

# Breaking Cassandra’s curse on air pollution

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Let us start with the Greek myth of Cassandra, a princess of Troy, daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba. The god Apollo fell in love with her and granted her the gift of prophecy to win her favour. However, when Cassandra rejected him, Apollo could not take back the gift he had given. Instead, he placed a curse on her: no one would ever believe her prophecies. This doomed her to a life of foresight and frustration. Cassandra foresaw the Trojan horse as a trick and predicted the city’s ruin, yet her people dismissed her as a madwoman. Hence the term “Cassandra’s Curse”—the agony of being able to see the future clearly but being completely unable to convince anyone to believe you or act on your warnings. Just as Cassandra’s visions could not save Troy from destruction, the overwhelming evidence of air pollution will mean little if Bangladesh continues to ignore the crisis. With undeniable data and visible human suffering, failing to formally recognise air pollution as a national disaster would be a blindness history will not forgive.

In this country, we picture disasters in the forms of cyclones, floods, or fires. What truly qualifies as a disaster? According to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), a disaster is “a severe breakdown in a community or society’s normal functioning caused by hazards interacting with vulnerability and exposure, leading to human, material, economic, or environmental damage.” Bangladesh’s own Disaster Management Act, 2012 defines a disaster as “any natural, human-made, or climate-induced event that severely harms lives, livelihoods, resources, and the environment, exceeding a community’s capacity to cope without external assistance”. Today, one of our lethal crises is invisible to our policymakers. It is the air we breathe. According to the recent Lancet Countdown report, Bangladesh recorded an estimated 2.25 lakh deaths related to air pollution in 2022. That is more deaths than any cyclone, flood, or lightning strike caused in the same year. In Dhaka alone, residents breathed “good” air for just 31 days in the last nine years. The other 3,083 days were marked by

hazardous, very unhealthy, or unhealthy air. By these standards, air pollution is not just a disaster—it is one of our deadliest disasters. One might ask if the government has tried to bridge this gap. Is not there already a wide range of legal and policy frameworks to combat air pollution? Bangladesh does indeed have several laws and policies addressing the issue, including the Environment Conservation Act (1995), the Brick Manufacturing and Brick Kiln Establishment (Control) (Amendment)

others, share overlapping mandates. This fragmentation, coupled with weak inter-agency coordination, makes holistic and effective enforcement of air quality regulations extremely difficult. It is reasonable to ask whether the government has introduced any initiative to bridge this coordination gap. To ensure a coordinated approach to air quality management, the Air Pollution Control Rules established a high-powered National

enforce clean air regulations remain weak and fragmented. Air pollution is not a slow-moving inconvenience. It is a full-blown public health catastrophe. And yet, unlike floods or lightning, air pollution has not been officially recognised as a national disaster. Why does official recognition matter? Back in 2016, the government declared lightning a disaster due to rising casualties. When lightning was declared a disaster, it

the Disaster Management Act, 2012 there will be several upsides. First, polluters could face legal penalties. Sub-sections 37 and 43 of the act make ignoring directives punishable, while sub-section 51 holds company leaders accountable. Second, the victims could seek compensation, which will evidently increase or, in our case, introduce accountability. This will also make it easier to access dedicated disaster funds that could support medical care, masks, air filters, and preventive campaigns. Finally, a response mechanism could be activated. Disaster management committees across the country could be mobilised to monitor air quality and enforce regulations. Such approaches would shift air pollution from a “soft” environmental concern to a hard legal mandate.

Now we might be asking ourselves: has any other country taken such steps? The answer is nuanced. None has declared air pollution a permanent national disaster, but several have taken half-measures. In South Korea, “severe smog” has been declared a “social disaster,” unlocking emergency funding. Chile has declared environmental emergencies over “toxic haze” in Santiago. Indonesia declared national emergency for transboundary haze. China’s “Red Alert” system for air pollution in cities like Beijing functions as a de facto local disaster protocol. When a Red Alert is issued, it triggers mandatory school and factory closures. These declarations trigger immediate, mandatory actions, such as temporarily shutting down thousands of factories. Banning unfit vehicles from the roads, prohibiting the use of wood-burning activities.

