Scholars from a variety of disciplines, including Economics, Geography, Political Science, and others, came to Ohio State to discuss the human dimension of climate change during the Adaptive Research and Governance in Climate Change conference. With an eye on the policy-relevant, social scientific study of climate change and attacking the problem with an integrative approach, the conference convened scholars for two days to focus on one question: how to marry the myriad aspects of climate change to develop a policy to improve the current crisis of climate change.

The keynote address was given by Roger Kasperson of the Stockholm Environmental Institute, who discussed the challenges of determining a point of “success” in climate change. As he pointed out, because there are so many human dimensions that both contribute to the problem and result from it and because there are such a variety of areas that need improvement, it is in an ambitious project to undertake. For example, food scarcity is a very real and problematic outcome of climate change. But if one of the goals of policy would be to protect biodiversity, developing strategies to improve both requires a comprehensive multi-stress analysis of the human dimensions.

Discussing these human dimensions was the goal of conference presenters. Molly Brown’s research focused on food security as a significant factor in climate change in her work on the price of millet in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso through the use of satellite imagery of agricultural activity in the region to measure the degree to which this sub-Saharan area is affected by extreme climatic events.

Much of the research, like Brown’s, dealt with the impact climate change has on developing nations because, as David S.G. Thomas and Chasca Twyman pointed out, the poorest and most vulnerable nations are likely to experience a disproportionately negative effect from climatic events, in part because these societies are most reliant on natural resources. Because many remote, underdeveloped, or sparsely populated regions are likely to be impacted the most, several researchers focused on the regions most likely to reflect climate change. For example, Kenneth R. Young and Jennifer Lipton’s research explored the implications for agricultural and biodiversity institutions in the tropical Andes.

Several scholars suggested that business and localized institutions may likely be the primary actors in efforts to reform climate policy. Research underway at the University of Ontario explored the role played by community action groups and local government agencies in Eastern Ontario as they manage the natural, human and social capital of water-related infrastructure.

Frans Berkhout, Julia Hertin, and David Gann approached climate change and its impact on business from the perspective of the corporations, who they argued are motivated towards organizational learning because of market forces. Their work focused on house-building and water service sectors, which reflect the importance of understanding for-profit companies and their adaptive management capacity and their likely organizational responses.

Erin Baker suggested that research and development can benefit many groups, including private corporations. Her theory was that R&D can act as greenhouse insurance, if developmental strategies can hedge against severe damages caused by climate change. Her contention was that learning as part of an “act then learn” strategy is of little value but that certain non-economic technologies and R&D will allow for flexible changes to be made in the midst of climate change.

Other conference participants focused on the supranational impact of international action. Barbara Koremenos explored the role of uncertainty as it motivates states to incorporate flexibility provisions in their international action. She thought that incorporating flexibility into an agreement makes it more likely for states to commit, because they will have the option of responding as a situation develops. Alexander Thompson applied this idea to the Kyoto agreement, suggesting the flexibility allowed member states to overcome the most serious barrier to cooperation: uncertainty.

Amassing the myriad of research ideas, conference participants are molding their ideas to create a policy-paper for publication.