

Exploring State Vulnerability and Climate Change

Bangladesh's Resilience Plan

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Introduction

In 2015, the Bangladeshi non-profit COAST Trust released a coffee table book provocatively titled *A Tale from Climate Ground Zero: Climate Change, Land and People in Bangladesh*. The book, published with support from Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was meant to celebrate Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's receipt of the 2015 United Nations Champion of the Earth Award for leadership on climate policy. The book comprised a series of lustrous photographs not only of the impacts of climate change on Bangladesh, but also of various village-level projects of adaptation. The book thus visually offered a story not just of passive victimhood but also of active response. The preface for the book, an excerpt from Hasina's UN acceptance speech, folded this narrative of adaptation and resilience into a longer narrative of the nation. Beginning with a retelling of the story of Bangladesh's separation from Pakistan and birth as an independent country in the crucible of the Liberation War in 1971 and tracing the many challenges the country had faced in its short history, the speech positioned Bangladesh not just as a victim of climate change, but as a leader in addressing its impending threat.

“As one of the most climate-vulnerable countries,” Hasina noted, “Bangladesh is moving with innovative ideas to address complex climatic challenges in a sustainable manner. We do not see any conflict between environment and pursuing sustainable development. We are ready to share our modest innovation and experience with others. That is our contribution to turn ‘vulnerability’ into ‘resilience.’”¹ The message in the speech, and in the coffee table book that memorialized it, was clear. Bangladesh, a country beset by all manner of difficulties, had historically triumphed against adversity. Climate change, and the massive environmental challenges it posed to the low-lying, riverine country, were significant, but were just a few of a long list of vulnerabilities that the country needed to navigate on its path to development. The country would confront these emerging vulnerabilities in the same way that it had confronted other historic and contemporary challenges: with a combination of development innovation and national resolve. In doing so, it would offer its model of resilience as a gift to

other countries confronting their own climate crises. Bangladesh would, in short, become a climate state.

This brief takes this proposition seriously. It first historically situates Bangladesh's transition from development to climate state. It then provisionally asks what this move from vulnerability to resilience might mean in practice.

The Climate-Vulnerable-Development State

In the past decade, Bangladesh has unquestionably become an epicenter of programming and policy solutions seeking to address and anticipate climate change. The physical geography of the country makes this a particularly urgent concern. Bangladesh is acutely vulnerable to, among other things, sea-level rise, saline intrusion into land and fresh-water reserves, desertification, flooding from Himalayan glacial runoff, and increased cyclonic activity from the Bay of Bengal. It is thus likely to suffer both severe and early effects of global warming.

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The country's economic and political geography are likely to further complicate an already deeply complex set of problems. In the short period since independence, the country has experienced dramatic improvements in numerous Human Development Indicators, marked decreases in rates of poverty, and increases in GDP.² The government is currently pursuing an ambitious goal of reaching “middle income” status by 2021, the 50th anniversary of its independence (the “Vision 2021 Plan”).³ Yet, despite these gains, 40% of the population (more than 50 million people) continue to live in poverty. Many of these reside in parts of the country that are likely to experience severe environmental degradation and climate induced displacement. Its capital city, Dhaka, is the fastest growing city in the world, and there are grave and pressing concerns



about its infrastructural capacity to weather continued population growth and climate change at the same time.⁴ Moreover, Bangladesh is hemmed in on three sides by India and one side by Myanmar. Both of these states have long and contentious histories with Bangladesh over questions of migration. In both India and Myanmar, ethno-nationalist political parties have mobilized the specter of Muslim Bangladeshi climate migrants to consolidate power and voting blocks.⁵ This makes the question of cross-border displacement a pressing political concern that is likely to grow in urgency in coming years.

These physical, economic, and political realities shape Bangladesh's acute vulnerability. But these vulnerabilities have historical roots as well. Longer colonial and postcolonial histories of water management, island and river embankment, and land transformation for agriculture and aquaculture have made Bangladesh's Southwestern Delta region, for example, acutely vulnerable to the effects of global warming. This history points to the need to understand Bangladesh's climate vulnerability as more than a simple bi-product of (predominantly) Western carbon emission. Rather, it is tied to historically and spatially situated forms of extraction, exploitation, and development.⁶

Bangladesh, throughout much of its brief history, has been an archetypal development state. During the East Pakistan period, from 1947-1971, it emerged as a site for Green Revolution experimentation. It became a site for large-scale land transformation projects such as the embankment of many islands in the coastal delta to facilitate transitions to high-yield varieties of rice. But it also emerged as a space for piloting innovative grassroots programs—most famously exemplified in the work of the Pakistan Academy for Rural Development's Comilla Model. Following independence in 1971, the country's status as a site for development experimentation emerged as a central and ongoing question of governance. In 1974, the country experienced a severe famine during which it is thought that as many as 1.5 million people perished. Partly linked to the massive flooding of the Brahmaputra River and partly due to the decimations of the 1971 Liberation War, the country responded by opening its doors to international development organizations. Since then, Bangladesh has become known as the “Wall

Street of Development,” a country densely packed with NGOs implementing cutting-edge development thinking and technology.

