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CLIMATE CHANGE EXODUS IN BANGLADESH



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Development Synergy Institute

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## CLIMATE CHANGE EXODUS IN BANGLADESH

The reality surrounding environmental or the climate-induced displacements of people are not unusual in Bangladesh as the country has always suffered from the catastrophic natural calamities and other disasters for centuries. Cyclones, heavy rainfalls, floods, droughts, river erosions, salt water intrusion are the usual scenario and they are all devastating in nature, which remain regular threats to the millions of Bangladeshi people. While having these on-going natural calamities, impacts of climate change have imposed further disastrous phenomenon in Bangladesh. On-going climate events and experiences have shown that the intensity and severity of natural disasters have increased in recent years due to climate change.

The adverse effects of climate change undermine the economic development, human security, and people's fundamental rights (UNDP 2007). According to Tanner et al. 2007, loss of coastal land to the sea, currently predicted to 3% by the 2030s and 6% in the 2050s, is likely to generate steady flow of displaced people. Also a report by Rabbani, 2009 shows over 35 millions of people will be displaced from 19 coastal districts of Bangladesh in case of 1 meter sea level rise in this century.

International Organisation for Migration (2009) indicated in a study report that many people have already migrated to the urban slums from the coastal zones of Bangladesh due to frequent cyclones, storm surges, river erosion, etc. In conjunction with ever increasing climate-induced impacts and exodus of people from their coastal homelands have subsequently put huge pressure on the big cities. Slums in the Dhaka city are expanding due to increased population and huge pressures are being felt on the infrastructure such as housing, transport, education, energy and water supply, sewerage system and recreational amenities. In 2009 around 12 million of people lived in the Dhaka city, around 3.4 million of them slum-dwellers. Dhaka is growing at 3 per cent per annum, one of the fastest rates in the world (Roy, 2009). Such unsustainable urban growths in turn step up the deterioration of local urban environment that contributes further to urban poverty.

However, the key questions are repeatedly being asked whether Bangladeshi government has appropriate policy in place, intuitional framework or even the capacity to deal with such monumental tasks. Many experts have provided useful advice to review issues related to human vulnerability against the impacts of climate change; displacements and identifying the important gaps with regard policies that are already in place.

It would be utterly unfair to suggest that Bangladesh does not have any existing national policies or the intuitional frameworks to deal with the consequences of

any disaster. In fact it's quiet opposite. There are different levels of agencies or working groups exist who are dealing with the disaster management, for example The National Disaster Management Council (NDMC), The Inter Ministerial Disaster Management Coordination Committee and The Ministry of Food and Disaster Management. They all coordinate and get involved under the Disaster Management Bureau (DMB). Moreover, The Department of Environment under The Ministry of Environment and Forest is the key group and focal point of most of the organisations that are engaged with national development activities.

Additionally, in this context there are few existing prominent policies that need to be noticed such as National Environmental Policy (1992), Coastal Zone Policy (2005), National Adaptation Programme of Action (2005) and Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (2008). These policies were designed to maintain ecological balance, protecting the country from natural disasters, environmental issues such as identifying and regulating activities which may degrade the environment, coastal zone development, identifying the priority activities to adapt to the impacts of climate change etc. But according to Aktar (2009) there are no clear indications how population displacement problems will be addressed in these policies, also there are no detailed action plans with a timeframe to tackle this problem.

Bangladeshi floods and disasters management experts are said to be the finest in the world. Even former US President Bill Clinton has said the world can learn from Bangladesh many things about disaster management (the Third International Conference on Early Warning System in Germany, 27 March, 2006). Sir David King, chief scientific advisor of the United Kingdom (UK), said Bangladesh is playing a role in facing natural disasters far advanced than other countries of the world.

In contrast, many experts have contradicted the claim that the scenarios on the ground are far from being commendable, and further stressed the fact that there are weaknesses and inefficiency in managing the natural disasters in Bangladesh. As experienced in cyclone Aila (Roy, 2009), the Government of Bangladesh could not repair the damage embankments even after more than one year in most affected areas. Other post-disaster problems such as displacement of people, improper and insufficient rehabilitation programme, issues related to transparency and accountability, negligence, corruption and favour people who support the same political party in power over others by the local disaster management authority regarding the relief operations were also reported.

Having a plethora of national policies and institutional frameworks are merely inadequate to response the consequences of any disaster. Appropriate, organised and corruption free actions on the ground are equally needed to fulfil the requirements. Government got to have policies and institutional frameworks

vis-à-vis proper and sufficient rehabilitation programme and corruption free supports. Metaphorically speaking, if a building is built with an inadequate foundation, inevitably building wouldn't stand for long even though the strictest building regulations were met to build the upper portion of the building. Therefore, fundamental question needed to be asked – how effectively and quickly Bangladeshi government can provide support and rehabilitation programme when it is needed on the ground, not on piecemeal basis but in an organised and coherent manner.

Undoubtedly, wealthy countries will not accept influx of millions of Bangladeshis as climate refugees. Even though at the December 2009 Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, the Bangladesh government successfully highlighted its concern and anxieties with clarity and urged the wealthy nations to accept millions of Bangladeshi climate refugees (Paul, The Daily Star, 2010). Does Bangladesh have a moral case to justify that the richer countries must allow millions of people to enter as climate refugees? Arguably, may be, but it is simply not plausible for many richer countries to accept such scheme, in reality many of richer countries in Europe, North America and Australia will face similar climate refugee problem within their own territories.

Furthermore, on-going dispute over the status of climate refugees have not yet been clarified by the international community, in addition the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is reluctant to revise refugee definition to integrate climate refugees on grounds that it would undermine the whole refugee status who have become refugees dejectedly non-climatic mean, for example flee from persecution, war or political reasons. Who knows how long it will take for international communities to come to a well-accepted finale or if ever this subtle debate will see a happy ending? Should Bangladeshi government wait and see what the international community decide, leaving millions of climate refugees to their fate? Or the government of Bangladesh should urgently act now before the situation gets too frantic?

Whole debate is not to undermine extraordinary resilience and determination of Bangladeshi people. Affected communities have always bounced back and overly shown their strongest resilience against any natural calamities. In relation to the impacts of climate change, there are many ways the poorest communities are now developing practical and realistic means (Huq, The Guardian, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2011) to adapt the impacts of climate change, for example capturing rain water, growing vegetables on floating meshes of bamboo filled with soil, using water hyacinth as the base of plant growing media, diversification of agriculture crops, revitalising the local plant varieties that can withstand extreme weather, homestead gardening, planting more trees close to river banks against river erosion etc.

As it stands, according to the International Red Cross (2008), environmental disasters attributed primarily to climate change are now a bigger cause of population displacement than war and persecution. Mother Nature will potentially be the cause of many conflicts in the future. Neighbouring country India recently stepped up their border security between Bangladesh and India. Indian Border Security Force (BSF) killed hundreds of Bangladeshi people in recent years in cross border trespassing and one can only imagine what the terrible consequences will be for those climate refugees who will prepare to cross the border to search for safer homes. In effect, the whole situation will create huge tension, which may push two countries to brink of wars.

Policy makers in Bangladesh must consider climate refugee situation with the utmost importance, make it as their primary concern and address climate-induced displacement within National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA). Government of Bangladesh as well as civic societies and the local communities must find the ways that best address the needs of climate refugees.

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