionist explanatory maneuver confuses exposure with vulnerability and reinforces the imaginative geography of the helpless and agency-stripped periphery in face of a "purely natural" climate change manifesting itself through menacing biophysical forces.

**Discursive violence in action: The vulnerabilized subaltern and the model adaptation subject in STP**

The previous section illustrated how the imaginative geographies of STP's vulnerability are reproduced in multiple sites by the epistemic community of professionals on the islands and beyond. The related process of discursive violence is predicated upon an "ambivalent" subject formation process, to borrow from Bhabha (1994, 86), unfolding along two parallel tracks. The first, and perhaps the more obvious of the two, projects onto beneficiaries a subaltern subjectivity rooted in vulnerability, incompetence, and dependency (Spivak 1988) -- ills that the catastrophic effects of climate change are only expected to exacerbate. The second track, which one could argue entails a more "creative" version of discursive violence, seeks to transform local people into someone who could actually achieve resilience to these impacts: model adaptation subjects.

*Unfit for adaptation: Creating the vulnerabilized subaltern*

Thematic analysis revealed several key themes around which the discursive process of pathologization, and more specifically vulnerabilization, of rural Santomeans takes place in the delivery and implementation of adaptation in the country. The most prevalent and powerful representation of local people has to do with the related traits of dependency and entitlement. In a number of internal project meetings, rural residents were referred to as feeling entitled to assistance from the outside. Moreover, at least seven interviewees based in STP (three UNDP staff members and four non-UNDP practitioners) invoked the culture of easy money or sluggishness, which in the words of a high-level UNDP official in STP imbues locals with a "dependency conscience." Certain members of the project team spoke plainly about how people's work ethic had turned into a sense of entitlement over time, facilitated by the proliferation of development projects on the island. According to this narrative, this has caused locals to become "specialized" in benefiting from development interventions. This explains why in one of the workshops during the design stage, employees of national institutions were reportedly advised to use the word "program" rather than "project" as a strategy to prevent local communities from seeing it as yet another opportunity for direct rent-seeking (UNDP 2015, 8).

Related to this broad theme of entitlement and dependency are the relatively widespread representations of local people as lazy or indolent. During one of the field visits to a rural community in the Lobata district, project team members repeatedly commented on the fact that men and women "hang out" in the village instead of doing work. Local charcoal producers (usually young men who are either landless or have no access to irrigation) are also accused of laziness because they do not engage in the more laborious process of farming -- a view that is shared by a number of senior community members, as well. Relatedly, rural

residents are rather indiscriminately represented as being addicted to alcohol. Being one of Liberdade's main products, *aguardente* is easily accessible and men in particular tend to indulge in its consumption. This issue is especially problematic for project staff:

> [B]ecause you have been to Liberdade, I think you have observed it. You arrive in the morning. Young men and women are drinking alcohol. Eight o'clock in the morning. Oh my god. What is it? "Don't you go to the farm and...?" "No, no, no. […] We are in the village."
>
> [senior project staff member #1, STP]

Three project staff members identified excessive alcohol consumption as the reason why consultation meetings could not be held in the afternoon, fearing residents would become intoxicated by that time. However, this timing was directly against the preference of many of the interviewed community members who work their fields in the morning and do not return home before mid-afternoon.

Another major narrative that renders rural people in STP vulnerable is their alleged ignorance and lack of capacity. Local people are seen as entrenched in their own ways of doing things and having little willingness to change. This view is espoused particularly by senior staff members who are removed both socially and geographically from the affected communities. According to a high-ranking UNDP official based at the Regional Office:

> I think often it's not that communities don't necessarily […] know what to do -- it's that they're either ingrained in what they know and are not sure why that's still not working, or yeah, they just aren't exposed to other types of approaches.

