



Climate Induced Displacement in Bangladesh through the Lens of ‘Loss and Damage’

This article looks at the economic and non-economic “loss and damage” (L&D) of communities in Bangladesh experiencing climate induced displacement. Highlighting the potential of the innovative Climate Resilient Migrant Friendly Towns project, developed by ICCCAD, to provide durable solutions to climate IDPs, the authors make the case that L&D funding should prioritize people displaced by climate and the host communities that take them in.

Published on 2 May 2023

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“I can re-build a house, but will it be my home? All those memories and social ties! Now I have lost everything,” says Abdul (pseudonym), a farmer in his mid-seventies from Pach Thakuri, Sirajganj, a region in Bangladesh highly vulnerable to riverbank erosion.

Last October, undertaking a research mission on behalf of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD), we interviewed flood-affected and displaced communities in Sirajganj, approximately 135 kilometres by road northwest of the capital city Dhaka. As we reached our destination, we were anguished to witness the suffering of the vulnerable communities living along the Jamuna River.

Like Abdul, every year thousands of vulnerable individuals and households in Bangladesh are displaced from their land of origin, mainly due to environmental disasters including riverine floods, riverbank

erosion, flash floods, cyclones, tidal surges, and slow onset events including sea level rise and salinity intrusion. The number of displaced people, which varies over time and by place, generally goes under-recorded and not fully unacknowledged.



Photograph: Man witnessing the havoc caused by riverbank erosion, Pach Thakuria, Sirajganj (2022) © Savio Rousseau Rozario

Disaster displacement in Bangladesh

From both the scientific literature and field evidence, it is quite clear that there has been an escalation in the frequency and intensity of environmental calamities over the last three decades in Bangladesh, predominantly due to the impacts of climate change. [The IPCC AR6 report](#) links the intensification of these environmental occurrences with climate change, while Bangladesh's flat topology, geographical location, dense population, and poor socio-economic structures increase the country's vulnerability to such adverse conditions ([Huq and Rabbani, 2011](#)). The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTD) [reports that climate change](#) and other associated risks, already quite evident, will only worsen in the future, threatening the economic and social progress of most least developed countries (LDCs), including Bangladesh.

Moreover, in an agrarian country like Bangladesh, where the population density is [1265 people per square kilometre](#), displacement due to environmental disasters is a matter of great concern. For example, environmental catastrophes and climatic anomalies hamper crop production and decrease the amount of arable land, impacting the livelihoods of large population groups, especially those of small farmers from rural areas ([Rozario et al., 2021](#)). Many of these farmers are forced to seek alternative livelihoods in urban and suburban areas. In many cases, environmental disasters, such as cyclones and riverbank erosion, lead to loss of capital and cultivatable land, causing farming families to become displaced.

Displacement scenario in Bangladesh

[Over 7.1 million Bangladeshis](#) were displaced by climate change in 2022. [In a study by the World Bank](#), three internal climate migration scenarios were modelled for the year 2050 — a pessimistic scenario, a scenario that reflected more inclusive development, and a scenario of more moderate climate-change impacts — with different combinations of development and emissions trajectories considered. For Bangladesh, the pessimistic scenario foresees 13.3 million new climate-related IDPs per year, on average. Lower estimates were made for the more inclusive development and climate-friendly scenarios.

A large proportion of displaced people in Bangladesh already resettles in the capital city Dhaka as well as in other major cities and towns, seeking livelihood opportunities. [As per a report by the Mayors Migration Council](#), Dhaka city has already sheltered more than ten million climate migrants with more to be added in the following decades. Once climate migrants arrive in urban areas, they regularly fall victim to economic and social disparity, with limited access to resources, leading to further vulnerability.

Displacement – seen through the lens of Loss and Damage

In most cases, the primary factor driving people away from their places of origin is economic loss and damage. Loss and Damage (L&D), as defined under the UN Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC), includes both the economic and non-economic impacts of climate change.

Economic losses include impacts that can be assigned monetary values, such as loss of land, infrastructure, houses, and financial stability. Disasters sweep away and destroy the livelihoods of vulnerable communities, causing them to either choose to leave in search of better livelihoods or to flee abruptly in the face of imminent risks. While livelihood mobility is often assumed to result in improved economic conditions at resettlement destinations, unfortunately, many victims of climate change find that conditions often worsen in their new, uncertain environments, thus shattering the narrative of ‘migration as an adaptation strategy’ ([Miron, 2023](#); [Vinke et. al., 2020](#); [Siddiqui & Billah, 2014](#); [Hutton & Haque, 2003](#); [Islam & Hasan, 2016](#)).

Furthermore, there are problems less widely acknowledged - the intangible losses that are suffered. [Non-economic loss and damage](#) can be categorized in many ways but largely constitutes loss of life, health, mental well-being, territory, social fabric, culture, indigenous knowledge, and ecosystems and biodiversity.

