

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. Longstanding debates on development in Bangladesh have 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

ANTI-POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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

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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.

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



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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 Adaptors 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