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In other words, these practitioners do not believe that there is sufficient (if any) knowledge at the local level about what is happening to the climate, why livelihoods are becoming untenable, and how these issues could be addressed. Here, one of the top UNDP officials in Addis Ababa spoke of local communities living in their "own realities" which may be far removed from what "we" (people in the development sector) are familiar with. Relatedly, the project's master document clearly points out the lack of local awareness on efficient production techniques, hindering smallholders' ability to adapt to climate impacts in the long term (UNDP 2014). The above representations manufacture a figure of an ignorant subaltern, an "intractable African" in Lester's (2002, 36) words, unable to deal with the local changes in weather patterns.

Two important caveats should be made at this point to avoid falling into a trap of gross generalization, which would suggest that spatially and culturally removed technocrats and urban elites invariably perceive the homogenous mass of STP's rural residents as idly awaiting financial and technical assistance. The picture is decidedly more complex. First, a generalization of this sort would unjustly ignore all those professionals working for UNDP and the government who, despite their techno-managerial bent, remain advocates for the local people and do not engage in, and occasionally even oppose, this kind of discursive violence. However, they find themselves in the minority and can do little to change the dominant professional culture. A second important caveat needs to be made as well, lest the power of the dominant adaptation discourse be underappreciated. The discursively violent pathologization of local people is not limited to development professionals or state employees. Nor is it geographically circumscribed to the city. In fact, it can be also found

among those who are expected to adapt their livelihoods to climate change, demonstrating the powerful subjectivity-formation forces at play. This was evident in the case of Liberdade where certain members of the community, including the leader and other more politically-active individuals, spoke disparagingly of their fellow residents as unwilling to cooperate for the 'common good.' Particularly telling in this context are the words of the village leader (*presidente*) speaking about the reasons why Liberdade still lacks many basic services, including potable water:

> They [the government] didn't bring it because the community didn't cooperate. There was no cooperation. Because if the community understood that it's for the good of the community, for us, today nobody would be saying there's no potable water. No? That we don't have potable water is not the government's fault. It's not the *Cámara*'s fault. It's our fault. It's the mentality. That's why I said to you, […], if we gain this mentality where […] it's normal that we have to collaborate, unite, and then, we benefit the community… Now, if we don't unite, who will lose out -- we will, no?
>
> [leader of Liberdade, STP, translated from Portuguese by the author]

Throughout the interview, the village leader referred to other residents of Liberdade as having a "sick mentality" which makes them unwilling to cooperate with one another, as well as of outright "not wanting development". As a member of a largely Westernized community elite, he sought to dissociate himself from his poorer neighbors by representing them as incapable of jointly solving pressing community issues. These views are illustrative of how the poorer and more marginalized members of the community are depicted as ignorant, uncooperative, lazy, and impatient, making them, in the eyes of their own neighbors, unfit for development and adaptation. They also highlight how pathologizing

imaginaries originating among urban and technocratic elites can spill over, permeate local community relations, and potentially undermine community cohesion, as was the case of Liberdade. Finally, they testify to the success of the formation of a responsibilized subjectivity, whereby local people seek answers to their development challenges and high vulnerability in their own personal traits and actions (rather than historical political economic processes and structural inequalities). What follows is a blueprint for an individual who has internalized this exact kind of subjectivity *par excellence*.

*Fit for adaptation: Creating model adaptation subjects*

The parallel track of the subject formation process that makes up the discursive violence of adaptation is strictly related to the first one, and its analysis builds on insights from governmentality literature (see: Agrawal 2005). Just as rural residents are discursively constructed as unfit for benefitting from the adaptation project due to their sense of entitlement, dependency, laziness, alcoholism, and overall lack of capacity, the project staff engage in a creatively violent process that seeks to materialize a particular vision of a model adaptation subject, or what Chandler and Reid (2016, 53) dub a "resilient subject."

