



WATER AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Fostering Regional Cooperation and Sharing

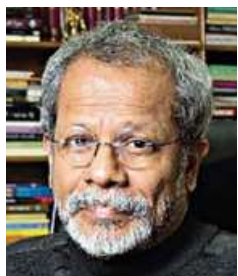
The Daily Star, Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) and Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD) jointly organised an online discussion titled "Water and Climate Change: Fostering Regional Cooperation and Sharing" on December 29, 2020. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.



SHAMSUL HUDA,
Executive Director,
ALRD

Rivers are nature's gift to us. The international rivers in our region have contributed to the expansion of civilisation since ancient times. In recent history, sharing water of international rivers by two or more countries led to concerns and frustrations throughout the region. Nevertheless, international rivers can be looked at as a symbol of expanding cooperation and an opportunity to foster friendships across the region.

Climate change is a similar global issue. Unprecedented human interventions have resulted in global warming and we are observing an increased frequency of natural disasters throughout the globe. The countries in the South are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Today's regional consultation hopes to widen the scope for sharing knowledge and experience among the stakeholders and lead to a concerted and coordinated approach towards a positive change. This discussion will also help encourage the relevant actors of the different states to negotiate through meaningful dialogues the issue of sharing water and promote wider cooperation on climate change responses.



DR IMTIAZ AHMED,
Professor,
International
Relations & Director,
Centre for Genocide
Studies, University of
Dhaka

There is a need for reconceptualization of certain terms. Rivers need to be reconceptualised to be thought of consisting of not just water but also of energy, biodiversity, and sediment. Whenever we talk about river sharing, we only talk about sharing of the water. Furthermore, we need to reconceptualise how we want to share waters.

Bangladesh is a water-centric country. Unfortunately, Bangladesh's entire development agenda is land-centric. There are two political perspectives towards rivers. According to the statist perspective, the upper riparian/lower riparian discourse focuses on why and how states cooperate or do not cooperate in sharing water only. The Water, Energy, Biodiversity, and Sediments (WEBS) perspective focuses on the experiential challenges of living beings. What needs to be done is to make this WEBS perspective more mainstream.

On the side of Bangladesh, there is a serious issue of river erosion. In 2015, a survey was carried out with the help of ActionAid where it was found that river erosion is the main cause of relocation for people. When discussing erosion, we seem to focus only on land loss. There is no system for calculating land gain caused by erosion through the piling up of sediments over the years. In some areas, on average there might be a loss of land but in others, there might be a greater volume of land gain. A problem arises due to the people losing the lands not being compensated for it.



DR A ATIQ RAHMAN,
Executive Director,
Bangladesh Centre
for Advanced Studies
(BCAS)

South Asia has the second largest population in the world. We have two island countries, two landlocked countries, and three riverine countries, making the whole region quite complex. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was supposed to be the regional cooperation mechanism but it has failed because the two greater powers within the South Asian region do not talk to each other. But the South Asian eastern sub region consisting of Bangladesh, India, Bhutan, and Nepal have been able to cooperate in regards to the Himalayan, Ganges, Meghna, and Brahmaputra system. Within this whole system, climate change has been wreaking havoc. Bangladesh itself is facing the various impacts of climate change which include frequent floods, droughts, cyclones, and so on.

There is an urgent need for planning when

it comes to migrations resulting from these various impacts of climate change. Rapid and non-voluntary migration of millions of people is a huge issue.

The reality of global climate change is impact on agriculture, food security, and water security and these impacts are far more complex than the political impacts. Our only way of moving forward is increasing trans-regional cooperation.



M ZAKIR HOSSAIN KHAN,
Senior Program
Manager (Climate
Finance Governance),
Transparency
International
Bangladesh (TIB)

The coastal people are the most vulnerable when it comes to issues of climate change. Globally, around 56 percent of the people reside in coastal regions.

In the context of South Asia, the Himalayan glaciers are melting more rapidly than anything else in the world. In Bangladesh, due to the rising sea level, more than 570 coastal cities could be affected by 2050. 46 percent of the poor of the world live in climate-vulnerable countries and 897 million people lack climate-adaptive capacities. The Paris Agreement needs to work in favour of these climate-vulnerable countries. The developed countries have the capacity to reduce carbon emissions and to mobilise funds and other resources. But the targets of the developed countries are not ambitious enough in the submitted Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Ultimately, the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are targeting emission of less pollution, and are forced to bear the inequitable burden of reducing emissions.

Although climate finance is supposed to focus on the adaptation of the LDCs, the money is only provided as loans to the developing countries. Hence, climate-vulnerable countries are at risk of the climate debt burden.

LDCs need to come together at the national level to demand ambitious and human rights-compliant climate action. The developed countries should create concrete and meaningful commitments under the Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) principle. The legal tools under the Paris agreement should be touched upon so that the lack of transparency and ambiguity can also be addressed. Time-bound mobilisation of required funds for climate adaptation is also essential.

