

Anti-politics of climate change

Depoliticisation of climate change undermines the historic reasons that made Bangladesh vulnerable to it.

BY KASIA PAPROCKI

In the global imaginary of climate change, Bangladesh holds a prominent position. Frequently described as the ‘world’s most vulnerable country to climate change’, this imagination of Bangladesh’s impending climate crisis has taken on a life of its own. The spectre of Bangladesh underwater, wiped off the map by rising sea levels, has given birth to a crisis narrative that obscures the ways in which interventions in the environment and social life of the country, particularly in the coastal region, have already transformed the landscape many times over. Long-standing debates on development in Bangladesh has structured our understanding of climate change in subtle but foundational ways. Making these connections explicit indicates new directions in the search for social and environmental justice.

Two distinct perspectives have prevailed within Bangladesh on how the country should address climate change: These may be termed Early Adaptors and Local Activists. Both of these are ideal types. It's rare to find anyone engaged in these conversations who would not, in either public or private, acknowledge the central concerns of the other standpoint.


The Early Adaptor perspective has played a major role in framing Bangladesh as the 'ground zero' of global climate change. This is done by proving that the impact of climate change can already be seen in the country, including in the rising sea levels, saline intrusion, ecological degradation and massive migrations of people away from the coastal zone. This standpoint is supported by a robust infrastructure of donors and development agencies that see climate-change adaptation goals as overlapping with development goals. The result: a massive proliferation of climate change adaptation programming, particularly in the low-lying southwestern coastal belt, widely referred to as Bangladesh's primary 'climate hot-spot'. Such adaptation strategies penetrate every aspect of development planning in this region. Examples of such overlapping interventions include major infrastructure investments, land-use policy changes and microcredit lending.

The Local Activist perspective, on the other hand, brings together Bangladeshi civil society and social-movement groups which are less vocal about the issues surrounding climate change, but are rightfully sceptical of the claims and vision of some climate change 'experts'. They see ecological changes taking place in the coastal region today as historical and contemporary developments that, in fact, have very little to do with climate change. For example salinity intrusion can also be linked to the diversion of waters from the River Ganga through the Farakka Barrage, as well as the proliferation of saline shrimp aquaculture on former agricultural lands. Proponents of this view argue that land subsidence and waterlogging can be attributed to the system of embankments built across the coast during the Green Revolution in the 1960s. And this, in turn, can be traced back to colonial-era infrastructure and land-reclamation efforts.

Side-stepping politics

The political implications of attributing these causes only to climate change are significant. The Local Activists are concerned that the focus on climate change comes at the expense of more pressing environmental concerns, such as the expansion of shrimp aquaculture, the planned construction of the Rampal Power Plant on the edge of the Sundarban and open-pit coal mining at Phulbari in the Dinajpur District of Bangladesh. They ask, “Why mobilise about something that might begin to show effects in 50 years, when there are urgent environmental issues having immediate and devastating impacts on rural communities right now?” The tensions between these perspectives are exacerbated by the profound uncertainty with which scientists studying the localised impacts of climate change in Bangladesh (or elsewhere) are able to ascribe these as causes of major ecological changes. The changes are shaped by a variety of factors within very diverse timeframes.



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The Local Activists, by and large, contend that climate change discourse is a money-making strategy for ‘NGO-wallahs’, and the donor funds pouring into the country to support ‘climate change adaptation’ are more likely to entrench inequitable development dynamics than to create real social change. These activists claim that much of climate change adaptation work being proposed today is the same as the development interventions NGO-wallahs have been opposing for decades – and that it is being carried out by the same people. This tension reflects a long-held antipathy between Bangladeshi activists and development workers from NGOs.

It also illustrates the gulf between local and international politics of climate change. The Early Adapters have been instrumental in forging an international politics of climate justice – not just for Bangladesh, but for most countries identified as ‘Least Developed Countries’ (LDCs) by the UN. They have been doing this since the very first international climate change negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992. In December 2015, if the UNFCCC Conference of Parties (known as COP21) in Paris is successful in establishing a binding international climate-action agreement, it will be largely thanks to the politics and networks developed by these leaders.

Yet, at the local level, this perspective runs the risk of depoliticising the dynamics of development that has long plagued Bangladesh. By proposing apolitical development solutions to problems that are seen as fundamentally linked to local and international power imbalances, the Local Activists are concerned that the discourse of international climate justice will erase the particular histories of social and environmental injustices that have compounded inequality in Bangladesh today. This poses a major challenge to climate science: interpreting environmental transformations specifically as ‘climate change’ is far more difficult in specific places than at the global scale.

The depoliticisation of climate change discourse in Bangladesh is the latest episode in the shift of the development sector away from political organising. The neoliberalisation of Bangladesh’s development sector in the 1980s and 1990s shifted bilateral resources away from the state and toward NGOs. These NGOs increasingly became a key tool in the privatisation of the state’s responsibility for social security. This shift in resources was accompanied by a remarkable retreat of the majority of the country’s NGO sector from what once appeared to be a sincere commitment to addressing social inequity through mobilisation of the country’s rural poor. This has given rise to a NGO-state nexus that has repeatedly proven to be more accountable to donors than to local constituencies, and has failed to address the structural conditions that reinforce poverty and inequality.