In short, such an individual is well-trained and -educated, eager to earn, cooperative, and entrepreneurial, but at the same time obedient and actively interested and engaged in the project. First, an ideal beneficiary is educated both in terms of climate change impacts and the solutions that are needed to prevent climate-related damage from occurring. For instance, one of the project reports speaks plainly of the need for local communities to "reflect" on the concept of resilience so that they are "prepared to protect themselves from climate change and, furthermore, undertake resilient livelihood activities in [their] fields" (CADR 2015, 3, translated from Portuguese by the author). Thus, there is an expectation that beneficiaries will

conceptualize their livelihood challenges in terms of climate change and low resilience. There is indeed an overarching imperative within the project to train community members on a range of issues beyond climate change, including agricultural techniques (e.g. crop rotation), environmental degradation, investment and marketing strategies, conflict resolution, and community governance (UNDP 2014), with the ultimate goal of creating climate-aware subjects with high adaptive capacity.

Lack of cooperation at the community level is cited by practitioners and written sources as one of the biggest challenges for the project's success. In contrast, it is envisaged that communities should organically come together when interacting with outside interventions and work out a collective interest to increase their bargaining position. In line with this prescription, the residents of Liberdade receive constant feedback from outside actors on the necessity to cooperate. Specifically, project staff members expect villagers to form different kinds of associations, including residents' associations, farmers' cooperatives and women's groups. Otherwise, the latter are warned, projects will not work properly and project managers may avoid selecting their community, altogether. This, however, ignores important historical and structural factors related to the country's oppressive experience as a plantation colony which have caused local Santomeans to shy away from collective activities and largely keep to themselves (see: Seibert 2006).

In addition to being well-educated and cooperative, a model adaptation subject has an entrepreneurial nature that will push them towards "that kind of visioning that you need," in the words of a senior UNDP official in STP. This means being able to identify the problem and actively engage in the search for creative solutions leading to increased yields and consequently, profits. For example, the reliance on market strategies is well-reflected in the

project's approach to increasing local resilience, which is supposed to counter the aforementioned dependency conscience. Model adaptation subjects do not wait for help from the state -- they take matters into their own hands by entering markets, saving money, and investing in their productive assets. This is precisely the reason why the project relies heavily on model farmers (*agricultores de referência*) -- usually wealthy and powerful growers who have the disposable income, time, land, and the level of education required to engage successfully in the implemented activities. Unsurprisingly, Liberdade's model farmers include the village leader and his former deputy, both boasting the highest yields in the community.

Despite the empowering semblance of the model adaptation subject, it must be underscored that one of their essential traits is obedience. Bhabha's concept of "mimicry" is helpful here in illustrating this ambivalence of the adaptation discourse. Bhabha (1994, 86) describes mimicry as a "double articulation" of colonial power -- one that seeks to reform, regulate and discipline while at the same time purposefully leaving space for difference and recalcitrance to justify the need for social control. As such, colonial discourses, and in this case the hegemonic adaptation discourse, create what he calls "authorized versions of otherness" that can be dominated and disciplined (Bhabha 1984, 129). The end result of mimicry is the discursive production of a "mimic man" (sic) -- a subject of difference made in the master's image who is "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 1994, 86). Adaptation seeks to produce mimic subjects almost as resilient as Western societies but "not quite" -- never relinquishing full control, mediated through scientific knowledge, technical expertise and the rules of the market.

In the context of the adaptation project, this injunction to remain obedient is cast as the only way for beneficiaries to be able to withstand the negative impacts of climate change on their lives and livelihoods:

> [P]eople need to change their practices and their behaviors. Their attitudes, to adapt. If a farmer is used to growing maize, and that's not the best crop to grow anymore, well, he [sic] needs to adapt to that. He needs to change his mindset. He also needs to change his food habits. So, it goes all the way down to what you eat.
>
> [senior Regional Office employee #2, Ethiopia]

Thus, local communities are expected to change in line with the advice of technocrats who, unlike them, realize the gravity of local climate predicaments. It is through this dynamic that the fundamentally unequal relationship of power between the wielders of climate knowledge (adaptation managers) and those who must comply to survive (adaptation beneficiaries) is perhaps the most conspicuous. As another example, at one of the project consultation meetings in Liberdade, residents were encouraged to think of themselves as businesspeople rather than farmers. Importantly, the overarching expectation on the part of the project team is that the design and the resulting strategies of the intervention will go unchallenged by local communities. What happens in an event of non-compliance was evident during one of the field trips to a village where a previous project had failed to deliver sustainable results. Upon realizing that the newly-constructed irrigation system had fallen into disrepair, project staff berated local residents for their incompetence and lack of community spirit. After one of them objected by suggesting the project had been poorly designed to begin with, staff members were dumbstruck, not being used to this kind of resistance and staging of equality.