Community-led adaptation should be the key to adaptation and resilience.



FARAH KABIR,
Country Director,
ActionAid Bangladesh

We must help decision-makers, legislators, and policy-makers move beyond land-centric thinking and shift to water-centric thinking to formulate legislation and policies accordingly. This cannot be achieved unless there is pressure from the community. Conversations around rivers in South Asia are about managing and controlling the rivers. We must move away from this dialogue and think about how we can learn to live with rivers, recognising them as living beings. If the upper riparian has the psyche and mindset that they control the water, I would recommend they rethink it because it will be difficult for anyone to control rivers.

The economic and funding aspects are usually discussed, but the loss and damage go beyond that. When there is river erosion or the water level rises, people have to move and they lose social capital and entire communities due to uncertainty. Cities are not planning with water and migration in mind. These aspects should be given importance in conversations with policy-makers across South Asia.



PROFESSOR DR LIYAN ZHANG,
Tianjin University,
China

I believe people are the core elements here instead of land and rivers. The common people at the grassroots who have missed

out on formal education are creative because there aren't many limitations in their minds. Their innovative initiatives are valuable. They happen to have many good practices. Therefore, it is crucial to develop a mechanism of sharing knowledge and learning even across different countries' borders. In South Asian countries like India, Bangladesh and Nepal, educating people can be challenging. Still, if the common people, like garment workers, took on this challenge, they may succeed. Learning and sharing valuable information would benefit everybody.

Water issues are mostly related to pollution because people in different countries pollute their water resources. This leads to suffering for people from other countries who happen to share the same river. But climate change occurs for other reasons, though being closely linked to river issues. Therefore, when it comes to water issues, we should concentrate on pollution over everything else.



DHARITRI KUMAR SARKER,
Deputy Secretary,
Ministry of
Environment, Forest,
and Climate Change,
Bangladesh

Bangladesh's two-fold strategy for facing the climate-change scenario is focused on increasing our resilience to the impacts of climate change. We are also working to achieve lower carbon emissions and more

entities is fascinating and, in many ways, a significant step. However, there is a big debate today about justice versus rights. Sometimes, those who command legal resources have rights and vice versa. So, how will the river represent and speak for itself?

We must de-centre engineers from the discussion surrounding rivers and move forward with new concepts, taking different perspectives into account. The government should be told that implementing policies requires plural methodologies and more understandings than the narrow engineering view of rivers.



ADVOCATE SYEDA RIZWANA HASAN,
Executive Director,
BELA

The rights of the river as an ecosystem should be put above everything else. That should, in turn, dictate the rights of the people and the rights of the state. Rivers or ecosystems are destroyed because there is an upper riparian or mega political power. At the national level, the current mode of development is also contributing to the mass destruction of major ecosystems. We have failed to respect rivers as ecosystems and we treat them as cesspools and mining centres. The damage is happening on both the regional and the national level.

The main problem in South Asia is that, when we talk about protecting rivers

make the water more erratic. There will be more water present at the wrong times and less when we need it. But storage does not only mean storage in dams. Water needs to be stored as groundwater, and in ponds, wetlands, and so on.



BARRISTER RAJA DEVASISH ROY,
Chakma Circle Chief

We do not know much about the rivers in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Most of the sources of these rivers lie within Bangladesh. The Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change is supposed to protect forests from deforestation and from loggers. But, instead, the indigenous peoples are forced to tell the ministry to do its job.

Indigenous peoples need to be part of the dialogue and work with the Bangladesh government for the benefit of the environment. We can bring vast knowledge and experience to the table. The government of Bangladesh alone does not hold the capacity to stop the logging in the hill forests of CHT. The indigenous forest dwellers, on the other hand, know who these loggers are. So, indigenous peoples working together with the government can bring in more meaningful forest management, water resource sharing, and water resource management.



AJAYA DIXIT,
Editor, Water Nepal
and Chairman, Board
of Directors, Nepal
Water for Health
(NEWAH)

The local ecologies have changed vastly over the last few decades. We need to recognise how these different ecologies interact with each other and how people living in those ecologies respond to environmental stress. In the water terrain, we can see two different universes. One is the world of the experts and the other is the universe of the people who learn from nature. Unfortunately, there is a huge gap between these two groups of people. We do not train our engineers about the social context and challenges present at the local level. Revisiting education can therefore be a good starting point.

Everybody discusses taking water away from rivers but not about putting water back into rivers. So, how can we change the fragmentation of rivers and the loss of biodiversity? The way forward would be to put the vulnerable first such as the smallholders, fisher folk, women and other marginalised groups. Data transparency is also an important issue. How do we then bring in the holistic ecological paradigm? How do we put an economic value on water? We also need to look into depleting upstream dry season river flow. To solve these issues we need a much greater dialogue and conversation across geographical regions.



SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN,
Commercial
Supplements Editor,
The Daily Star &
Moderator of the
session

We are aware that the trans-boundary freshwater resource management in South Asia has become complex due to water scarcity and climate change impacts. The water basins in these regions show the impacts of climate change on ecosystems and on society more visibly now. In terms of building resilience, it becomes a major issue as climate change affects water quantity, quality, temperature, water-related ecosystems, and the magnitude and occurrence of extreme weather events such as floods and droughts.

Through its impact on water resources, climate change is affecting many sectors including agriculture, fisheries, tourism, health and biodiversity. These impacts will eventually affect the lives of the millions of people dependent upon these sectors. The poor and vulnerable communities are affected in particular. To address this situation, trans-boundary cooperation is a necessity. Trans-boundary cooperation can also help in terms of conflict prevention, socio-economic development, and overall human well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reconceptualise the term river
- Introduce a water-centric development agenda
- Make the WEBS (Water, Energy, Biodiversity, and Sediments) perspective of rivers more mainstream
- Ensure proper compensation for people losing lands due to river erosion
- Increase trans-regional cooperation on river basins
- Ensure time-bound mobilisation of required funds for climate adaption
- Address the pollution of water resources
- Ensure participation of the indigenous peoples in the fight against climate change

resilient development through mitigation. The mitigation measures that have been undertaken include developing utility-scale solar energy, scaling up wind energy, expanding the Solar Homes Programme, scaling up biogas production from waste, and building elevated express highways and Dhaka mass rapid transit systems.

Adaptation priorities include improved early warning systems for cyclones and floods, disaster preparedness for cyclones, climate-resilient infrastructure and communications, climate-resilient housing, stress-tolerant variety improvement and cultivation, biodiversity and ecosystem conservation, research, knowledge management, and capacity building.

Over the last decade, the government has allocated over two billion dollars annually for climate change-sensitive project implementation. So far, Bangladesh has created 200,000 hectares of coastal plantations as shelter belts to save the coastal people from climate change. We are also successfully managing 601,700 hectares of the Sundarbans mangrove forest, which saves lives and resources from natural calamities. Due to lack of upstream water flow in winter, saline water intrusion increases coastal soil salinity. We are coping with this problem by raising embankments and changing planting times.



ROHAN D'SOUZA,
Associate Professor,
Graduate School of
Asian and African
Area Studies, Kyoto
University, Japan

We must reconceptualise the language and understanding surrounding rivers. If we want to formulate new solutions for climate change, we must rethink what we mean by rivers, water, and so on. We need to think of rivers through WEBS rather than their statist concept. We have to go beyond cooperation and think of the idea of sharing and radically rethink how to position the beneficiaries and the cost. We cannot think about sharing without ideas of empowerment. Empowerment is about enabling people to secure their livelihoods, improve their abilities, and build their capacities. We must address that adaptation is not merely about dodging the damages caused by climate change; it is about what people are gaining as benefits and who are paying the costs.

Rivers being accorded the status of legal

as ecosystems, we consider rivers to be a bilateral issue, hence a matter for negotiation between the states. We fail to see the river as an agenda for discussion and dialogue. There is only state-level negotiation, which is devoid of any public consultation. People's voices should be given a place in discourse or negotiations. There is a need for information to be shared among nations and with all relevant communities. A set of guidelines and principles are required to guide future discourse. Climate change, climate challenges, and climate vulnerabilities should shape the agenda.



MR DIPAK GYAWALI,
Former Minister of
Water Resources of
Nepal; Academician,
Nepal Academy
of Science and
Technology

We are all victims of climate change. The energy sector created climate change, and the impact on societies came through the water sector. When Kyoto was first developed, there was a concept of equal but differentiated responsibilities. The equal but differentiated responsibility issue has been thoroughly watered down now and taken a new turn with the China versus US rivalry.

We put the responsibility of the climate issue with the bureaucracy and we expect this bureaucracy to lead us towards finding a solution to this issue. But we have to understand that this bureaucracy might be good at management after a framework has been set but they are not good at setting the framework. The current fight resides at a moral and market level as well. The market can be pressured through moral activism of environmentalists. We are expecting our government and ministries to take the lead and come up with brilliant solutions for us to follow. This will not happen.

We also need to look at water through a much wider lens. The biggest portion of trans-boundary water is not actually the river water but water present in the atmosphere. This water transports far more moisture than rivers, especially in the tropics, and does not recognise any boundaries. The cooperation on meteorology is far more serious and far more doable than the cooperation in trans-boundary river sharing.

We also need to shift our focus to the issue of water storage. Climate change is going to