

# "WE NO LONGER KNOW OF THE PEACE WE ONCE HAD"

Fragilities and dispossession in  
the climate-affected borderlands  
of southwest Bangladesh



### **Lead researchers and authors**

Tasnia Khandaker Prova  
Era Robbani  
Humaun Kabir

### **Community research team**

Akash Kumar Mondal  
Allbright Baroi  
Anamul Kabir  
Azra Khatun  
Md. Abdur Rouf  
Md. Hafizur Rahman  
Md. Hasibur Rahman  
Md Mehbub Hossen Lemon  
Md Nayim Rahman  
Md. Zubayer Islam  
S M Shahin Alom  
Shajalal Hossen

### **Other contributors**

M Sanjeeb Hossain  
Samira Manzur  
Tabea Campbell Pauli

### **Designer**

Deddeaw Laosinchai

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Border tensions and climate disruptions in Bangladesh</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Research Findings</b>	<b>8</b>
Climate change in borderlands	8
(Im)mobilities	9
Economic instability	10
Communal discord	10
Structural neglect and complexities	11
Identities and intersectional vulnerability	11
<b>Policy Considerations</b>	<b>13</b>
Recommendations for localised action	14
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>16</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure 1:</b> Map indicating to the five study sites in southwestern Khulna division, along with two landports	5
<b>Figure 2:</b> Intersectional identities and compounded fragility-risks	12

## LIST OF BOXES

<b>box 1:</b> “What candy do the kids like?”	5
<b>box 2:</b> Theoretical Framing and Terminology	6
<b>box 3:</b> Climate disasters vs slow onset degradation	7
<b>box 4:</b> Dispossession of Land	9
<b>box 5:</b> Dispossession of livelihoods and connections	10
<b>box 6:</b> Dispossession of trust and peace	11
<b>box 7:</b> Voices from the borderland	15

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

CPJ	Centre for Peace and Justice
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
KII	Key Informant Interview
NGO	Non-governmental organisation

# INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is consistently ranked one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world.<sup>1</sup> Occupying a low-lying delta, it is prone to sudden climate shocks like floods, cyclones and tidal surges, and slow climate disruptions such as extreme heat, erratic rainfall, and saltwater intrusion, which lead to widespread destruction and loss of life.<sup>2</sup> The south-west regions, in particular, report a growing intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, with well-documented impacts on the lives and livelihoods of local community members.<sup>3</sup> Due to these characteristics, some of these areas are recognised as “test sites for climate adaptation” where donor-funded projects apply climate solutions.<sup>4</sup>

However, the nearby border, and the way its social, economic and political dynamics interact with climate change are not well understood.<sup>5</sup> Communities there negotiate local level tensions, political violence, and the ebbs and flows of the bilateral relationship, whilst experiencing the worsening impacts of climate change. National-level strains on the bilateral relationship are observed in fishing and trade sectors as shared waterways yield uneven benefits.<sup>6</sup> Over time, Bangladesh has become a “dam-locked delta”, with India controlling over 40 structures on the 54 transboundary rivers between the two countries.<sup>7</sup> Disputes over land and water boundaries remain unresolved.<sup>8</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

Research was conducted using a situated knowledge approach which advocates for reclaiming research narratives produced by outsiders, recognising their imperfect vantage point.<sup>9</sup> Community-driven design in research can reveal obscure ways in which people are threatened by climate change and how their resilience may be weakened. This study employed a version of participatory research, where knowledge is co-produced with community members from peripheral Bangladesh with lived experiences and connections to the study site.<sup>10</sup> The research team tested the effectiveness of a community-based participatory research method previously developed and applied by the Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ) in the southeast border of Bangladesh.<sup>11</sup> Recognising the contrasts in demographic landscape and spatial order between the east and west research sites, the methodology was able to foster communal collaboration and mutual trust to discover nuances that risked being otherwise overlooked, including links between the social, economic and political systems that shape fragility in bordering communities of the southwest.

The specific questions that this study seeks to answer were identified through an initial scoping study in 2023. There is a need for contextualised community-driven research to better understand the ways that local communities experience and navigate fragility, evaluating the role of climate action and good governance in addressing emerging challenges. This report uses existing literature and in-depth focus group discussions with community members, along with key informant interviews to build a picture of community perspectives on the threat of climate change in the area and what could be done to improve support and responses on the ground.

Following a brief overview of relevant historical and political background, the report outlines the ways in which climate change exacerbates existing ‘fragilities’ by compounding exposure to loss and dispossession, as experienced by local communities living in the southwest region of Bangladesh. The report concludes with considerations for policy actors, including national government, and international and multilateral development actors, to improve the effectiveness and inclusivity of future climate change initiatives in fragile contexts.