Loss and Damage

Even as policymakers have failed to reach an international consensus on strategies for mitigating the threat of global climate change, the ensuing discourse on the real impact of climate change and proposed adaptations indicate a broadening international politics of possibility. The UNFCCC and the bilateral funding offered by donors for adaptation projects are shaping not only what adaptation strategies are pursued, but also how ecological change is understood. As a result, regional history and political economy with regard to ongoing ecological processes are discarded in favour of top-down emphasis on global climate change and its explanatory models.

One of the clearest examples of this fraught process – of framing the causes of ecological change – is the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage created by the UNFCCC. The Mechanism proposes compensation for losses associated with climate change that aren't preventable through adaptation measures in LDCs most vulnerable to climate impacts. It is a key point in international climate negotiations, and implies that major carbon-emitting (i.e. developed) countries would owe financial reparations to countries like Bangladesh for losses and damages attributable to climate change.

In 2013, the UNFCCC called for researchers and negotiators to report back by 2016 on the economic and non-economic losses and damages being experienced in vulnerable countries as a result of climate change. Many saw this mandate as a significant victory for the LDCs. Whereas wealthy countries have fiercely resisted any discussion within the climate change negotiations of liability and compensation for the effects of their greenhouse gas emissions, the Loss and Damage Mechanism promises to put these topics on the table.

Bangladesh has been at the centre of these debates over loss and damage. Bangladeshi negotiators and advocates were instrumental in introducing the mechanism into the UNFCCC negotiations. Today, those advocates play a key role in organising fellow LDCs to understand loss and damage and strengthen

collective bargaining power. Critically, much of the research on this has focused on Bangladesh's coastal zone, where researchers have sought to establish direct links between climate change and a variety of social and ecological changes, such as coastal erosion, saline intrusion, water logging, biodiversity loss and mass migration. Securing Bangladesh's right to compensation for loss and damage is contingent on linking this great variety of problems directly to climate change.



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But the politics of identifying loss and damage in Bangladesh, is quite complicated. At a global level, it is critical for securing the rights of LDCs to be compensated for the fallout of wealthier nations' greenhouse emissions, which disproportionately impact the poorer countries. At the local level, however, attributing changes in Bangladesh's coastal zone exclusively to climate change obscures the history of political and economic interventions that have reshaped the landscape.

A history of exploitation

What no one is talking about, least of all the UNFCCC climate change negotiators, is the possibility that Bangladesh (or other LDCs) might be owed reparations for a much longer history of extractive development in the region. Just as the colonial legacy has been preserved in Southasia's legal systems, so too have imperialist governance strategies been preserved in agrarian class structure and the physical landscape in coastal Bangladesh. Both are implicated in the vulnerability of Bangladesh's coastal population today.

Social scientists have long recognised the far-reaching impacts of the colonial land-tenure system in Bengal, which was

characterised by intensely stratified feudal land relations in order to maximise tax extraction. In Bangladesh today, where postcolonial land reform has been extremely insufficient and poorly implemented, high levels of rural inequality and some of the highest rates of landlessness in the entire world can be observed. In James Boyce's 1987 book, *Agrarian Impasse in Bengal: Institutional Constraints to Technological Change*, the author demonstrated that these inequalities in turn shaped the landscape itself, producing crucial constraints to drainage, irrigation and other water control technologies. Boyce argued that these failures in water control continued to inhibit agricultural growth in the region, despite the land being one of the most fertile in the planet. Since his study, decades of structural adjustment and contemporary agrarian development policies have only exacerbated these rural inequalities.



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Today, it is the landless and the land-poor living in the coastal region who are most vulnerable to cyclones and other disasters. In the aftermath of recent cyclones Sidr and Aila, as well as lesser storms that have caused breaches in protective embankments, it is unsurprising that it is this population that is the most insecure – both physically and economically. They have often been forced to migrate or crowded into settlements precariously perched on the tops of embankments, waiting (often for months or even years) for infrastructural repairs to address the waterlogging which has pushed them away from their homes. The vulnerability of land tenure is no historical accident. It has been systematically entrenched through historical and contemporary agrarian development policy that treats the presence of landless people

as inimical to national development. While the precise linkages today between climate change and cyclones (and other extreme weather events) are contested, scientists predict that climate change will lead to a rise in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events in the future. When that happens, it is these historically determined dynamics of inequality that will exacerbate the resulting vulnerability of coastal communities.

One of the most important results and determinants of inequality in the coastal zone today has been the rise of commercial shrimp aquaculture on former rice agriculture lands. In the early 1980s, spurred by structural adjustment and projects supported by USAID and the World Bank, shrimp farms proliferated rapidly throughout the coastal region (concentrated in the southwest), quickly becoming Bangladesh's second largest export after garments. Benefits derived from this shrimp boom have accrued almost exclusively to urban elite investors and to consumers abroad, primarily in Europe and the US, who have enjoyed an unprecedented drop in prices of abundantly available frozen shrimp, once considered a luxury in those countries. Thanks to inequitable and unstable land tenure, this transition has been accompanied by rampant and often violent land grabbing. For the last 25 years, landless social movement groups throughout Bangladesh have gathered annually on 7 November to commemorate the death of Karunamoyee Sardar, a landless peasant leader who was murdered by shrimp farmers for leading a protest against would-be land grabbers in her community in 1990. Their mobilisation continues today. Indeed, this rapid transition has been made possible precisely by the historical legacy of a highly unequal land tenure system, which has created precarious livelihoods for the majority of the region's population.

