

GOBESHONA RAISES THE



In conversation with Dr Saleemul Huq about the status of climate change research in Bangladesh, the reasons behind it and the way forward

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2014 broke the record for both the highest and lowest temperatures in decades. Climate change is here to stay, and we sit down with local expert Dr Saleemul Huq to find out what we're doing about it here in Bangladesh.

What is Gobeshona?

Gobeshona is an initiative to improve the level and quality of research in Bangladesh. There's quite a large research community both within and outside Bangladesh, working on different aspects of climate change. The objective is to make better use of the research, producing information and evidence as research outputs, thereby enabling decision makers at the national level and practitioners at the local level.

Photo: Courtesy

RESEARCH BAR

How did Gobeshona get started?

We had a series of preliminary brainstorming and planning meetings with the research community, identifying well over 100 organisations that claim to do some research on climate change including-public universities, private universities, international and national research institutes, NGOs and the private sector.

We invited them to join. Then with about 20 members we formed the consortium and named it Gobeshona.

Tell us about gobeshona.net.

It is a knowledge-sharing platform where we upload publications on climate change in Bangladesh. To get published on our site, the research must be on climate change in Bangladesh - any aspect of it. Through this web portal, researchers share information on their ongoing research.

After almost a year, we have over 650 publications on the site.

We are going to add a new element to the site, a Young Researcher Fellowship Programme, where we mentor young researchers on how to do good quality research. It launches next week on January 7.

What is the state of climate change research in Bangladesh?

Improving the quality of research is another of our objectives. Let me explain the situation with regard to quality.

In the global scientific community, there is a very strictly followed guideline to measure quality research: Publishing in international peer-reviewed scientific journals. Within those journals there is a hierarchy, with some being more highly regarded than others. Nature and Science are the two most highly regarded science journals.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) looks at vulnerability reports and adaptation. My colleague Clare Stott did a study of a subset of IPCC cited papers with the word Bangladesh in it. There were about 150 papers, with over a 100 papers specifically on Bangladesh. Of the Bangladesh papers, she looked at the whether the first authors lived in here or abroad.

She found that 75% of these climate researchers writing on Bangladesh actually lived outside the

country. They are either international researchers like Joanne Jordan, or Bangladeshi academics belonging to foreign universities.

So the question is: Isn't there research going on inside Bangladesh? The answer is yes. Lots of research is going on in Bangladesh, but it is of very poor quality. The quality bar is, as I said, publishing in international peer-reviewed journals. The IPCC only looks at papers that are published in international peer-reviewed journals. So if it is not there, it is not considered quality research.

Bangladesh produces a lot of so-called research, but it is not of good quality, so that is another starting point for us.

Why do you think we produce poor quality research?

There are several reasons, one of which is that our education, as you are well aware, focuses on rote learning. We are taught to produce in exams through memorisation. We do it well, but it does not teach us to think for ourselves.

As a result, Bangladeshi researchers are very good at collecting volumes of information. What they are very bad at is presenting that information in a critical, meaningful manner.

If you see a Bangladeshi presentation, and I have seen many, they will tell you all kinds of information they have collected, but they have no ability to tell which information is important and which isn't. Critical analysis is a not part of their culture, unless they have a foreign degree.

How does that foreign degree impact a researcher's outlook?

At foreign universities they cannot get away without learning how to do effective research. Universities in Bangladesh are producing people with Master's or even PhD degrees who really do not know how to do good research. That is a gap that we need to address.

Through the Young Researcher workshop, Gobeshona is trying to capture younger researchers who are beginning their careers. We will teach them how to distinguish between good and bad quality research and aim to publish in an international peer-reviewed journal.

Another reason is that to be a professor in Bangladesh, you don't need to have your papers published in an international peer-reviewed journals. Here, if you have an article published in a national newspaper, it counts as publication. There is no incentive to produce quality. In fact there is a disincentive. Why produce quality research when mediocre papers are treated the same as good quality ones?

Tell us about next week's Gobeshona Conference .

Gobeshona will be held as an annual event every second week of January. We want to become our national learning event.

There are at least a few dozen international research programmes around the world that work in Bangladesh. Researchers fly in, do their work, maybe have a seminar, then fly out. 90% of the time you will not even know they have come and gone.

So what we're saying is: Come at one time of the year. Come to this one conference and present your work here then everybody will know about it, instead of doing isolated seminars. As this becomes a regular event, people can put it on their calendars.

Holding it in January works out well because a lot of expat Bangladeshi academics come on holiday around this time, so we can get them to attend the conference.

In terms of the structure of the event, we have three different events happening in sequence: Young Researchers' Day on January 7, three days of conference sessions, and Government Day on January 11.

The conference includes plenary and panel sessions, where we get 12-20 international participants and about a 150 national participants. Researchers share what they do. Each theme is set by a host institution. For example, on January 10, UNDP will host a session titled "Research into policy" that will discuss the methods

and scope of integrating science at the policy level.

Government Day is hosted by the government, who will present a number of papers on the projects they are working on.

What are your comments on tackling climate change in general?

Tackling climate change is inherently a learning-by-doing process. Bangladesh has actually done quite a lot. We've spent half a billion dollars already on several hundred programmes and projects around the country - government, non-government, academic.

Our hypothesis is that now we need to learn from what we have done before we do something more, particularly learn from past mistakes. This is what we are trying to do collectively, because we are spending a lot of money to tackle climate change.

That is what the conference is about. Learning from failure is a huge part of this process. Based on these reflections, we will be able to decide whether to do the same thing in the future or take a different approach.

Bangladesh is tackling climate change, and every year we aim to use the Gobeshona Conference as a collective national learning exercise with some key stakeholders such as the research community and research through other communities. We want to create a forum with the involvement of all those who are working with climate change

This is the first of what we hope will be a series of annual events, and that each one will be a milestone in moving up the learning curve. We hypothesise that tackling climate change successfully requires the involvement of a society and a country. Every year we will convene and see what we have learned, and then move on to the next phase. ■

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