Research took place in five study sites in Khulna Division, home to Bangladesh’s southwestern districts, Jashore and Satkhira, which border the Indian state of West Bengal. The sites were selected from these two districts, based on their proximity to the border and their perceived climate vulnerability.<sup>12</sup> The five sites are geologically and environmentally diverse.

- **Putkhali** and **Debhata** are both border towns, on the banks of the transboundary Ichamati river. Susceptible to upstream flooding and river erosion, these towns are close to the busy land ports of Benapole and Bhomra where there is a history of formal and informal border trade and trafficking of goods and people.<sup>13</sup> The towns are rarely discussed as being vulnerable to climate change impacts.
- **Munshiganj** and **Gabura** are regularly counted among the most climate-vulnerable areas in Bangladesh, where coastal communities are relatively isolated, and severely affected by natural disasters and saltwater intrusion.<sup>14</sup> Climate risk studies undertaken here rarely





**Figure 1:** Map indicating the five study sites in southwestern Khulna division, along with two landports

consider the effects of the nearby international border on the area’s vulnerability and potential solutions for climate change adaptation.

- **Satbaria** experiences extreme and erratic temperatures which, in conjunction with arsenic-contaminated groundwater, has impacted its agrarian economy.<sup>15</sup> Some initial conversations also suggested that Satbaria was a transit destination for many climate-driven and labour migrants hoping to move to other towns or across borders. Despite being further away from the border, the site was included to enable varying degrees of border proximity to be measured against other indicators of fragility.

The research team comprised ten *community researchers* and two *community research coordinators* who were recruited for this study from local communities and universities in the study sites. They were given training over a three-month period in research methods, ethics and data analysis through in-person and virtual capacity-building workshops with CPJ researchers. Two researchers, responsible for communicating with the study participants, were assigned to each study site and one coordinator, responsible for organising the research effort, to each district.

### “What candy do the kids like?”

Reflections by the authors

*We accompanied the Gabura community research team on the last day of data collection. We had presumed that interviewing women at midday would be difficult given their caregiving responsibilities, so the team decided to first interview a male household member before speaking with a female household member later in the same day. The woman in question had a young child sitting next to her, visibly displeased by the strangers speaking to her mother. Seeing this, a community researcher quickly took out a local candy from his bag. After asking permission from the mother, he handed the candy to the child, who was then occupied long enough for her mother to complete the interview.*

*We—three Dhaka city-based researchers—had not seen this brand of candy before. Knowing which local candy a six-year-old would enjoy while their parent is interviewed can be the difference between a success and failure for the research team. This is one of many examples of how community researchers demonstrate their professional capability and belonging to the community.*

During the first round of data collection, a total of 45 in-depth community-based interviews were conducted across 15 households in five sites.<sup>16</sup> The second round engaged the same participants again in a group discussion setting to encourage discourse and debates. To measure the impact of intersectional marginalisation on climate resilience, 10 out of the 15 households were selected based on pre-identified ‘marginalisation’ factors, including

- Minority status (religious or ethnic)
- Age
- Women-led/majority households
- Physical disability
- Income below poverty thresholds.

One household in each study site was loosely identified as a form of ‘control group,’ where marginalisation factors did not play a discernible role in increasing the household’s social or political vulnerability. These households live in

well-constructed homes made with brick walls and a roof, and were observed to have members that are Bengali-Muslim, able-bodied, and engaged in livelihood activities that are not readily associated with slow or sudden climate shifts.

Eleven key informants, including borderland experts, conservationists, local aid practitioners and government representatives, were consulted on their work in the south-west border regions. The research team acknowledges the subjectivity embedded within any form of research data and the associated challenges in triangulating it to generate a comprehensive narrative. Nevertheless, the insights and perspectives collected here represent a crucial part of the larger picture around what vulnerability means in a region affected both by climate change and fragility. This understanding must inform policies and programmes designed to support vulnerable communities with adaptation and mitigation strategies.

## Theoretical Framing and Terminology

### Fragility

In the Bangladesh context, ‘fragility’ is a more appropriate term than ‘conflict’ to describe an absence of armed conflict and instead shift focus to the structural violence, marginalisation and instability experienced by communities in the southwest. Fragility also encompasses the failure (whether whole or partial) of governing institutions to provide basic protection of the rights of its citizens. The social contract of the state that guarantees “legitimacy, authority and capacity” to its people becomes eroded, public confidence declines and social safety nets dissipate.<sup>17</sup> Fragile societies are in turn susceptible to more conspicuous forms of instability, including violent conflict.

