

ISAS Brief

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Climate Change Strategy in Bangladesh: An Analysis of Policy Back-up

Bangladesh is a densely populated country whose vulnerability to climate change seriously threatens its impressive development credentials. Its policy in this regard is based on the knowledge-based Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, largely focussed on adaptation issues, but also takes mitigation measures into account. While, to-date, it is assessed as successful, in the future, it must adjust to certain changing socio-economic circumstances such as rapid urbanisation, as well as human-induced issues like influx of cross-frontier political refugees (the Rohingya). This paper reviews past policies with analyses and makes some recommendations for the future

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Bangladesh, one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with numbers exceeding 160 million in an area of 56,000 square miles of low-lying deltaic terrain, has, despite manifold constraints, achieved commendable economic progress. Its growth has been steady over decades, at around six per cent or more per annum. It has a per capita income of over US\$1,030 (S\$1,405). It has a vibrant civil society and, in social indices, has been recording better performance than many of the neighbouring South Asian states. It is a vanguard in the region in poverty alleviation and women's empowerment. It is poised to

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graduate out of the list of the United Nations List of Least Developed (LDC) Countries by 2024 to become a lower-middle developing country, and is viewed as an inspiration for nations of comparable milieu. Sadly, however, its geographical location has caused it to be subjected to the vagaries of nature and climate change.

This phenomenon poses a grave danger to Bangladesh's prospects for economic growth and development. It has, in the past, experienced a large number of natural disasters. This situation is unlikely to change. Indeed, it is likely to be exacerbated by man-made contributions to climate change. In the coming years, it is predicted that there will be increasingly frequent floods, tropical cyclones, storm surges and droughts which will threaten Bangladesh's economy. Unless existing polders are strengthened and new ones built, the sea-level rise could inundate vast swathes of land and turn millions into 'environmental refugees'. It is, therefore, essential that the nation prepares adequately and undertakes requisite steps to face the challenges that lie ahead.

The authorities are alive to the evolving threats and necessary measures are being adopted. A decade ago, in 2009, the government developed and released the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP), the first of its kind at that time. It was a knowledge strategy built upon an earlier National Adaptation Programme of Action (2005-2009). The BCCSAP was remarkable for three main reasons. First, it was developed entirely by local experts with domestic resources rather than by international consultants with foreign funding. This is remarkable as, in the past, such studies were always conducted by the Planning Commission, with the support of external expertise and resources. Second, it was undertaken following consultations with a wide variety of stakeholders and different groups at grassroots levels. Third, its funding was entirely met by the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund, with the Finance Ministry allocating nearly US\$100 million (S\$136.4 million) annually, with 90 per cent of the amount allocated to government agencies and 10 per cent to civil society groups for community-based adaptation activities.

The BCCSAP set out 44 programmes to be implemented over the short, medium and long term. For this purpose, six strategic thrust areas were identified. These were (1) food security, social protection, and health; (2) comprehensive disaster management; (3) infrastructure; (4) research and knowledge management; (5) mitigation and low carbon development; and (6)

capacity building and institutional strengthening. It is noteworthy that, while the focus was on the adaptation to tackle the impact of climate change due to the country's vulnerability to it, after some debate, it was deemed necessary to include mitigation actions as well. There were plans to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases as part of a moral obligation, even though overall, the amount was still very low.

Through this period, flood management, protection and drainage schemes, coastal embankment projects, disaster management plans, agricultural irrigation and research, as well as coastal 'greenbelt' development comprised massive investments in 'climate proofing' the country and minimising the effect on economic growth and poverty reduction. Indeed, grain production rose to nearly 35 million tonnes annually from a mere nine million tonnes in the late 1970s. This is one testimony to the success of the strategy. Cyclone shelters and embankments reduced human fatalities to a minimal. It was to be understood that mitigation activity should be consistent with the country's energy security as the demand for energy would increase with the rapid pace of development. As such, apart from the emphasis on cost efficiency in conventional energy, there is a burgeoning focus on solar energy.

The excessive use of water is lowering tables, enhancing the problem of arsenic poison. The measures to tackle this need be intensified. The civil society and the private sector are playing a key role. An example is the 'Grameen' initiatives, which include the Grameen Shakti Solar Homes Project, costing approximately US\$428 million (\$\$581 million) and largely funded by the World Bank, as well as other non-bank sources. Also, Bangladesh is the third country in the world in 30 years to turn to nuclear energy. Two reactors will come on-stream in 2023-24. There are also two clean development mechanisms on the cards. One is focussed on solar energy and the other on waste management. Plans are afoot to generate carbon credits and facilitate carbon market financing in the future.

The strategy is a living plan, which would require updating. This would have to take into account both lessons learnt and newly emerging challenges. Of the lessons learnt, first and foremost is that tackling climate change demands an integrated approach involving different public agencies, civil society and private sector groups. The ultimate sustainable solution to human-induced climate change is to develop an integrated low-carbon and climate resilient

development strategy. Coordination at the highest level could perhaps be improved by the appointment of a National Climate Change Advisor to assist the Prime Minister.

Second, innovative ideas of employment in drought areas, as in the so-called seasonal ‘Monga’ region in North Bengal, would be essential. This will require special skills development programmes to support temporary seasonal employment.

Third, rapid urbanisation is a factor that must be taken into account as the Bangladeshi population living in cities is growing fast. They create additional environmental strains and generate new civic demands. An example is urban waste management and the debate between burial and incineration. The municipal corporations must be included in the capacity-building programmes.

Fourth, Bangladesh is discharging a major humanitarian role that has severely stressed its environment. This is a human-induced issue. It pertains to the Rohingya, a million of them that Bangladesh hosts. They are not climate refugees, but allegedly escapees from man-made atrocities inflicted on them in Myanmar. The result is a major negative impact on the environment – forest resources, to name just one – in and around their settlements. Obviously, Bangladesh will require additional international assistance to deal with this problem which is unique to it.

In terms of international obligations, Bangladesh is, of course, committed to implementing what is required of it under the Paris Agreement and United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 13. Under the Planning Commission, the mapping of the responsibilities of various government agencies has been done and a unit has been set up in the Prime Minister’s Office to monitor progress. Cooperation from the civil society and the private sector would be critical. Knowledge stakeholders and think-tanks must remain actively engaged in research and innovation. The mainstream and social media must be encouraged to remain active. Happily, in Bangladesh, they are.

Graduation from the LDC group may create some issues with regard to resource mobilisation by limiting easy access to some funds. Bangladesh will need to redouble diplomatic efforts that its climate-playing field does not become uneven. Multilateral financial institutions must

take into account its special vulnerabilities. Its relationship with its neighbours remains key. For instance, arsenic poison is a regional issue and demands a collaborative regional approach. Regular sharing of information, such as with regard to flash floods, cyclones and droughts, is absolutely essential. Also, an amicable water-sharing arrangement is a sine qua non. All these may appear a tall order, but non-engagement with climate change issues is not an option.

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