City government-research partnerships

Reflections from Cape Town and Johannesburg

FRACTAL Briefing note | September 2018 | Produced by Alice McClure

FRACTAL

Future Resilience for African Cities and Lands (FRACTAL) is a trans-disciplinary group of researchers from partner organisations around the world. Together with a broad range of stakeholders, they are working to co-produce relevant knowledge that will support resilient development pathways and enable decision-makers to better integrate pertinent climate knowledge into their resource management decisions and urban development planning. FRACTAL is a four year project within the multi-consortia Future Climate for Africa (FCFA) programme - jointly funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).

These knowledge products have been developed to share findings from the research in the hope of fostering dialogue and eliciting feedback that strengthens the research. The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and are not necessarily shared by DFID, NERC or other programme partners.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Alice McClure | FRACTAL coordinator
Climate Systems Analysis Group, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
Inputs from Amy Davison (City of Cape Town) and Coleen Vogel (Global Change Institute)

CONTACT DETAILS

Alice McClure | alice@csag.uct.ac.za

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FUTURE CLIMATE FOR AFRICA

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Introduction

This briefing note provides key discussion points from the fourth FRACTAL learning webinar, during which the team reflected on **city government-research partnerships**. Two FRACTAL self-funded cities, Cape Town and Johannesburg, reflected on different experiences across the cities, and thought about how these relationships contribute to building climate resilience going forward.

The session was structured in a Q&A fashion. Amy Davison (head Climate Change at the Environmental Management Department in the City of Cape Town) and Coleen Vogel (project lead on the City of Johannesburg Adaptation and climate change) provided key insights on the topic.

What is the history of these relationships?

Coleen provided an overview of the relationship between the City of Johannesburg (CoJ) and the Global Change Institute (GCI) based at the University of the Witwatersrand. An adaptation plan was developed for the CoJ some time ago but had not really been implemented. The adaptation agenda was revitalised when new leadership entered the Environment and Infrastructure Services Department (EISD) within the CoJ. At this point, a conversation started about a potential collaboration between CoJ and Wits to learn about climate change in the city together. Importantly, everyone (researchers and government) agreed to partake in a slower learning journey that focused on unpacking existing contradictions of the decision-making system before planning a way forward. This is difficult considering the pressure of working in a city under strict Key Performance Areas (KPAs). The landscape of co-production for climate knowledge in the CoJ has essentially been built over two years as the city and researchers have learned a lot about each other and almost more importantly, about themselves.

Figure 1. Johannesburg city (courtesy of CNN.com)

The City of Cape Town (CoCT) and University of Cape Town (UCT) also have a long-standing relationship that has evolved over time. Before 2009/2010, the CoCT and UCT engaged in a relatively traditional government/research partnership; the CoCT would contract the university to undertake pieces of work, or academics would visit the city to undertake research on aspects of the city and decision making. In this way, the relationship was much more extractive on both parts. Around 2010, the CoCT partnered with African Centre for Cities (ACC) for the City of Cape Town Climate Change Think Tank process, which ultimately resulted in a book of learning experiences. This was essentially the first step towards a more co-productive relationship. Since this time, projects have been implemented between the two organisations but an ongoing relationship also exists so that collaboration or co-production can take place as and when needed.

Figure 2. City of Cape Town (courtesy of Tamsin Rhodes, SApeople.com)

What do these two different relationships look like?

Wits has been building a steady, intimate relationship with the CoJ, each organisation learning a lot about the other over the past few years. Few other organisations have been involved in this knowledge co-production relationship. However, an understanding of the city has been informed by some outside perspectives (e.g. people living and working outside the city). The case of CoCT and UCT is different as many groups were brought into the Think Tank processes to talk about issues of climate change in the city including experts and people from the NGO sector. Despite the difference in these two models, both seem to have resulted in real benefits.

What has the relationship taught academics?

Coleen, as a trained climate scientist, reflected on how humbling the experience of working in the CoJ with decision makers has been. She described how, often, even though climate researchers pay lip service to co-production processes, the goal of engaged research is often to share the "right" scientific message about climate change. With this perspective, city government are nudged into a climate change discourse with the provision of information, vulnerability maps, adaptation options etc. Research teams often enter a decision context with a strong climate change agenda, which does not align with those that have been

developed and implemented in a city on a day-to-day basis. True co-production, for Coleen, means understanding the workings of a city thoroughly before intersecting climate concerns. The researcher's passion on climate-related issues sometimes becomes her/his blind spot as s/he steers the planning with a climate discourse from early in the engagement. For Coleen, it's been a bit of a moral tangle in the city; she's felt that she's always had valuable climate knowledge related to the city that she would like to offer but must first focus on understanding what's happening in the city. In light of this, notions of mainstreaming need to be explored in a more critical manner.

Coleen has also thought a lot about the ethics of producing or co-producing climate knowledge for decision making. As a climate scientist, what can or can't she say? what should or shouldn't she say? She has to ask herself how honest a broker of information she is during these processes, and this questioning needs to happen within herself as well as with others. It is also important to remember that different groups of people working within the city and informing decisions have varying mental models; imposing a scientific mental model doesn't generally work to support resilient decision making. Coleen is starting to think, more and more, that focussing on supplying or 'handing over' climate information is problematic when considering the nature of the complex climate change problem. Instead, we should be focussing on creating joint storylines or narratives of the future that contain different types of knowledge, including climate science.

What is the methodology used in Johannesburg to unpack climate-related issues between researches and city government?

