

Living with disasters: A tale of adaptation and survival of coastal communities in Bangladesh

By Shakirul Islam, migrant activist, researcher and founding Chair of [Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program \(OKUP\)](#), a grassroots migrants' organization in Bangladesh.

“This year, there is no rain yet. We couldn't prepare the seedbed. It might be a barren year for us. It is not a new phenomenon now. Nowadays, when it rains, it's heavy and it floods everywhere, but when it doesn't, the sun heats so hard, we are just out of water. Earlier it was easier to predict when it was going to rain. But now it's not possible anymore. The weather has changed a lot and thus, our life. It is so difficult to survive. To earn a living, I am planning to leave.”

Jabed Ali, a farmer from the coastal district Satkhira in Bangladesh

Jabed Ali is one of the 40 million people who are currently living at risk of extreme climate events in the coastal areas in Bangladesh. Their vulnerability to climate change has largely increased after cyclones hit the country in 2007, 2008 and 2009. Sea level rise has resulted in frequent tidal surges, leading to more seawater intruding the remaining freshwater sources. Prolonged waterlogging and salinization have become a persistent threat to the coastal communities in Bangladesh. While the impacts of the sudden-onset disasters like cyclones, floods, and tidal surges are more obvious, leading to partial or complete loss of assets and homesteads, the impacts of slow-onset disasters like saltwater intrusion leave the population in a continuous struggle for their lives and livelihoods.

The changing climate has led the coastal population towards an endless cycle of adaptation to survive. Affected people will try to adapt by taking loans or diversifying their occupations. However, as livelihoods tend to become expensive after disastrous climate events like cyclones and floods, women and men from the coastal areas often fail to rebuild their livelihoods despite the loans. The recurrence of climate hazards also affects people's well-being: newly rebuilt houses are destroyed again before they pay back their loans or can save some money. The excessive costs of health treatment also put many of them into a debt cycle. There is evidence that families arrange marriages of their young girls to reduce economic burdens.

In such a situation, when the hope of local adaptation is lost, the people from the coastal areas look for livelihood opportunities outside their villages. Although their decision to leave the country to find better work opportunities abroad is usually taken voluntarily in a technical sense, those who leave feel compelled to do so.



On the outside, the youth and their families seem to have little hope for their future. On the inside, they are resilient and full of dreams. For instance, I met a Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) student who was planning to learn IT skills and work freelance. Ambitions have no boundaries. I met eight-year-old Asmat, who has already made up his mind about becoming a pilot. He doesn't want to be a van driver like his father, who works hard to make ends meet. Another HSC candidate, Sadiya, is looking for opportunities to work abroad. In fact, many adolescents like her are fascinated by

overseas employment. Unfortunately, there is no infrastructure or opportunity for them, and the youth in general, to enhance their skills and competences, and prepare them for the job market both at home and abroad.

On the other side, I have heard many stories of deception and fraud faced by migrant workers, shared by their spouses and families in Bangladesh. The unfair and unethical recruitment practices and the unregulated Kafala System in some destination countries have put many migrant workers in an irregular situation. Their precarious working conditions, including exploitation and slavery-like situations are exacerbated by the absence of a protection mechanism that would uphold their rights and dignity.

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) specifically calls on governments to address adverse drivers of migration, including climate change, in its Objective 2, and to offer more pathways for regular migration in Objective 5, with specific commitments to respond to the needs of people compelled to move by sudden- and slow-onset disasters.

However, people in the coastal areas might not have any knowledge about the GCM objectives that aim to create legal pathways for their overseas migration. They are also not aware of the government's adaptation plans. As a consequence, people are looking for overseas jobs and training opportunities abroad to become self-sufficient and resilient, no matter where.

Being a grassroots migrant organization, OKUP believes that focusing on skills recognition and development can help people stand up on their feet again, even if they are shattered by the cyclones, floods or other climatic events. Therefore, OKUP's pilot interventions are focused on promoting transformative skills to the youth and women to help them find viable livelihood opportunities at home and abroad. We also carry out awareness activities to provide information and education on safer migration, sustainable social and economic reintegration, and access to services. Our activities also aim at organizing migrants and youth to help them build community-led support mechanisms and advocate for justice.

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