Social fabric: [It is observed](#) that displaced populations often face troubles stemming from loosening social ties with their home communities. In contrast, many displaced people struggle with loneliness and social conflict in their new communities.

Mental well-being and security: Poverty places a greater physical and psychological strain on the displaced community or individuals – often, more than the process of the relocation itself ([Hutton & Haque, 2003](#)).

Undergoing the stress of surviving in an uncertain environment, in contrast to the rooted economic and social foundations of the home, drains displaced individuals emotionally. This can be especially problematic for women climate migrants. Often working as domestic helpers or in garment factories while raising families, they [encounter threats of sexual and other forms of violence almost daily](#), which is traumatic.

Climate displacement in the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) of Bangladesh (2023-2050)

Addressing climate induced displacement has been problematic in Bangladesh due to insufficient data and problems of attribution and validation. Nevertheless, the government of Bangladesh has acknowledged the reality of climate displacement and has developed measures to address it through national climate change adaptation planning. The recently published [National Adaptation Plan \(NAP\) of Bangladesh \(2023-2050\)](#) is the core climate change adaptation planning and financial investment roadmap for the next 28 years, aligning with the [Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100](#) and the [Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan](#), two other important development frameworks. The vision statement of the NAP is: “Building a climate-resilient nation through effective adaptation strategies to foster a robust society and ecosystems and stimulate sustainable economic growth.”

To achieve its vision, six goals have been established. Goal 3 states, ‘Develop climate-smart cities for improved urban environment and well-being’, strongly aligning with the concept of building climate-resilient migrant-friendly towns, discussed in detail below. That goal aims to develop climate-smart cities reinforced with robust urban drainage networks and water management infrastructure; expand green infrastructure, effective solid waste and renewable energy mechanisms; and improve human healthcare and WASH facilities. Relatedly, extensive

research on innovative climate-resilient WASH technologies, infrastructure, and housing has been given high priority in the plan.

Furthermore, the NAP identified four priority sectors for adaptation, one of which is urban areas. One of the interventions identified under the urban area sector is the development of city climate action plans for major urban and peri-urban areas, emphasizing the need to create greater resilience for urban-poor communities and climate migrants.

National-level initiatives

Aligning with NAP commitments and goals, the government has undertaken post-displacement initiatives that largely focus on resettlement and rehabilitation. However, such efforts aren't new as the government has been addressing the needs of the climate-induced IDPs since even before Bangladesh Independence (1971), such as through resettlement activities for those affected by severe disasters including the great Bhola cyclone (1970). Over time, however, government focus has shifted to supporting more 'resettlement-cum-livelihood' approaches and, since the start of this century, has integrated 'resettlement' into climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction policies.

One of the notable initiatives undertaken by the government is the Ashrayan project, under which 538,139 families have been rehabilitated since 1997. The initial project ran from 1997 to 2010, with the objective of settling landless and homeless families (particularly those who are landless as a result of tropical cyclones, river erosion, and floods) on vacant government land (Khas land). Under the subsequent Ashrayan II initiative, the government implemented the [“Khurushkul Special Ashrayan Project”](#), launched in 2014 and 2015. It is one of the world's biggest relocation housing projects, targeting climate IDPs in Cox's Bazar. The aim is to construct 139 five storey buildings, among which 20 have been completed to date, with 640 climate victim families already

sheltered. In addition to enhancing disaster resilience, the project also focuses on climate change mitigation through the planting of 1.5 million trees, rainwater harvesting, installation of solar home systems, and greener cooking stoves.

