

Understanding the Politics and Governance of Climate Change Loss and Damage

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Abstract

This introduction to the 2023 special issue of *Global Environment Politics* brings questions related to politics and political processes to the forefront in the study of climate change loss and damage. The aim of avoiding the detrimental impacts of climate change has been at the heart of the international response to global climate change for more than 30 years. Yet the development of global governance responses to climate change loss and damage – those impacts that we cannot, do not or choose not to prevent or adapt to – has only become a central theme within the discussions under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) over the last decade. Loss and damage has also become a research topic of growing importance within an array of disciplines, from international law to the interdisciplinary environmental social sciences. However, the engagement of scholars working in the fields of political science and international relations has been more limited so far. This is surprising because questions about how to best respond to loss and damage are fundamentally political, as they derive from deliberative processes, invoke value-judgements, imply contestation, demand the development of policies and result in distributional outcomes. This introduction describes the context and contributions of the research articles in this special issue. By drawing on a wide range of perspectives from across the social sciences, the articles render visible the multifaceted politics of climate change loss and damage and help to account for the trajectory of governance processes.

Introduction

For decades, the scientific community has warned of the potentially catastrophic consequences of climate change, including rising sea levels, increasingly frequent and intense storms, and the degradation of land, water and ecosystems. Yet, it is only very recently that governance arrangements to explicitly respond to those climate impacts that we may not be able (or choose not) to adapt to have begun to be developed. While policy efforts to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change impacts have been at the heart of climate governance efforts for decades, climate change loss and damage has only recently emerged as “a third pillar” of climate governance. Recent developments within the UNFCCC underscore the timeliness of this special issue. This collection of articles is published during a critical juncture in the development of governance arrangements within the climate change regime and broader governance landscape that will influence the way that loss and damage is understood and responded to in the near future. These discussions are likely to shape institutions and policies that will establish path dependencies, build new constituencies and will ultimately influence the trajectory of people’s lives as they cope with the wide variety of losses associated with climate change. We suggest that scientific understanding and evidence are much needed and the articles published here stand to help inform policy approaches – both those that are being rapidly developed now but also those which will emerge in the future. This introduction briefly surveys historic and recent developments, highlights the key contributions of this collection of articles and then articulates an agenda for future research.

The concept of loss and damage was introduced in the early 1990s by the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in the UNFCCC and has gradually become institutionalized at the international level (Roberts and Huq 2015; Vanhala and Hestbaek 2016). While an official definition has never been agreed in the climate regime, current scholarly understandings emphasize the unavoidability and irreversibility of certain climate change impacts and the role played by constraints and limits to adaptation as drivers of adverse outcomes (Mechler et al. 2020).¹ The latter can include both monetizable impacts as well as what are referred to as “non-economic losses” (NELs), such as loss of biodiversity, territory, cultural heritage, and also encompasses climate-induced human mobility (Serdeczny et al. 2018). In recent years, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has increasingly included assessments of “losses and damages” in its reports – understood as harmful impacts or risks that can result from climate change-related slow onset hazards and extreme weather events (IPCC 2022b).

¹ We note that scholars use different spellings and capitalisations for the term loss and damage with some preferring to use capital letters (“Loss and Damage”) to signify the political discussions within the UNFCCC and beyond. We do not follow that convention here and authors within the special issue varied in their practices. See the piece by Hartz (this issue) for more on the significance of orthographic choices.

Within the climate change negotiations, discussions on loss and damage have progressed far more slowly than on mitigation and adaptation, with differing views among countries on what loss and damage encompasses, the best approaches to respond to it and appropriate sources and levels of finance to address it (Calliari et al. 2020; Johansson et al. 2022). The contentious nature of the negotiations has led to loss and damage being repeatedly referred to as a highly political topic, even as impacts of climate change are already being documented around the world (IPCC 2022a). However, recent milestones in the UNFCCC have highlighted the urgency of the need for technical and practical understandings of what constitutes loss and damage and related responses as distinct from adaptation. The decision at COP27 to establish new funding arrangements, including a fund, to respond to loss and damage has brought the issue to the attention of a much broader set of actors, including multilateral banks, humanitarian organizations, development agencies, the private sector and a wide-range of UN bodies, and has highlighted existing gaps in policy approaches to address loss and damage (Naylor and Ford 2023). All of this suggests a pressing need for a deeper conceptual understanding and empirical evidence on climate change loss and damage.

