

BAKU CLIMATE CONFERENCE

The unresolved question of ‘non-economic’ loss and damage



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Some 64 kilometres southwest of Azerbaijan’s capital, Baku, is the Gobustan State Historical and Cultural Reserve. After the first week of the Baku Climate Conference, the 29th Conference of the Parties (COP), we had the opportunity to visit these relics of our ancestors.

As I observed the stone carved cavities in Gobustan, I wondered what Stone Age humans might have stored in them—perhaps meat, fruits, herbs, or seeds. Cooking rice was not yet part of civilisation, as rice had not been discovered; only later domesticated by *Homo sapiens*. Over time, wild rice was tamed, but the “Green Revolution project” transformed agriculture into a profit-driven industry, eradicating the diversity of traditional rice and other crop genetic resources.

In parallel, the discourse on climate change adaptation and payment for loss and damage is growing, with the Global South advocating for an Adaptation Fund and a Loss and Damage (L&D) Fund. Yet, L&D negotiations largely focus on economic losses, leaving non-economic loss and damage underrepresented in the global climate negotiations.

On our way back from Gobustan, I wondered: could we ever put a price tag on these priceless remnants? If these artefacts were to be lost to a volcanic eruption or another climate-induced disaster, the losses would fall under what we describe as the category of non-economic loss and damage in climate discourse.

The Baku Climate Conference, dubbed the “Finance COP,” focused more on promoting carbon credits and false solutions than addressing people-led adaptation and loss and damage. The unresolved, irreversible impacts of climate change continue to grow. Disasters like cyclones, droughts, floods, and heatwaves not only cause economic losses but also destroy traditional knowledge, rituals and even rare species. Can humanity survive without these non-economic, intangible cultural heritages? Acknowledging and incorporating these losses into global climate action is not just necessary—it’s urgent for conserving the essence of human existence.

Non-economic loss and damage  
in global climate discourse

The issue of “Loss and Damage” due to climate change gained prominence through small island nations (Small Island Developing States/ SIDS and Alliance of Small Island States/ AOSIS) initially focusing on economic impacts. However, Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLC) shifted the discussion

towards non-economic loss and damage (NELD), a concept often overlooked. Based on the UNFCCC’s report (2013) on Non-economic losses in the context of the work programme on loss and damage’ refers to losses not traded in markets—loss of life, health, human mobility, loss of territory, cultural heritage, Indigenous local knowledge and social capital, biodiversity and ecosystem service. Measuring these losses is challenging as they lack a market value, yet they are integral to human civilisation.

Following the Paris Agreement, a 2019 report identified key sectors for assessing NELD, and the “Santiago Network” was established to support developing nations. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report included NELD examples, such as loss of life and ecosystems. NELD’s scope varies across different cultures, ecosystems, and communities, shaped by diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts. This article presents examples of NELD caused by climatic stress from various eco-regions of global countries including Bangladesh to illustrate the broader concept.

Lost rain, lost rituals

The Huni Kui people, who reside in the Brazilian and Peruvian parts of the Amazon, believe that after death, humans are reborn as trees in the forest, according to Ninawa Inu Huni Kui, leader of the Huni Kui. To them, every plant and tree is sacred. The *Mukaya* (shamans or healers) venture deep into the forest to collect flowers, leaves, and roots used in herbal medicine and various rituals.

Due to irregular rainfall and rising temperatures, many plants are going to be extinct in the Amazon. Ninawa’s account parallels the experiences of the Indigenous Tripura community in Bangladesh’s Rema-Kalenga forest. The Tripura believe the *Kuthui/Rugani/Khlum* plant guides dead’s souls to heaven, but prolonged droughts have made this sacred plant harder to find.

In the Bengali Hindu tradition, 108 lotus flowers are essential for *Sharadiya Durga Puja*. From 2022 to 2024, excessive rainfall during the flowering season destroyed many blooms in wetlands. While some devotees managed to acquire lotus flowers at high prices, a very few could gather the full 108 required for rituals.

New diseases, new concerns

Climate change is also linked to diseases like dengue, chikungunya, cholera, and malaria, which bring new challenges and fears. Caroline

Naeku Lemachakoti, an Indigenous activist from the Samburu community in Nigari village of Kenya, reported that prolonged droughts are increasing the spread of a camel disease called *Nadopapita*.

Meanwhile, Shahin Alam, a youth climate activist from Bangladesh’s Sundarbans, highlighted that intrusion of salinity is causing complex reproductive health issues among women in coastal villages. Irregular rainfall

water scarcity—a grim story she reiterated this year. Meanwhile, U Khing Nu Chak, a youth climate activist from the Indigenous Chak community of Naikhongchhari in Bangladesh’s Bandarban, shared her Grandmother Janingme Chak’s memories of colourful maize varieties that once flourished in their mountain villages. These varieties are now disappearing, driven by drought, water shortages, and rising temperatures.

by Chathurika Sewwandi of Sri Lanka’s Vikalpini National Women’s Federation, face increased violence and insecurity in these situations. The emotional toll of leaving one’s birthplace is immense, and adapting to new settlements often leads to social, cultural, and environmental conflicts.