For us, declaring air pollution a national disaster is not “symbolic” anymore. It is a strategic and immediate necessity. It would ensure that polluted air is treated with the same urgency as floods or cyclones—because it kills silently, relentlessly, and at a larger scale.

Bangladesh has shown global leadership in climate adaptation. The country, facing some of the world’s most toxic air, can be a pioneer by being the first to formally recognise this silent killer as a national disaster under our own robust Disaster Management Act.

We must not wait for another generation to choke. Recognising air pollution as a national disaster would honour our constitutional duty to protect public health, enforce accountability on polluters, and provide relief to the millions already suffering. Until that day comes, we are all condemned to wear Cassandra’s gown, forced to watch a preventable future with painful clarity, powerless to make those in power believe our warnings.



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Act (2019), the Air Pollution Control Rules (2022), and the National Air Quality Management Plan (2024-2030). Together, these frameworks provide the legal backbone, sector-specific interventions, as well as standards, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms for air quality management. However, under these policies, the responsibility for enforcement does not lie with a single authority. Instead, multiple government bodies, such as the Ministry of Environment (MoE), Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), the traffic division of Bangladesh Police, and

Committee to Control Air Pollution, headed by the cabinet minister and senior secretaries of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives, BRTA, Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk), and city corporations of Dhaka. However, despite this structure, the committee’s work has shown little progress. Adding to the challenge, the Bangladesh Clean Air Bill, prepared six years ago, still awaits enactment. If passed, it would constitute the most significant legal instrument for air pollution control; in its absence, efforts to

transformed our response. The government mobilised funds, launched a life-saving public awareness campaign, installed lightning arresters, widely used radio, television, and mosque loudspeakers to warn people about the dangers of being in open fields or under trees during thunderstorms, and the “30-30 Rule” campaign was integrated into our early warning systems. These measures significantly increased awareness among communities about lightning risks and safety practices. But lightning kills only a fraction compared to toxic air. If air pollution is declared a disaster under

# Can COP30 elevate climate adaptation?



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As the world braces for the 30th Conference of the Parties (COP30) in Brazil, the host nation’s presidency is signalling a decisive shift in climate policy, placing the issue of adaptation at the forefront of its agenda. Through a series of eight impassioned letters, it called on the global community to view adaptation “through new lenses.” In the eighth letter, shared on October 23, the COP30 presidency designates adaptation as the signature agenda. Even in the first letter, the presidency argued for “a major inflection on adaptation” to align climate actions with people’s lives through multilateral cooperation. The last letter states: “survival has never belonged merely to the strongest, but to the most cooperative...cooperation has been the essence of our humanity in natural selection.” These ideas reflect the organising principle of this COP, i.e., *Mutirão*—the Brazilian culture of community cooperation to solve a problem through dialogue—extended globally as the “global *Mutirão*.” This sentiment that adaptation must be viewed through a new lens is also reflected in the *Report of the Circle of Finance Ministers*. Authoritative reports such as *Adapt Now: A Global Call for Leadership on Climate Resilience* of the former Global Commission on Adaptation and studies by the World Bank estimate that robust adaptation measures can yield two to ten times their cost in economic, social, and environmental benefits. The COP presidency rightly deplores that adaptation remains undervalued and underfunded. Nominal adaptation support (\$28 billion) represents only a quarter of total climate finance, which is at least 20 times smaller than the estimated needs. According to Oxfam, the already insufficient official figure for adaptation funding is a gross exaggeration, and the actual, effective amount of support is roughly three times smaller than what is being claimed. Moreover, two-thirds of public adaptation support comes in the form of loans to developing countries, and over half even to the least developed countries (LDCs).