Existing social science research highlights the myriad ways in which the problem of loss and damage – and appropriate governance arrangements – are articulated (McNamara and Jackson 2019). While a variety of disciplines have developed bodies of literature on topics related to loss and damage (e.g. disaster studies, impact modeling), studies specifically focused on climate change loss and damage emerged around 2010, with a significant increase in research after 2013 (McNamara and Jackson 2019). Early work tended to focus on different conceptualizations of loss and damage, finding varying interpretations and definitions, influenced in part by disciplinary backgrounds. Scholars in law (e.g. Adelman 2016; Broberg and Romera 2021; Burkett 2016, Toussaint 2020), geography (e.g. Barnett et al. 2016; Hepach and Hartz 2023; Tschakert et al. 2019, Warner and van der Geest 2013, 2015), anthropology (e.g. Oliver-Smith 2013; O’Reilly et al. 2020), economics (e.g. Fanning and Hickel 2023; Markandya and González-Eguino 2019) and in the interdisciplinary environmental social sciences (e.g. Mechler et al. 2019; Mechler et al. 2020; Boyd et al. 2017; Boyd et al. 2021; James et al. 2014) have begun to turn their attention to the phenomenon of loss and damage and related responses. By contrast, scholars working in the fields of political science and international relations have only recently (with a few exceptions, see e.g. Calliari 2016; Calliari et al. 2020; Wapner 2014; Vanhala and Hestbaek 2016; Vanhala and Calliari 2022) begun to engage with this novel area of climate research. Yet, the contribution those working with the theoretical approaches and methodological tools of the discipline can make is critical: questions about how best to address climate change loss and damage are fundamentally political, as they derive from processes of deliberation and imply distributional outcomes. Moreover, Javeline (2014) and Eriksen et al. (2015) had already noted that climate change

adaptation – far from being a neutral, technical, and managerial process – is based on contestation of what counts as “adaptive” for different groups and implies differentiated outcomes in terms of vulnerability and the capacity to adapt. We suggest that these considerations are equally applicable in the loss and damage realm. Following Tschakert et al. (2019) we note that what counts as “loss” in different places and over time is highly contextual and will be grappled with (or not) through local, national, regional and international political processes.

The objective of the special issue is two-fold. First, by recognizing the highly interdisciplinary essence of loss and damage research, the special issue seeks to promote dialogue, cross-fertilization, and the building of bridges across social science disciplines concerned with politics and governance. Second, we seek to inform a policy landscape that was slow moving for many years, but which has begun to shift rapidly. Political actors and practitioners from the international to the local level are quickly having to get to grips with the conceptual debate, policy discussions and empirical evidence on a topic that is both a threatening material reality but also a product of socio-political processes.

In terms of scope, the special issue investigates how loss and damage as a “governance object” (Allan 2017) has been shaped by contentious negotiations within the UNFCCC (Calliari 2016; Vanhala and Hestbaek 2016) and has been then enacted (or not) by a range of actors across different levels and governance sites. A growing number of actors are engaging with the implications of loss and damage governance, including a range of non-state actors from international organization secretariats to civil society groups to scientists working within and beyond the IPCC. At the national level, a wide variety of institutions – from environment ministries to disaster risk management departments to courts – have all been invoked in loss and damage governance efforts but represent significantly different paradigms for action. Against this background, much of the existing scholarship still situates loss and damage at the scale of UNFCCC negotiations and focuses predominantly on states. We broaden this perspective by posing the following overarching questions: 1) What kind of knowledge and ideas do stakeholders draw upon when constructing, reproducing or contesting loss and damage as a governance object? With what consequences? 2) How do different stakeholders engage with loss and damage at different scales (international, national, local) and across sites of governance (e.g., international negotiations, across epistemic communities and within national institutions)? 3) How does this engagement affect the way the idea of climate change loss and damage is conceptualized and institutionalized at the international and national levels?