Indigenous knowledge, beliefs  
and new doubts

The devastating floods in Sunamganj and Sylhet in Bangladesh in 2022 not only led to loss of life and property but also wiped out many *Dhamail* songs, a cultural heritage of the *Haor* region. Women in these areas have their *Dhamail* songs written in songbooks, which were submerged and lost in the floods. Thus, climate change is causing the daily disappearance of numerous songs, languages, Indigenous knowledge, and cultural expressions around the world. Traditional practices related to weaving, agriculture, local adaptations, rural architecture, culinary arts, herbal medicine, and disaster management are all critically endangered due to climate change.

In the hills of Bandarban, only six speakers of the *Rengmitcha* language remain. The scarcity of water and land crisis is exacerbating the survival challenge of Indigenous communities. When the last speaker of the *Sare* language from India’s Andaman-Nicobar Islands passed away during the first wave of the Covid pandemic, the language went extinct.

Stephanie Stephens, a representative from Vanuatu’s Ministry of Climate Change, explained that as coastal villages are submerged by tidal surges, people are being forced to move to mountain areas. In these new regions, the medicinal plants they once relied on are no longer available, leading to the erosion of indigenous knowledge about herbs and healing.

Non-economic loss and damage, human  
rights, and political commitments

While Bangladesh has made strides in disaster management and adaptation, it has yet to fully address NELD. There is an urgent need for policies and management frameworks in this area. Although Bangladesh presented a national L&D assessment framework at the Baku Conference, NELD must be explicitly integrated. This requires the consent of all regions and communities, along with coordinated research on the impacts of NELD on ecosystems and people.

In climate finance negotiations, countries must include NELD in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC), National Adaptation Plan (NAP), and National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan (NBSAP) to ensure that NELD are addressed in both national and international climate policies. After undue delays and false oaths, the global leaders at the Baku conference agreed to climate finance \$300 billion per year. Strong commitment and concrete climate actions are now needed to address the global NELD.



Prehistoric stone curving art at Gobustan State Historical and Cultural Reserve, Baku, Azerbaijan.

PHOTO: PAVEL PARTHA

and rising temperatures are also damaging betel leaf plantations in the Khasi Indigenous community of Sylhet in Bangladesh, leading to a rise in the *Uttam* disease of betel leaf garden.

Erosion of genetic resources  
and biodiversity

In Sherpur of Bangladesh, the floods during August-September this year, submerged rice fields, including those growing the indigenous *Tulshimala* variety, a crop with Geographical Indication (GI) status. Rukasen Beypi, a climate activist from India’s Assam, highlighted a similar plight among the Karbi Indigenous people, whose traditional crops are rapidly vanishing. Droughts have made finding two wild banana varieties, *Lorup* and *Lochin*, increasingly difficult.

Bolivian food rights activist Aira Roja Condori, who also participated in last year’s climate summit in Dubai, recalled the loss of wild potato varieties due to droughts and

Leodegario Velayo and Rowena Buena the farmer-scientists from Philippines told that, they are trying to conserve the traditional climate resilient varieties.

Alien territories, new conflicts

Cyclones, floods, droughts, and rising temperatures are increasingly displacing both humans and wildlife, forcing migration in Bangladesh’s Satkhira and Netrokona regions. Young people, particularly women, are seeking jobs outside their villages due to the loss of agricultural land and employment opportunities. Unlike cultural migration, this displacement forces people to leave behind everything they’ve known: villages, ancestral graves, temples, and communities.

Makereta Waqavonovono from Fiji shared how frequent tidal surges displace her community, a situation mirrored by those affected by riverbank erosion in Bangladesh’s Meghna, Jamuna, and Brahmaputra basins. Women and children, as highlighted

A roadmap for rickshaw management is essential



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The unplanned growth of our cities has exacerbated the management crisis surrounding rickshaws, adding to the woes of an already chaotic transport sector. Battery-powered rickshaws, in particular, have gained popularity nationwide as a more convenient to pedal rickshaws. However, since these vehicles are unsafe by design and poorly regulated, accidents occur frequently, which shows the urgency of formulating a comprehensive policy to manage their operation effectively.

Over the years, the authorities have made various attempts to control the spread of battery-powered rickshaws. In Dhaka and Chattogram, battery-run rickshaws were banned by the High Court in 2014, with a subsequent directive in December 2021 prohibiting their import. In August 2015, the government banned three-wheeled, non-motorised vehicles on 22 roadways across the country. The Road Transport Act of 2018 further restricted battery-powered rickshaws, along with vans and other three-wheelers, and in 2023, the government unveiled the “Registration and Movement of Electric Vehicles Policy.” However, this policy neglected to address battery-operated rickshaws specifically, leaving a regulatory gap.