Bangladesh is an example where climate debt continues to mount, as shown in research by Change Initiative. However, the COP presidency does not elaborate on the underlying dynamics of why adaptation remains the “poor cousin” of mitigation. As a long-time negotiator and writer-activist, I have been arguing for strengthening the conceptual and legal basis of adaptation. Progress is finally being made, though slowly, for its expanded understanding. As adaptation has never been officially defined, epistemic ambiguity persists. It began its journey in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as an afterthought, while mitigation was prioritised. This was justified because mitigation was and still is considered the cardinal solution. By the end of the first decade of the climate regime, adaptation witnessed a steady ascent for three reasons: developed countries were not pursuing mitigation, climate disasters were becoming the new normal with increasing frequency and severity, and the climate justice movement was gaining momentum because poor communities and countries contributing least to the problem were suffering most, with the least capacity to adapt. The outcome was a recognition of adaptation as a pillar equal to mitigation at the 2007 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bali. The Paris Agreement included an article dedicated to adaptation, linking its need to the level of mitigation. Still, adaptation remains perennially underfunded. I ascribe this poor funding to three reasons. First, there is a spatial disconnect between the main causes and the main sufferers of climate change. Hence, the empathy of the rich historical emitters fails to reach the faraway victims, despite an obligatory responsibility under the climate regime. Second, private sector support is weak because adaptation benefits are seen as non-exclusive, shared freely by others.

Here lies the fundamental lacuna: adaptation is perceived as providing only local or national benefits. Under the narrow neoclassical understanding, public goods, defined more than 70 years ago by economist Samuelson, were bounded by national territories, when extra-territorial pollution problems had not yet emerged. By the early 1990s, global commons problems like climate change had begun to manifest as the most

mitigation not also be regarded as a GPG? CCLs are global public bads (GPBs), plain and simple. Therefore, the solution to GPBs should be provided by taxing the GPBs, which is a fundamental lesson from neoclassical economics. The climate regime is founded on this mainstream model, and the UNFCCC parties are supposed to promote it (articles 3 and 5). Here lies the “moral corruption” of historical emitters in avoiding the underlying

Woods Conference in 1944 that established institutions like the World Bank must acknowledge that “economic diseases are highly communicable; [i]t follows, therefore, that the economic health of every country is a proper matter of concern to all its neighbours, near and distant.” Climate change and COVID-19, which induced compound health and economic distress affecting all countries, exemplify such communicability. This was



UN Sec-Gen Antonio Guterres appears on screens as he speaks at the opening of the Belem Climate Summit plenary session, as part of COP30, in Belem, Brazil, November 6, 2025.

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intractable crisis. Socio-economic concepts evolve in response to societal needs and cannot be treated like religious precepts. In recent years, cross-border and secondary impacts of pollution have been increasing and recognised. Many organisations and writers, led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), have argued for an expanded understanding of public goods to cover developments beyond national territories. In a similar vein, I have been arguing for an expansive interpretation of adaptation as a global public good (GPG). The argument is: if mitigation to restore climate stability is universally recognised as a GPG, then why should adaptation to address climate change impacts (CCLs) resulting from non-

dynamics of climate change. Many examples illustrate that funding adaptation brings both direct and indirect global benefits—bio-physical shifts in ecosystems and species, transboundary river pollution, trade disruptions, financial instability, increasing human displacements, etc. Addressing these issues through adaptation provides benefits at all scales. If the most vulnerable economies of more than a hundred low-income countries—including LDCs, small island states, and large economies like Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan—continue to decline due to devastating CCLs, will regional and global security, trade, and financial stability not also be affected? Global statesman President Roosevelt argued at the opening of the Bretton

foreseen even 266 years ago by Adam Smith, the Father of modern economics, who argued in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) that interests are indivisible at individual, national, or international levels; one cannot pursue personal or national interests while ignoring the interests of others. Finally, upon reading the letters shared by the COP30 presidency, we see a common thread—a deep and passionate advocacy of global cooperation based on norms and values befitting the intricately wired world of today, not the Westphalian order of the 17th century. Along this vein, we hope all countries at COP30 will agree to a capacious framing of adaptation that can mobilise funding through solidarity levies from high-emitting economic and industrial sectors.