The articles in this collection: the politics of governing loss and damage

The articles included in this special issue cover a breadth of social science approaches – international relations, comparative politics, Science and Technology Studies and political theory. The collection of articles is underpinned by a shared interest in questions of power and justice.

A first group of articles explores the relationship between loss and damage politics and science, knowledge and evidence. Serdeczny relies on a process tracing approach to show how developing country negotiators used knowledge produced within the UNFCCC process (e.g. technical papers) and beyond (e.g. NGOs reports) in a political way to further their interests in loss and damage negotiations from 2003 to 2013. While the role of knowledge is usually conceptualised as helping to justify or rationalise previously taken positions, she finds that it can make a difference in policy outcomes. Serdeczny shows knowledge as having both an institutional effect, whereby it was used to establish loss and damage as a theme under the UNFCCC, and having an effect at the individual level, where it provided actors with a sense of clarity and legitimacy that strengthened their resolve in defending political positions. The paper by Hartz focuses instead on the way the IPCC has engaged with the politically charged concept of loss and damage over time. The IPCC plays a key role in the climate change governance landscape, as it provides “‘certified’ scientific and policy-oriented knowledge” to stimulate and legitimize climate policies (van der Sluijs et al. 2010). Hartz traces the representation of loss and damage across IPCC assessment reports and accounts for the inclusion of the term ‘losses and damages’ in the Summaries for Policymakers (SPMs) of the Working Group II and III of the IPCC’s Sixth Assessment Cycle. By focusing on the implications of orthographic choices (‘Loss and Damage’, ‘loss and damage’, ‘losses and damages’) in the science-policy discourse, she shows how different ways of spelling out the concept are appraised differently by individuals depending on their context and position in the loss and damage space. For those more closely involved with the political sphere, the wording of “‘losses and damages” is considered yet another way to impede the development of global governance in this area, but for those engaged with the topic at scientific-technical and practical levels the inclusion of loss and damage terminology in IPCC SPMs is perceived as an important next step in the institutionalization of the topic.

A second group of articles draws attention to the important role of ideas and meaning-making processes in the politics of loss and damage governance. While the ideas of liability and compensation are often associated with loss and damage, the article by Wallimann-Helmer argues that, from an ethical perspective, they can be de-coupled in the governance of loss and damage. He calls for a new way of thinking about these concepts by taking climate resilience as a point of departure. By shifting from a backward-looking to a forward-looking conceptualisation, he proposes a re-framing of responsibility within the sphere of loss and damage governance. The paper by Calliari and Ryder changes scale to focus on the country level to understand how national policy actors make sense and

translate the (ill-defined) global agenda on loss and damage for the national level. They analyse how loss and damage is framed within countries' archived and updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and outline countries' different understanding of what the problem of loss and damage entails and possible solutions. The authors find that countries are not simply adopting the framing of loss and damage elaborated by the UNFCCC but are instead actively shaping the concept by advancing certain understandings that are consistent with the challenges experienced in their national context. The analysis therefore outlines an emergent two-level ideational game, whereby countries attempt to shape the global agenda by advancing certain framings of the loss and damage problem and solution space. Finally, the piece by Falzon et al. develops a typology of obstructionist tactics that countries have used to delay action on loss and damage over the last thirty years. Drawing on and contributing to international relations theories they centre their analysis on the practices of power and how it is used to shape legal and political understandings of loss and damage. They show how the use of these tactics has limited what the concept of loss and damage encapsulates (at least within the global governance regime) and the effect this has on potential policy solutions and legal outcomes.