[Table 4 near here]

Mirroring the themes from the previous section, the imaginary of a model adaptation subject is geared towards creating their capacity to participate in the project. A representation of a lazy, entitled, uncooperative, undereducated, and intractable subaltern is juxtaposed against an archetype of someone entrepreneurial, creative, cooperative, eager to learn, and obedient (see Table 4). Adaptation to climate change, in this sense, is often seen as potentially more transformative than "traditional" development initiatives. In the words of one of the most senior UNDP representatives in STP:

> [Adaptation] touches [on] the habits, which are difficult to change because they are from generations past, etc. And it touches [on] […] a lot of other issues that development solutions per se sometimes don't touch, because development brings change of one situation to a better one, while adaptation is not only change. [It] touches more on [the] *sub-conscience of populations, or societies, or groups, or tribes.*

> [senior Country Office employee, STP, emphasis added]

Thus, justified by the threat of catastrophic climate disasters, adaptation to climate change is enabled to cut into the social fabric deeper than development. As implied by the interviewee above, adaptation initiatives embark on a mission to touch on the sub-conscience of societies, imbuing their beneficiaries with a subjectivity that not only makes them perceive the Self as underdeveloped, in line with Escobar's earlier quote, but also as fundamentally unqualified and unprepared to face the imminent dangers of climate change. Herein lies the irreducible difference between the discursive implications of development and those of adaptation. The discursive violence of adaptation draws its power from the securitization of climate change as

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a fast-approaching, existential threat for the Global South, which is periodically reinforced by influential publications on the state of climate change, such as the recent *Global Warming of 1.5° C* report by the IPCC (2018). On the other hand, development arguably does not have a discrete deadline which, if missed, could lead to disastrous humanitarian, economic and environmental consequences (neither the Sustainable Development Goals nor the Millennium Development Goals fit that description). Similar to the broader discourse of development, adaptation prescribes what people should do and who they should become, but -- armed with this apocalypse-laden rhetoric -- can do so in a much more forceful and blatant manner.

In practice, the expectation of the project staff is that smallholders ultimately realize the threat posed to them by imminent climate change (despite its impacts already being felt in Liberdade and elsewhere in the country). Crucially, this new subjectivity is to be guided explicitly by what Felli calls a "neoliberal ethos" (2013, 352). Smallholders are to increase their resilience by engaging in collective action aimed to facilitate investment in and marketing of their agricultural products. The resulting surge in productivity is to lead to higher profits, providing a locally and autonomously created social safety net against the imminent negative climate impacts. Importantly, this process is to be accompanied by cultural change, ranging from occupational choices to food habits. This specific adaptation pathway is not to be questioned by the beneficiaries, whose alternative perspectives remaining outside the scope of the project are silenced or ignored.

Of course, a model adaptation subject of the kind described above does not exist. It is an ideal that, if real, would make the adaptation project a relatively easy undertaking or in fact obviate the need for it, altogether. Paradoxically, the project must first create model adaptation subjects before they can effectively benefit from adaptation assistance. Thus, despite the less

than fertile ground for training local entrepreneurs, the process of neoliberal, adaptive subjectivity formation in the Santomean countryside is slowly progressing. Old understandings of rural life are being gradually superseded by more modern, and specifically neoliberal, canons of efficiency and productivity, as suggested by the views of Liberdade's elite. On the other hand, rural Santomeans are considered unfit to act as meaningful partners for the project. Despite the well-trodden rhetoric of economic and human empowerment, the pathologizing representations of local people deny them their knowledge, skills, and agency, and, paradoxically, have the ultimate result of restricting their ability to participate in a project that is intended to increase the resilience of their own livelihoods. Somewhat ironically, climate change -- an issue caused almost exclusively by the metropole -- is used as a justification for its disproportionate power relationship with the periphery.