Bangladesh's transition from a development state to a climate state is more a shift in framing than in kind. Indeed, its current climate strategy is a direct extension of its developmentalist past.

As the country's fledgling democracy fell to a series of military regimes between 1976 and 1990, a wave of domestic and international NGOs increasingly began to assume responsibilities for the management and development of rural areas.⁷ Healthcare, credit, agricultural extension, food security, and other sectors central to rural development became proving grounds for new innovations in high-yield agriculture, community development schemes, empowerment programs, and microcredit and microfinance. This explosion of NGOs enabled a marked retreat of the state from the arena of development, particularly in rural areas.⁸ Not only did this mean that, increasingly, constitutionally guaranteed services were being provided and managed by non-governmental intuitions; it also opened Bangladesh to rapid and early transitions to new regimes of liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s and, more recently, sustainable development.

From Developmentalism to Climatalism

Bangladesh's transition from a development state to a climate state is more a shift in framing than in kind. Indeed, its current climate strategy is a direct extension of its developmentalist past. Much of the focus within national-level policy and strategic planning is on how the country will confront the impending climate crisis through growth-oriented development. As the country's National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) has it, “The challenge Bangladesh now faces is to scale up [investments in climate preparedness] to create a suitable environment for the economic and social development of the country and to secure the



well-being of our people.”⁹ This marriage of ecological and economic environments is tightly integrated into national policy frameworks. Both the NAPA and the 2008 Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) offer frameworks for moving the country from vulnerability to resilience by building enhanced Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) programs into existing sustainable development strategies.¹⁰ As the NAPA makes clear, “there are various coping mechanisms, formal and informal, already in place. What is new is the urgency of the matter to be integrated within the development process so that when the Climate Change impacts become more clearly discernible, the nation shall be ready to handle that as almost a routine affair in its development process.”¹¹

Yet, the continuity between Bangladesh’s historical developmentalism and what might be termed its contemporary climatalism is also suggestive. It implies a future that, despite potentially catastrophic environmental transformations, follows directly on the past.

The meaning of “routine,” a word that is liberally peppered throughout these policy frameworks, is twofold. First, it involves pursuing strategies of climate change preparation that dovetail with already existing priorities of growth and sustainable development. The BCCSAP explains, “We believe firmly that development is the most effective way to reduce poverty and build resilience to climate change. To do this we have already made climate change an integral part of our national development strategy and have started to build the country’s capacity (communities, civil society, the private sector and Government) so that we are able to tackle the impacts of climate change, in a routine way, as part of the development process.”¹² Second, it involves deepening the reliance on foreign aid to underwrite climate preparedness. As the BCCSAP makes clear, “Bangladesh is seeking the strong political commitment and support of the international community to assist in implementing its long-term climate-resilient strategy.”¹³ Arguably, a reliance on

foreign aid to underwrite climate preparedness is both logical and historically just. Yet, the continuity between Bangladesh’s historical developmentalism and what might be termed its contemporary climatalism is also suggestive. It implies a future that, despite potentially catastrophic environmental transformations, follows directly on the past.

Climate Business, as Usual

That Bangladesh’s emergence as a climate state is more repackaging than radical transformation is not surprising. Path dependency and inertia are to be expected for a country confronting catastrophic ecological crisis in the midst of its aspirational transition from “basket case”—in Kissinger’s famous characterization—to middle-income nation. Bangladesh’s climate strategy plan, particularly its attention to disaster management, can be interpreted as a qualified success. For example, recent cyclonic events such as Sidr in 2007, Aila in 2009, and Roanu in 2016 have caused comparatively small numbers of deaths, particularly when compared with cyclones in 1970 and 1991 that killed more than 300,000 and 100,000, respectively. Much of this reduced loss of life can be directly attributed to intensive DRRM efforts to protect and prepare vulnerable coastal populations. These include construction of cyclone shelters, community trainings in disaster preparedness, and new early warning systems put in place by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and other NGOs.¹⁴ Similar strides have been made in other arenas of disaster management throughout the country.

Yet the articulation between climate and development policy also leaves a number of open questions and uncertainties. One key question is that of financing. Hasina’s invocation of the “gift of resilience” frames Bangladesh’s climate story as a national narrative. Yet its climate strategy remains very much dependent of international donors. Prior to 2016, there were two primary funds underwriting the program outlined in the BCCSAP: the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF), supported by national budgetary endowments, and the Bangladesh Climate Change Resilience Fund (BCCRF), a multi-donor trust fund. While much of the money distributed by these funds has been directed to ministries within the government,



many of the actual projects are implemented in coordination with or through donor organizations. Moreover, as Transparency International Bangladesh points out, such funding is at constant risk because of donor fears of corruption.¹⁵ Justified or not, it is certainly true that there has been a marked lack of transparency in decision-making processes related to the use of these funds.¹⁶ In 2016, the BCCRF is scheduled to be shut down due to a lack of commitment by the Government of Bangladesh.¹⁷

A second set of questions revolve around the ways that climate change programming will impact the lives of marginal groups. Despite repeated references to the “most vulnerable” communities and members of society in the BCCSAP, the government has been roundly criticized for its failure to consult at-risk groups in its preparation.¹⁸ This raises concerns over the ways that climate planning might deepen inequalities that have already been accentuated through national development strategies. For example, a major target area for climate change preparedness, as identified in the NAPA, is the enhancement and protection of coastal salt-water fisheries and aquaculture.