Coleen spoke about the different approach that they've been using to support the relationship between CoJ and Wits; based on Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). According to Coleen, this framework supports building relationships and understanding by surfacing contradictions within a "system" (e.g. city government), which enables identification of aspects that are not currently working and drives change. This process is ongoing as more people are brought into the conversation, more contradictions are surfaced and more actions to resolve contradictions are co-designed.

Some of the core elements of the CHAT approach are similar to FRACTAL; questioning and analysing current activities, as well as thinking about problematic areas of concern. Wits has implemented workshops and interviews to inform these processes. Although the team is not bound to the rigidity of methodology, the CHAT framework has been useful to explore issues, constantly open minds, challenge assumptions and build relationships. It's guided a slower, messier learning process that attempts to deal with the complexity of decision making in The

CoJ. Coleen mentioned that although this approach has been useful in laying the groundwork, quick answers are often requested for burning issues related to the intersection of climate with city decision making; this is a tension that they need to face and manage… There is no magic, silver bullet for these climate change problems so constant exploring is necessary.

How has the relationship between the CoCT and UCT contributed to responding to the drought? Has the drought taught us anything important about the relationship going forward?

Amy reflected on the fact that the relationship has, in this time of drought in Cape Town, been both essential and insufficient. This is because in a time of climate crisis, with all the inherent uncertainty related to climate and urbanisation in southern Africa, decisions need to be made that science can't make for city decision makers, particularly related to trade-offs. Using the drought as an example, such questions include: *should we invest in infrastructure to increase water supply this year? Should we adopt a more cautious waiting approach and hope for good rains next year? Or should we wait to decide when science provides more certain information?* There's a significant level of fear and uncertainty related to any decision, which can be criticised in the value of hindsight. Amy has witnessed this in the case of the Cape Town drought, during which competing narratives were growing among the public (e.g. CoCT has not made strong enough decisions, CoCT has overreacted).

A notable benefit of the UCT-CoCT relationship has been a deeper understanding of the decision-making processes involved in responding to the crisis. This relationship is also helping the CoCT to become more comfortable with the aspect of uncertainty; to build resilience based on the general trends without necessarily homing in on the details of the future. Pre-existing relationships that were built between CoCT and UCT supported their working together during the time of crisis and afterwards.

Do large research conferences, and information shared during these, contribute to decision making on the ground?

Amy feels extremely lucky that her department views attendance at conferences as part of her work, not a nice-to-have. One of the most valuable aspects is being able to take a step back from everyday work as an official and think through things more reflectively. This provides the opportunity to reframe some of the work or compare actions and responses with how others are doing so.

How do specific individuals or champions play a role in these relationships, and climate-related work?

The importance of having people who are proficient in the academic and practitioner world was emphasised by Amy; she would like to see this aspect built stronger in CoCT to support decision making around climate change and variability. Coleen emphasised the importance of multiple champions operating at different levels and scales for carrying this type of work forward.

How does academia and city government team up to measure resilience?

Amy reflected on the fact that adaptation to climate change or resilience, as an output, is impossible to measure unless you're looking at a narrow area such as coastal zone management; perhaps in this context for example, a city can become more resilient to storms by building a wall. The question of how to measure resilience as an outcome is, in Amy's opinion, not very useful especially in complex, heterogeneous spaces such as cities because the *resilience process* is ongoing. A resilient city is one that is more dynamic and responsive. Learning processes, such as those implemented by FRACTAL, help to build relationships as well as understanding that contributes to this responsiveness. Essentially, these processes help cities become more reflexive.

Coleen then questioned whether it is incumbent on people working in cities of the global south to push back on the trend of measuring everything; to push back against commodification of adaptation or resilience.

Mzikisi (CoJ) then provided a learning from the CoJ related to setting targets within incredibly dynamic, complex spaces; his department included GHG emission reductions into their plans and this target became one of the most important with which to comply. The implementation of plans to meet this target, however, was much more challenging. He also reflected on the

relationship between the CoJ and Wits from a city official perspective, explaining that the City had never been part of a learning process such as the one that has been supported by Wits to develop the updated climate adaptation plan. They had also never developed their own plan. In the past, consultants were contracted to develop plans that "landed" on their desks and were difficult to implement. After the benefits of the learning experience supported by Wits, the CoJ is not likely to contract another consultant to develop a plan in the future. The process has built confidence within city officials to take ownership of planning.

Chris (UCT) reflected on the idea of a city learning about itself through these relationships processes and how this links to 'receptivity'[1] of stakeholders working in the city. This is quite evident in FRACTAL but how do we capture this? Is it the responsibility of the researcher to capture this?

How do we sustain the city government-research partnerships outside of projects?

Anna (UCT) presented the idea of the 'critical friend', which is both the research organisation and the city government for one another; i) the city learns about itself through constructive research undertaken by the research institution; ii) the university learns about the value of academic research and how research should evolve to respond to real-life needs. This 'friend' helps each organisation to learn about themselves through a trusting relationship. Evidence suggests that the city and the research institution both benefit from this relationship, but the question of sustainability always emerges; how can these organisations continue to be 'critical friends' outside of projects? Coleen suggested the development or strengthening of platforms within and across cities and institutions.

[1] Building on political concepts of receptivity and reflective judgement. FRACTAL argues that the uptake of the information is highly dependent on the receptivity of the actors and decision-makers who are situated in their urban context. Understanding and building agency and receptivity is therefore crucial for decision makers to make judgements to use climate information in their decision-making. (Scott and Taylor forthcoming)