

Climate Migrants in Bangladesh: A Journey Towards Uncertainty!

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Human-induced climate change and associated forced human migration pose serious threats to international cross-border security and sustainable peace.¹ The World Bank (WB) projects that there would be around 143 million climate migrants by 2050 from the Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America regions.² Similarly, Myers and Myers and Kent have estimated there will be 200 million climate migrants by 2050.^{3,4} Some say that climate change will create the world's largest refugee crisis in the coming decades. However, at present, climate-induced disaster displacement is being highly debated in academia and in global politics.

In this discussion paper, first, I briefly explain the impact of climate change, how it is exacerbating the various forms of social vulnerability, and how it is forcing people to relocate from their traditional habitats. Next, I identify some challenges in tackling the climate migration crisis and propose some recommendations. Here, climate migrants are defined as people who have moved from their place of origin for at least 10 years (permanent) and travelled over 14 kilometers within country due to climatic disasters.⁵

Bangladesh has been selected as a case study because it is often cited as one of the hardest-hit countries by anthropogenic climate change.⁶ The country is listed as the world's fifth most natural disaster-prone and sixth most long-term climate-vulnerable country.^{7,8} Only 8% of the country's area is categorized as relatively less hazard-prone.⁹ Almost 40% of people

in Bangladesh rely on agricultural activities, and flooding, cyclones, tidal surge, river erosion, saline water intrusion, and agricultural drought are common hazards (see Figure 1) that threaten rural livelihoods, crop production, and food security.

It is projected that by 2050 in Bangladesh, human-induced climate change would be responsible for: temperature rise between 1.4-2°C, increase in magnitude and frequency of floods, sea-level rise from 0.2-1 meter in the Bay of Bengal, increase in coastal flooding by 5-8% in the central and western zones, a decline in fresh surface water availability and increase in soil salinity (17.5-24% in ppt) along the coast, increase in the intensity of future tropical cyclones (a 10-year return period cyclone will be more intense and covering 17% more area), and an increase in cyclonic storm surges and related coastal floods (inundation depth would be 14-69% higher).

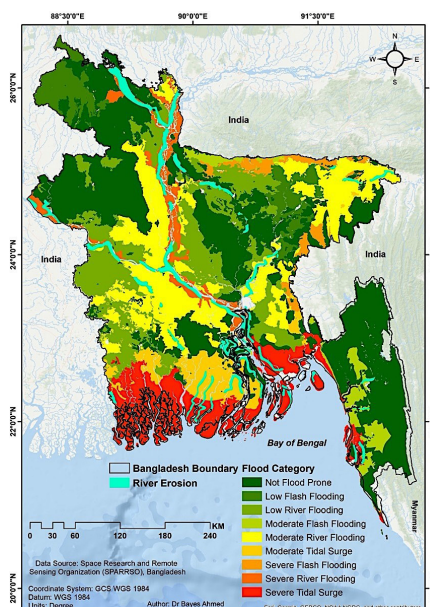


Figure 1: Flood and river erosion hazard map of Bangladesh

The impacts of climate change would extensively reduce rice and wheat production by 17% and 61% respectively. Some water-borne (diarrhea and dysentery) and vector-borne (dengue, chikungunya, and malaria) diseases will intensify. The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has also found a strong correlation between poverty and intensity of hydro-meteorological hazards: 67% of the top high-risk districts have poverty rates higher than the national average. Overall, the combined effects of human-caused climate change would be responsible for a loss of 1-2% of GDP per year in Bangladesh.¹⁰

Note that the multi-faceted impacts of climate change are already evident; local communities currently face extreme weather events on a regular basis. For example, the July 2020 flooding inundated almost a quarter of Bangladesh, affected around 2.4 million people, displaced 56,000 people, and caused nearly half a million people to lose their houses.¹¹ This is a one-in-twenty-year flood event, however, the country is facing similar extreme flooding events in every 3-4 years. Climate attribution scientists have proved that this type of extreme weather event in Bangladesh (such as the 2017 floods) are linked to anthropogenic climate change.¹²

To cope with the changing climate, many rural people are relocating to urban areas to take low-paid jobs.¹³ The WB report projects that by 2050 there will be 13.3 million climate migrants in Bangladesh; that will surpass other internal migrants.¹⁴ To validate the WB projection, the entire 2011 population and housing census data were collected from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.¹⁵ This database is authentic (next census is due in 2021) and was prepared based on actual household

surveying in Bangladesh. The questionnaire had around a hundred questions covering each respondent's household characteristics, such as demography, migration details, and economic activities. To calculate the number of climate migrants in Bangladesh (in a decadal scale), variables related to life-time migration (born in a different district), travelled to another district (distance greater than 14 km), migrating from rural to urban areas, residing consistently for at least ten years in the present location, and the reasons for migration (employment and natural hazard-induced disasters) were analyzed. Most importantly, only the sub-districts (Upazila) historically and recurrently hit by extreme and slow-onset climatic disasters were considered to avoid the clash between regular natural disasters and climate change-induced events.