The government has been criticized for failing to consult at-risk groups in its preparation, raising concerns that climate planning might deepen inequalities that have already been accentuated through national development strategies.

Frozen seafoods, particularly tiger prawns, are the country’s second largest export market following ready-made garments. This sector was an early target of liberalization and structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and, over the last 30 years, has spread rapidly throughout much of the coastal belt. Shrimp aquaculture has long been known for its ecological impacts—including pollution of adjacent land and water through salt and chemical run-offs and degradation of fragile mangrove ecologies. As recent research with landless groups in the Southwest demonstrates, shrimp aquaculture has equally devastating social impacts, especially for small-holders, share-croppers,

and day laborers, many of whom have been displaced to urban slums in cities such as Khulna, Chittagong, and Dhaka.¹⁹ Brackish water seepage into adjacent fields and aquifers has undermined agricultural yields, radically reduced dietary diversity and access to drinking water, and dramatically eroded employment opportunities in the region. Moreover, it has increased potential exposure to storms and cyclones in the Southwest, as shrimp farmers regularly drill through embankments to access the brackish water in rivers outside. Privileging an industry that has manifestly undermined community resilience in the midst of an action plan for climate-resilient development raises questions about what visions of the future are on offer in the climatologist framework. One plausible answer seems to be a future in which depeasantization and urbanization are more central to national development strategies than the protection of rights and land for marginalized groups.²⁰

Finally, there remains a question about what this transition from vulnerability to resilience means as a governance strategy. Does “resilience” as a goal of climate policy constitute enhanced social welfare for marginal groups or an ongoing governmental retreat from social protection? An example from the BCCSAP illustrates this concern. Buried in the midst of this otherwise dry policy document is a text box which illustrates the plight of a tiny village named Sona Mollar Dangi on an island in Faridpur district which experienced severe flooding in 2004 and 2007 “caused by climate change.”

With the help of a local NGO, village residents devised a plan to combat floods by raising all of the houses, and ultimately all of the agricultural land, onto earthen plinths. The success of this program led residents to foment other plans, such as setting up a primary school and a local health clinic. As the text box states, “The simple and hard-working people of Sona Mollar Dangi had never done anything to make Mother Nature angry. But they are facing the brunt of her anger anyway. While the rest of the world are debating who is blame [sic] for global warming and who is to pay for it, the resilient people of Sona Mollar Dangi stand out as a radiant example of how to brave climate change.”²¹ The story does indeed illustrate the resilience of Sona Mollar Dangi’s residents and speaks to the capacity of rural



communities to adapt in ways that may allow them to weather some of climate change's impending storms. But it also speaks to a resilience which is primarily rooted in the population itself, not necessarily in government intervention. Situated in the midst of the country's climate action plan, the story is telling. As a governance strategy, resilience suggests enhancing the capacity of populations to cope with disaster, but does not necessarily outline a robust strategy to protect them from it.²² A program organized around combatting vulnerability through resilience might well privilege acclimatizing vulnerable populations to climate disaster, rather than protecting them from it.

Situating Bangladesh's climate planning historically demonstrates that current climate strategies are extensions of long-standing patterns of development and experimentation within the country.

Conclusion: Provisional Notes Towards an Investigation

Situating Bangladesh's climate planning historically demonstrates that current climate strategies are extensions of long-standing patterns of development and experimentation within the country. Bangladesh's transition from vulnerability to resilience should thus be read as part of an ongoing project of combatting a range of challenges—environmental, social, political, and economic—through similarly conceived development intervention. There is evidence that this plan of action has produced significant and measurable impacts, especially in realm of disaster preparedness. But there remain a number of critical ongoing concerns about the ways climate planning will shape the climate state. First, the status of climate finance, as well as the programs that it underwrites, remains highly contingent on donor states. Second, the existing climate strategy documents and policies rarely interrogate the ways that development has reinforced and exacerbated existing inequalities, particularly among smallholder and landless groups in rural areas. A climate policy organized around extending the goals of sustainable development could well further exacerbate these inequalities and increase, rather than decrease,

vulnerability. Third, the meanings of “resilience” remain fundamentally ambiguous. What a resilient climate state is and what its relationships and obligations to its citizens are remain unclear. These areas of concern are open questions for Bangladesh's future as a climate state. Moreover, they chart a provisional starting place for further analysis of state vulnerabilities and climate change.

Endnotes

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