**Conclusion**

This article sought to critically interrogate the discursive politics of adaptation. It should be once again reiterated that its goal was not to argue against the need for adaptation to climate change in the Global South which is and should be considered more vulnerable to climate impacts compared to the Global North. Therefore, adaptation as a concept should not be discounted in its entirety. This would be highly irresponsible given the high degree of political and financial commitment to it at global, national, and increasingly local levels. Even more importantly, it would also be unethical to hinder access to these resources -- rhetorically or otherwise -- which are undeniably needed in places like Liberdade. That said, development research and practice must both evolve beyond the dogmatic, positivist understandings of adaptation as something unquestionably beneficial for those affected by current or future climate change impacts, and recognize that in some iterations it can actually

be damaging to those considered vulnerable. This article illustrated the potential implications of uncritical approaches that lack this recognition.

Based on the evidence presented here, it is clear that the discursive politics of adaptation should not be left uninterrogated, as discursive practices are bound to turn into material consequences. This mirrors similar observations made by numerous scholars in critical development studies and post-colonial theory (Ahluwalia 2001; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Escobar 1995; Kapoor 2011). The imaginative geography of the Global South's vulnerability and the associated discursive violence inflicted on its people run the risk of entrenching them in a position of political, financial, technical, and technological subordination relative to the Global North. Adaptation guided by this discursive politics becomes a *leitmotif* for reductionist, ethnocentric interventions that seek to assist local people seen as urgently requiring resilience in the distant, vulnerable periphery. The end result is an adaptation regime that scripts the Global South's countries and people into a permanent, inalterable space of vulnerability and precariousness. What further fuels this powerful discourse is its temporality -- there seems to be a critical deadline in the global collective mind, beyond which the loss of lives and livelihoods becomes inevitable if adaptation as prescribed by Western agents of development is not followed. The fallacy of this discourse, of course, is that these tragedies are already unfolding in many parts of the world.

Investigating how adaptation is imagined and effectuated locally helps uncover these often invisible processes of discursive subordination and oppression. As Evans and Reid (2013) note while discussing adaptation as a form of Foucauldian biopolitics, by securitizing climate change and trying to protect the vulnerable subjects from it, the existing adaptation regime ends up subjugating them and diminishing their autonomy in the process. Rather than

addressing important structural and political issues, this kind of adaptation merely shifts around the problems that lead to local vulnerabilities (Swyngedouw 2011), dislocating them away from an erratic climate and dropping them, in this case, in the arms of the free market. Rather than inclusive and transformative, adaptation rooted in the imaginative geographies of vulnerability tends to be exclusionary, disempowering, and in the end -- ineffective. Decades of failed development programming rooted in neoliberal thinking (which STP also experienced as part of its Structural Adjustment Program) leave little hope for the long-term success of an adaptation that follows the same path.

In the case of the adaptation project in STP, local people were *ex ante* disqualified from adaptation governance based on their perceived lack of agency or capacity to act as serious partners. As such, the project fell short of benefitting local people. It did not allow them to redefine their own livelihoods, nor did it effectively engage them in the local governance of adaptation. Instead, it became an explicitly top-down, techno-managerial, and market-based intervention with scarce local legitimacy and ownership. Paradoxically, then, it constituted yet another case of climate injustice. The (re)produced imaginative geographies of STP's vulnerability have facilitated a problematic and damaging process whereby a clearly well-intentioned intervention commits discursive violence against its own beneficiaries, with staff members deploying disquieting language that resembles Balfour and Baring's early 20th-century portrayals of colonized Egyptians. While the two constitutive processes of this discursive violence -- one that pathologizes and the other that seeks to transform the subaltern into a model adaptation subject -- may seem antithetical, both result in stripping local people of agency and political subjectivity, and offer no clear path to emancipation and human development.