In Bangladesh, individuals from the climatic disaster hot spots primarily migrate in search for alternative livelihood opportunities as the last resort for survival. Results show (see Figure 2) that between 2001 and 2011, around 10% of people (13.5 million) migrated internally for a variety of reasons; among them, 8.6 million were economic migrants and 6.1 million were environmental migrants (rural origin, but temporary or circular movement pattern). It is acknowledged that climate migration is a sub-set of environmental migration. Lastly, I calculated around two million climate migrants (1.44% of the total population) in Bangladesh (as of 2011). Similar results were obtained by Myers (1993) and the 2018 WB report, which validates my findings.

It is notable that about 62 million people still live in those climate change hot spots in Bangladesh, who are also known as environmental non-migrants. They should

be categorized as voluntary or involuntary non-migrants, whereas climate migrants should be categorized as forced migrants.¹⁶

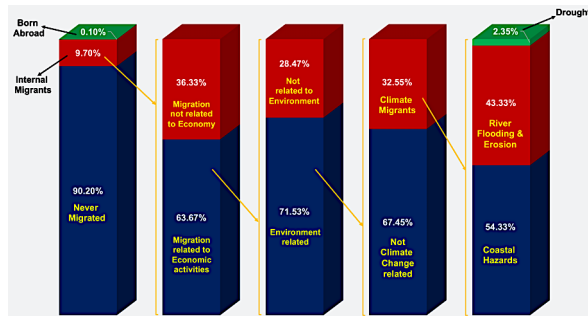


Figure 2: The distribution of different types of internal migrants in Bangladesh (as of 2011). Source: Bayes Ahmed, June 2020

Globally, migrants—whether they move internally or cross borders, or are protected by international laws (refugees, IDPs, asylum seekers, or stateless people)—now face unprecedented challenges. The concept of environmental migrants fleeing natural disasters was introduced in the mid-1980s. Now if we add climate migrants to this already fragile setting, then it would certainly create more complexities as world leaders are not yet ready to accept them. Some realities regarding climate migrants in the context of Bangladesh are discussed here.

In addition to environmental migrants (temporary, circular, or long-term), we must acknowledge that climate migrants are also real. Their total numbers vary slightly due to lack of a generalized definition and limits of sophisticated scientific tools; however, the basic concept remains the same. A scientific consensus is required in this regard. There should be clear distinctions between the role played by natural variability in weather systems and man-made drivers in delineating extreme weather events.¹⁷

Migration is a complex decision

intertwined with historical, economic, social, political, cultural, environmental, and institutional facets of a community. It is important to consider those dimensions of social vulnerability and combine with climatic hotspots for slow-onset and recurrent, rapid-onset hydro-meteorological hazards while calculating the climate migrants (the poverty rate is generally found higher in climatic hotspots). As there is no universally agreed rule for classifying them, each country should develop its own mechanism based on analyzing the local context and socio-economic factors. Innovative, context-specific, and social surveying methods should be promoted to capture the overall scenario and publishing reliable results should be encouraged. It also requires developing a distinctive method for collecting reliable primary data through household surveying, incorporating community-based participatory tools, and analyzing them consequently.

At present, climate change-induced disaster displacement is a highly debated topic. Contrasting research is being conducted by a wide range of scientists, and negligence is common among the top-level global policymakers. Some scientists are claiming that both climate change and climate migrants do not exist, and the predictions and modelling numbers are imaginary. Others acknowledge anthropogenic climate change, but deny the existence of climate migrants. The latter group is even more intimidating for achieving climate justice. According to the latter group, climate change does not affect people's vulnerability, which is the primary factor for migration.