For the landless and land-poor in rural communities, who have always depended on agricultural day labour and sharecropping, commercial shrimp aquaculture presents a threat to their very survival. In addition to other serious social and ecological impacts, shrimp aquaculture requires a small fraction of the labour needed for rice farming and, in many areas, has displaced those who long



depended on rice farming. While this vulnerability has little to do with the real impacts of climate change, it will deeply texture the continued survival of the people living in increasingly precarious coastal communities.

Engineering vulnerability

Landscape engineering from the colonial period onwards has also been critical in shaping the vulnerability of this region and its inhabitants. In his book, *The Bengal Delta*, Iftekhar Iqbal documents how the natural adaptive capacity of the coastal population to an unpredictable environment (characterised by frequent storms and cyclones, as well as seasonal water inundation) was greatly reduced around the turn of the 20th century, following, among other colonial policies, the introduction of the railways to eastern Bengal. Although the deltaic landscape was uniquely naturally suited to water transport, the colonial administration promoted the expansion of the rail network as a means of facilitating resource extraction as well as expanding administrative control of an otherwise relatively impenetrable frontier region. The results were almost immediately catastrophic. New railway embankments crisscrossing the landscape impeded the flow of the rivers, compromising their navigability. Riverbeds began to rise, causing intractable waterlogging in surrounding settlements. Agrarian decline ensued. As many paddy fields went under water, eastern Bengal, long a rice surplus region, had to begin importing rice in large quantities for the first time in its history. Although evidence exists that engineers quickly made the problems with this new infrastructure known to colonial administrators, no actions were taken to curtail its expansion.

After independence, spurred on by the Green Revolution, the Pakistan government was eager to expand agricultural production in then-East Pakistan's coastal zone. To that end, in the 1960s, with the support of American engineers, the East Pakistan Water and Power Development Authority began building a dense system of embankments surrounding 123 coastal islands (known as 'polders' after the Dutch word referring to low-lying lands completely surrounded by protective dikes). The limited

understanding on the part of the engineers of the area's unique deltaic landscape, along with poor maintenance of this elaborate infrastructure, resulted in a land and water regime that has only exacerbated the problems which began during the colonial period. The resultant waterlogging, soil salinity and tidal surges from breached embankments have all contributed to the extreme vulnerability of people living within these polders. Relatively rapid subsidence is causing the polder lands to sink in relation to the sea level – a process previously mitigated by sediment deposits from natural tidal flows, which were cut off after the introduction of the polders. In the interstices of the climate change-centric narrative of the disappearance of Bangladesh's coastline, local and international activists and scientists are asking what is to be done about the polders, a concern marginalised in Bangladesh's current development landscape.

 International concern with anthropogenic climate change is preoccupied with technical mitigation strategies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions while leaving capitalist growth and ecological devastation unchecked. 

While the legacy of exploitative landscape manipulation long predates climate change, it will nevertheless impact Bangladesh's vulnerability to climate change in the future. In this sense, identifying the historical foundations of climate vulnerability is critical to understanding how these dynamics are linked with the destruction resulting from climate change. Subsuming the implications of these effects to discourses about climate change erases the long and often violent histories that have shaped ecological vulnerability in much of Bangladesh today.

Adapting to adaptation

The lacunae in the understanding and analysis of loss and damage in Bangladesh reflect broader chasms between climate change discourse and global capitalism. International concern with anthropogenic climate change is preoccupied with technical

mitigation strategies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions while leaving capitalist growth and ecological devastation unchecked. At a local level, attempts to address climate change have failed to confront historical power dynamics that made Bangladesh vulnerable to climate change in the first place.

There are indications that international climate finance mechanisms could offer a pathway out of the anti-politics which has characterised the majority of development work in Bangladesh for decades. Some Early Adaptors insist that funding secured through UNFCCC negotiations is substantively different from development funding which has come before. Unlike Overseas Development Aid (ODA), which flows from wealthier countries to LDCs entirely at the discretion of the former, climate finance is pledged through international treaties, which recognise the obligations of major carbon-emitting countries to compensate the countries that are the primary victims of those emissions. Bangladesh and other LDCs are thus entitled to these funds, and should continue to fight for greater self-determination in their expenditure.

The implication is that climate finance could be used to address real structural change, shifting away from business-as-usual development. Even as Early Adaptors have thus far embraced development orthodoxy in imagining the possibilities for climate change adaptation, embracing political solutions and addressing inequity could offer a restorative paradigm for reducing the vulnerability of coastal communities. But doing so will require reckoning with the historical processes that made them vulnerable in the first place. Δ



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