However, there is still limited empirical evidence on the political nature of adaptation to climate change, let alone the discursive politics surrounding it. This is despite the urgent need to factually contest the imaginative geographies of the Global South's vulnerability to climate change impacts, as its residents seldom wait to fall back on external assistance when confronted with adversity (Esham and Garforth 2013; Tschakert and Machado 2012). While not the focus here, the conclusions of this paper point to a key question: How can scholars, practitioners, activists and the public resist the disempowering and vulnerabilizing configuration of adaptation's discursive politics? One option is to flip critical theory on its head and argue that discursive violence could be used to level the playing field for those currently excluded from adaptation governance. This would follow the argument of radical political theorists that there can be no democracy (understood in terms of freedom rather than as a political system) without aggressively (or agonistically) competing discourses (Mouffe 2005; Shantz 2012). For these scholars, discursive violence understood as ongoing competition between political alternatives is not an obstacle to freedom but its prerequisite. In practical terms, this means ensuring that everyone is capable of contesting the disempowering discourses waged against them -- how to achieve this should certainly be co-produced with if not led by adaptation beneficiaries. Similarly, the oppressive imaginative geographies of the Global South's vulnerability should be met with what Gregory et al. (2009, 371) call "imaginative counter-geographies," or deliberate attempts to subvert the dramatic boundaries between "our space" and "their space." To achieve this, Dawson (2013) calls for forging new alliances across the North-South divide, rooted not in geography but the common political issues that unite people in the (neo)metropole and the (neo)periphery.

Academic work on this topic is slowly emerging from various quarters of critical geography, anthropology, and security studies (Chaturvedi and Doyle 2015; Eriksen, Nightingale, and

Eakin 2015; Chandler and Reid 2016; Nightingale 2017), and studies that employ

ethnographic methods are rarer still. This critical work, however, is extremely important, as it

allows us to reflect on adaptation as an explicitly political and stratifying process unfolding in

local contexts, since it is those that arguably matter the most (Fisher 2015). Critical analyses

of the kind proposed here demonstrate that the monumental policy undertaking called

"adaptation" can blindly replicate development's well-documented pitfalls and that its local

manifestations, if unexamined, are likely to increase global, regional and local inequalities --

at both discursive and material levels.

**Notes:**

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[1] The village name has been altered to preserve the anonymity of its residents.

[2] These are Santomé, Angolar, Cabo-Verdean on São Tomé island, and Lung'le on Príncipe (Becker 2015).

[3] This was due to the limited financial resources available to the project.

[4] Besides STP, these include: Cabo Verde, Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Kiribati, Maldives, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

[5] STP is a net absorber of greenhouse gases (Ministry of Public Works, Infrastructures, Natural Resources and the Environment 2019).

[6] The total number of interviews with development professionals was thirty-six, but the topic of climate change *impacts* was not discussed with two participants.

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**Figure and Table captions**

Table 1. List of all 56 interviews, which took place between November 2015 and May 2016. All interviews were conducted in person (except #5 and #15) and audio-recorded (except #32). Acronyms: MoARD -- Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, IO -- international organization.

Table 2. Practitioners' perceptions of the importance of climate change as a threat to development.

Table 3. Examples of urgency-laden language employed by representatives of the development sector when discussing climate change.

Table 4. Selected traits of the vulnerable subaltern and the model adaptation subject juxtaposed against each other, as produced by the dominant adaptation discourse in STP.

Figure 1. STP, with the northern district of Lobata -- where Liberdade is located -- highlighted. Credit: Cartographic Unit, School of Environment, Education and Development, The University of Manchester.

Figure 2. Principal methods implemented during both stages of fieldwork in Ethiopia and STP. Acronyms: RSCA -- Regional Service Center for Africa.

Figure 3. A poster advertising the First Climate Change Fair of STP. The text reads (from top to bottom): "Act for Change. The climate is changing, and I'm adapting. Are you? First Climate Change Fair of STP. Come and learn what climate change is and how UNDP and national institutions are responding to this phenomenon." Source: UNDP, STP Country Office (translated from Portuguese by the author).