Gradually this type of far-reaching ideology will take a dreadful political shape that will abolish the hope to elevate

the realism of climate migrants. It is true that vulnerability is the root cause of disasters, but it should be acknowledged that there is a limit for local-level adaptation strategies undertaken by the victim communities. Global warming is responsible (of course not in all cases) for higher and stronger tides or storms, sea-level rise, salinity intrusion, less availability of fresh drinking water, changing frequency and intensity of natural hazard events, and destroying livelihood activities. The added burdens are increasing social vulnerability and local people are struggling to cope with the forced environmental changes. Even a one centimeter-rise in sea level due to climate change is responsible for an increased level of vulnerability among the coastal communities.

Climate migrants are not yet officially recognized by the United Nations (UN) and donor agencies, and they are not protected by any international conventions. Furthermore, no major external funding is yet available to solely tackle the issues related to climate migration.¹⁸ Bangladesh (or similar victim countries or states) should utilize its own resources to identify the root causes of internal migration, trace their origin-destination pattern, and take necessary policy measures to provide the needed local livelihood support. We should admit that from the climate hotspots, only around 4% of people migrate internally due to human-caused climate change, whereas 96% of people remain in the highly degraded environment. The environmental non-migrants, who are often overlooked, should also be supported and given proper attention.

At the global scale, immigration is now perceived as a privilege or even a crime, and is discouraged. Right-wing populist politics, anti-immigration groups, and

xenophobia are now spreading globally. Many countries have slowed their immigration systems and others are outright banning it. In a few cases, only “skilled migration” is still permitted, which is not helpful for the less educated or lower income disaster displaced population or climate migrants. Consequently, (international) migration should not be considered an adaptation strategy in the face of climate change.

For example, Bangladesh is confronting huge complications with its two neighboring countries, India and Myanmar. Bangladesh is currently accommodating over one million Rohingya refugees, who are consistently being labelled as illegal Bangladeshi migrants by the Myanmar authority. India has recently identified two million people in Assam as illegal foreign migrants and is threatening them to send back to Bangladesh. Some Indian scientists are even linking it with climate migration from Bangladesh.¹⁹ The Myanmar Army officially mentioned that: “Because of the unequal ratio between the country’s area and population, people of Bangladesh who are also facing natural disasters flee to Myanmar and India as illegal migrants.”²⁰ But in both cases, the concerned authorities could not provide any evidence to the GoB regarding their stateless peoples’ links with Bangladeshi origin. However, it is quite evident that the neighboring authorities are somehow trying to connect the issue of disaster displacement of Bangladesh with their internal ethnic confrontations (Muslims vs. Buddhists in Myanmar, and Muslims vs. Hindus in India) and avoid a trial for genocide.²¹ Bangladesh should consider this attitude to be a major security threat. Based on these situations, it seems likely that disaster displacement and climate

migration could be used by right-wing political parties or radical extremist groups as a tool for spreading hatred and provoking cross-border communal violence and conflicts.

The signatories of the 1951 Geneva Convention are not following their obligations to protecting the conflict-driven migrants. Thousands of refugees fleeing war, violence, and natural disasters are drowning in the sea while trying to cross borders. Seeking asylum is now more difficult than ever before. The refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps are overcrowded and funding for their minimal level of survival is always scarce. It seems global leaders and major climate polluters are not willing to give recognition to the climate migrants although there is strong evidence behind it.²² Some influential developed countries are withdrawing from certain UN organizations or climate emergency agreements and suspending their promised funding to tackle major global humanitarian crises. The top global leaders are not even ready to accept and follow the proper scientific guidelines to tackle disasters, as the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed. For example, the black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities, and women, refugees, and immigrants are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 in many countries. This is an indication that migrants might never get full access to human rights, proper healthcare facilities and other basic needs, and they will always remain at the bottom quarter of the society in terms of ensuring living standards.

Overall, there is nearly no hope for many climate migrants. They will probably never gain recognition internationally, considering current global geopolitics and financial mechanisms that prioritize profit

maximization. Henceforward, Bangladesh should take responsibility for all its citizens and refugees and should have its own adaptation strategies and national plans in place to tackle the anthropogenic climate crisis and associated climate migrants. Similarly, each victim country should also produce scientifically rigorous policy guidelines by considering both mobility and non-mobility interventions to ensure climate justice. Conclusively, we need a radical change in today's societal and global economic system that would promote sustainable development, human rights, justice, and environmental protection over nationalism, religion, and racism.²³

Endnotes

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