The collection of articles in the special issue together offers insights in three ways. First, the contributions advance our empirical understanding by building on earlier research and highlighting the importance of varying, overlapping, and often competing discourses and conceptualizations of loss and damage (Calliari 2016; Vanhala and Hestbaek 2016; Vanhala 2023). The articles unpack these discourses within different settings, from the UNFCCC negotiations (Falzon et al. 2023; Serdeczny 2023; Walliman-Helmer 2023) to the IPCC (Hartz 2023) to national level articulations of the problem (Calliari and Ryder 2023). Going beyond just an analysis or description of these novel conceptualizations and existing discourses, these papers together highlight their many impacts from the institutional to the individual level and from the legal to the cognitive and emotional realms. Second, the research presented here sheds new light on the role of knowledge (as well as a lack thereof, see Vanhala et al. 2021) in explaining outcomes in the study of the global governance of loss and damage. For example, Hartz's work draws on insights from Science and Technology Studies and International Relations to offer a nuanced understanding of the use and relevance of language and spelling more specifically as a way of reaching consensus at the interface of climate science and policy. Serdeczny highlights the multiple pathways through which knowledge about losses and damages shapes personal engagement, political behavior and legal outcomes within the climate change negotiations. Finally, these articles contribute to broader theoretical debates within the study of global environmental politics. For instance, Falzon et al.'s typology of methods of obstruction can help us understand the full range of negotiation tactics that are deployed in the climate change regime but also in global governance more

generally. Calliari and Ryder draw on the idea of a two-level ideational game to analyze developments bridging the national and international level and Hartz shows how seemingly mundane matters, such as spelling, can shape world views. Together these articles contribute to constructivist theorizing of the modes and methods for constituting objects of global governance.

Agenda for Global Environmental Politics

This special issue marks an important step forward in our understanding of the politics and governance of climate change loss and damage. Yet we argue there is a pressing need for further research and for all of the tools of the social sciences to be brought to bear on questions related to climate change loss. We identify three promising avenues of research here.

First, the relationship between loss and damage and adaptation is an ongoing area of research with particular relevance for policy approaches and with potential financial implications over time. In the discussions to establish the new loss and damage fund there are challenges in trying to distinguish between approaches. Planned relocation or permanent migration as a response to climate change exemplifies the challenges of sharply differentiating adaptation from loss and damage, as these approaches have been posited as viable adaptation options or as examples of grievous loss and damage by different research communities (McNamara et al. 2018). Other conceptually distinct but practically and empirically murky dichotomies include the differentiation between loss on one hand and damage on the other; the distinction between non-economic and economic losses and the categories of impacts resulting from extreme weather and slow onset events.

Second, while much of the early research on loss and damage focused on the local level (Warner and van der Geest 2013), the overwhelming focus of the literature on the politics, governance and law of loss and damage has been on discussions with the UNFCCC. More recently, Calliari and Vanhala (2022) have argued for a “national turn” in the study of loss and damage governance. Both the existing gap in knowledge about how national policymakers are conceptualizing and managing the issues grouped together under the heading of “loss and damage” as well as political developments including the operationalization of the Santiago Network on Loss and Damage, which will offer technical support to countries, demand a broader and deeper evidence base regarding the types, effectiveness and legitimacy of policies, activities and interventions that are already in place. Governance and politics at other scales of governance, including the sub-state level and within supra-state regional bodies, also merit attention as critically important in managing losses and damages.

Finally, the special issue seeks to stimulate political scientists’ and International Relations scholars’ engagement with the loss and damage issue, and to highlight the vital insights that scholars from

across sub-disciplinary fields (e.g., political theory, comparative politics, political economy, international relations) can bring to the table. A range of theoretical approaches, methodologies and underlying epistemological commitments from within and beyond political science can help shed light on the problem and policy solutions of climate change loss and damage.

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