From pedal rickshaws to battery-  
run rickshaws

The history of the origin of rickshaws in Dhaka goes back to 1938 when six rickshaws were brought into the city by a zamindar from Sutrapur and a Marwari trader from Wari. This significant moment, documented in a 1986 BIDS publication, marked the beginning of Dhaka’s rickshaw industry. By 1944, according to Robert Gallagher’s 1992 research book “The Rickshaws of Bangladesh”, Dhaka licensed its first 100 rickshaws. By 1948, it was 575, and by 1972, the number increased to 23,000. However, there were more pullers than there were rickshaws, as many drivers shared the same vehicle. The Dhaka City Corporation (DCC)—the sole licensing authority until 1986—issued 79,554 rickshaw licenses, yet since its bifurcation, the city’s North and South corporations have conspicuously lacked data on the number of rickshaws in operation. This added complexity to managing the industry.

The transition to battery-powered rickshaws began between 2007 and 2009 when local workshops outfitted the vehicles. Auto-rickshaws and easybikes are the two primary varieties of battery-powered rickshaws. An electric motor and lead-acid batteries were added to the rickshaw frame, allowing it to operate at high speeds. However, these rickshaws or easybikes, often built with low-quality parts and batteries, lack essential safety

features, making them dangerous for drivers, passengers, and pedestrians alike.

Rickshaw-related  
research findings

Research on rickshaws and their pullers/drivers can help policymakers understand the industry’s scale and impact. According to a 2019 study by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), Dhaka alone has around 1.5 million rickshaw operators, with five million nationally relying on the vehicles for their livelihood, contributing around Tk 30,000 crore to the rural economy each year. Therefore, regulation and registration, especially zone-based management, are essential to address the issues posed by unregulated battery-powered rickshaws.

A May 2024 study by CLEAN found that 1.4 million easybikes collectively use approximately 659 MW of electricity daily, serving about 25 million people for short-distance transport. The easybike system contributes approximately Tk 97,625 crore to the national economy, according to the study, with major contributions from manufacturing, battery, and services related to charging, servicing, and commuting. The study suggests that proper regulation of easybikes could add Tk 8,000 crore to the national exchequer if they were legalised, licensed, and subjected to regular renewals. To promote sustainable use, the study also recommended shifting to lithium-ion batteries, offering driving courses and licenses, setting up solar-powered charging stations, etc.

From October 2021 to September 2023, the Bangladesh Energy and Power Research Council (BEPRC) carried out a project titled “Development of a Design

Standard for Easy Bike in Bangladesh.”

Conducted by BUET’s mechanical and electrical engineering departments, the project focused on creating a standard for easybike manufacturing, assembly, and importation. The project findings suggested that safety could be enhanced by improving the braking system, adding doors, and altering seating capacity. Replacing lead-acid batteries with lithium-ion batteries would reduce pollution and extend battery life. However, large-scale adoption of these changes could be hindered by the significant amount of illicit money involved in the unregulated sale of battery rickshaw number plates and inferior batteries.

Guidelines for sustainable

rickshaw management

Immediate action is needed to establish and enforce operating guidelines for both pedal and battery-powered rickshaws. But first, public walkways should be cleared for pedestrian use, and a rental bicycle system could encourage more people to cycle. Improved public transportation could also gradually reduce the dependency on rickshaws. Temporarily halting the production and sale of all rickshaw models and banning battery rickshaw imports are further steps to curb proliferation. That said, we should ensure that all these vehicles are properly registered and standardised. Community-based rickshaw systems, similar to those in DOHS and Bashundhara,

could be expanded, while a QR code-based registration for rickshaws could facilitate regulation. Finally, decentralising Dhaka’s concentrated economic and social opportunities is essential for alleviating transportation crises and reducing traffic congestion.

The rickshaw industry, both pedal and battery-powered, is deeply intertwined with the socioeconomic fabric of Bangladesh. By establishing and enforcing a structured management system, including regulated standards, safer designs, and environmental measures, the government can transform rickshaw dependency into a safer, more efficient, and economically beneficial system for all.

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Sl. No.	Tender ID No.	Invitation Reference	Name of Tender
1.	1041601	27.22.4785.900.50.002.24.487 Date: 25.11.2024	Construction and renovation work of internal road and drain of WZPDCL Head quarter, Khulna.
2.	1039892	27.22.4785.900.50.002.24.485 Date: 21.11.2024	Construction of One Storied Semi- Paka (steel structure) Store at khulna under WZPDCL.

This is Online Tender, where only e-tenders will be accepted in the National e-GP System Portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted.  
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