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Changing rainfall patterns caused by climate change can increase the severity and frequency of both droughts and floods. This is a cause for concern when these historically new patterns occur in drought-prone areas. For example, in 2019 after the hottest summer on record, a delayed monsoon in India brought floods to several historically drought-prone regions. This sudden deluge caught local people and agencies off-guard and unprepared. While the Indian monsoon has always been notoriously difficult to predict, anthropogenic climate change has dramatically altered the scale and incidence of extreme weather events. Climate scientists are struggling to understand these changes because of uncertainties in observations and climate models. It is unclear what implications these changes have for the ability of people and organisations to deal with their impacts. While local communities in arid rural areas may be used to adapting to the uncertainties around drought, the incidence of floods in drought-prone regions is stretching the planning and response capacities of both individuals and public agencies. This has led to what we conceptualise as radical uncertainty in this paper. As such extreme events become more pervasive globally, new ways to deal with climatic uncertainty are required, which will involve acknowledging knowledge pluralism as well as novel ways of understanding, anticipating and reimagining for socially just transformation in the context of climate change. Instead of seeing uncertainty as potentially apocalyptic and disruptive, we explore how such events can foster new forms of knowledge-making and collaboration, which could lead to better preparedness.

We focus on the Indian state of Gujarat, where extreme variability (floods and droughts) has pushed pastoralists, dryland farmers and fishers to the limits of coping. Drawing on ethnographic insights, we conceptualise radical uncertainty through the lived experiences and everyday practices of marginalised communities and explore how preparedness can be re-imagined from the ground up.

Anticipatory governance – Dealing with uncertain futures