Another option: Building climate resilient migrant friendly towns

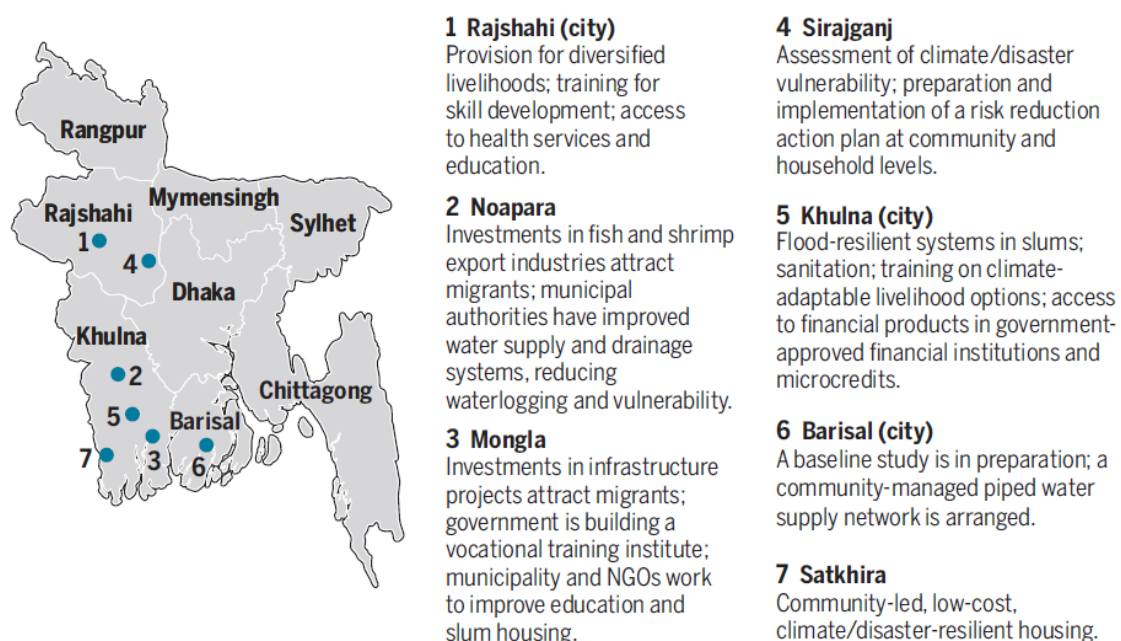
Surely, displacement is not a long-term solution. Moreover, land and resources are finite, and uncontrolled displacements will only lead to their depletion in populous countries like Bangladesh. In light of this, the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at Independent University, Bangladesh developed the concept of [building 'climate-resilient and migrant-friendly towns](#) (CRMFT). The foundational objective was diverting migration pathways away from populous cities such as Dhaka toward secondary cities and peri-urban growth centers which are already rapidly growing or have the potential to thrive economically. A CRMFT is defined as [a town or city that is designed to absorb a growing number of migrants](#) from climate displacement hotspots while remaining resilient to current and anticipated climate shocks, without sacrificing the immediate and long-term well-being of all its citizens including new settlers. The concept of CRMFT emerged to ensure a just transition and equity for both host populations and settlers in smaller cities and peri-urban areas located near climate-vulnerable hotspots.

The process of selecting a CRMFT: Criteria for selecting a CRMFT includes the proximity of a rapidly growing secondary town to climate-vulnerable areas with the potential to support the economic needs of climate IDPs and migrants. The proximity of receiving and sending locations helps minimize non-economic Loss and Damage through familiar cultural and social environments where the risks of being rejected are lessened.

Scaling Up: In recent times, the idea of building CRMFTs has been taken up by other implementing entities, such as the NGO BRAC. BRAC has

initially identified about 20 towns and municipalities on the basis of their economic potential, relative resiliency to climate stress, and ability to absorb a sizeable number of displaced people. In parallel, they have also identified a number of satellite towns adjacent to economic hubs, including places located in relatively elevated areas near sea and river ports and export processing zones (EPZs), which could potentially employ thousands of migrants.

Infographic: Potential CRMFT sites in Bangladesh identified by ICCCAD. Source: [Khan et al., \(2021\)](#)



Recently, another project, called “Building Climate Resilience Migrant Friendly Town through Locally Led Adaption (LLA)”, was awarded a [Global Center on Adaptation](#) (GCA) grant, funded by UK AID and the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO), to integrate locally led adaptation (LLA) approaches into CRMFT pilot projects. The initial pilot, undertaken by BRAC, ICCCAD, and the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers (SPARC), is located in Mongla Municipality of Bangladesh. The goal is to scale up to three towns by 2026 and 26 towns and cities by 2030. The project incorporates the [Eight Principles for Locally Led Adaptation](#). Two key final outputs of the project include the development of a locally-led Town Climate

Adaptation Plan (TCAP) and the establishment of a Local Adaptation Centre (LAC). A Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment (CCVA), the development of local climate adaptation plans (LCAPs), and the establishment of ward climate adaptation plans (WCAPs) are central features of the Mongla Town Climate Adaptation Plans (TCAPs). Implementation of these initiatives will be the responsibility of the LAC. The project will ensure capacity building for and the involvement of relevant stakeholders at every level and stage of the project.

Tapping into the Loss and Damage Funding arrangements for climate displacement

Given the [historic agreement at COP27](#) to establish Loss and Damage (L&D) funding to address climate injustice, an important challenge will be the efficient and well-prioritized mobilization and distribution of L&D funds. This requires a holistic and multi-faceted approach to Loss and Damage. In this regard, climate-induced displacement is an appropriate priority for Loss and Damage funding considerations given that the impacts of climate displacement are quite tangible and evident. Impacts occurring in sending and destination locations are equally important, though they may vary in nature and will require further understanding.

Interventions to address climate-induced displacement, such as establishing Climate Resilient Migrant Friendly Towns, require significant funding in order to become a reality. L&D funding arrangements can be used as mechanisms for both minimizing displacement in places of origin and developing opportunities for people already displaced. Vulnerable countries experiencing high levels of internal displacement, like Bangladesh, should create a consortium to seek Loss and Damage funding to address internal displacement. Such funding could target both structural initiatives, such as infrastructure development and improved public service facilities, and non-structural initiatives, such as skill enhancement and vocational training.

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