By identifying fragility indicators, this research does not legitimise unfounded fears of mass immigration or militancy which policymakers could instrumentalise in their efforts to implement greater security actions.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, in advocating for improved security in Bangladesh, a human security approach is encouraged that prioritises the preservation of human life regardless of race, religion, gender or citizenship over conflicting national interests. The research also recommends including systemic and long-term risks to the quality of human life, beyond focusing only on immediate or spectacular threats, in this approach.

### Structural violence and ‘negative peace’

Structural violence is created and maintained by weaponizing systems of inequity and inadequate governance that trap people into a “vicious cycle of adverse, mutually reinforcing processes.”<sup>19</sup> The violence targets already vulnerable populations and assists elites in capturing and consolidating economic and political power. Without functioning social justice mechanisms, the situation results in ‘negative peace’, i.e. the absence of active conflict and the inability to identify and pursue sustainable political solutions.



# BORDER TENSIONS AND CLIMATE DISRUPTIONS IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh's southwest features an active coastal belt in the south, home to the largest mangrove forest in the world, the Sundarbans, and a tense international border with India in the west. Local populations experience extreme climate events, with those on the coast susceptible to saltwater intrusion and regular cyclones and flooding, while the towns and villages further inland see climate disruptions in the form of water-logging, river erosion and extreme heat. Border-towns can face a range of unique challenges and opportunities, with the climate impacts on inland districts being harder to identify and analyse.

Bangladesh and India share the fifth-longest land border in the world, over 4,096 kilometres, which has been a site of tensions for many years. This border, over 70% of which is fenced, constitutes “historically and socio-economically connected spaces.” Living in interaction and proximity with the border can create opportunities for communities but also invite insecurities that shape future mobility patterns. The geography of Bangladesh

as it bridges and facilitates greater integration between India's north-east and central states, provides the basis for a geopolitical alliance between the two countries, though disputes over shared resources, trade, security and social tensions remain.<sup>20</sup>

To better understand the findings of this study, it is important to contextualise the southwest borderlands in terms of which conflict dynamics are present and which are not. The region has seen robust cross-border economic diplomacy through billion-dollar investments into land ports and construction projects.<sup>21</sup> In 2017, India approved a US \$4.5 billion loan to Bangladesh, a portion of which was intended to improve connectivity to Benapole, Bangladesh's largest land port which accounts for 30% of bilateral trade.<sup>22</sup> Nearby Kolkata is the capital of West Bengal and one of the wealthiest cities in India by gross domestic product.<sup>23</sup> Cultural and linguistic similarities and substantial Bangladeshi patronage in local markets and hospitals results in friendly cross-border relations in this region.<sup>24</sup>

## Climate disasters vs slow onset degradation<sup>25</sup>

Scientific rankings of climate change vulnerability are likely to prioritise disasters over incremental degradation, which can risk focusing on reconstruction over future proofing and adaptation.<sup>26</sup>

- Study sites Gabura and Munshiganj are part of a sub-district called Shyamnagar. The area is known for climate shocks like cyclones and floods, and gradual saltwater intrusion caused by low waterflow from upstream rivers, maladaptive climate infrastructure, shrimp culture, and climate change.<sup>27</sup>
- Residents in Jashore's border town of Putkhali, despite experiencing agricultural losses from flooded farmlands, receive no aid.<sup>28</sup>
- In Satbaria, extreme weather patterns and poor urban planning is causing its local rivers to dry up, yet central government support for environmental safeguarding has been absent, and local efforts are limited to small scale initiatives.<sup>29</sup>

Human exposure to slow onset climate shifts like extreme temperatures, saltwater intrusion, and resulting in infestations, food and water insecurity, and price volatility, are major risk factors currently experienced in the southwest.

- Bangladesh experienced its longest heat wave in April 2024, with Jashore reaching temperatures of 43.8°C—the highest recorded in 52 years—causing health risks to poorer residents.<sup>30</sup>
- In Satbaria, a farmer with 24 years of harvesting experience, said that not a single crop was bringing him profit at present: “Heat waves destroyed 30% of my green chilli harvest ... I am now in a 40,000 BDT loss.”<sup>31</sup>
- Respondents from Satkhira mirrored the reflections collected from Jashore, and felt that their exposure to slow climate disruptions like extreme heat and salinity was worsening with time and becoming more costly.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, the region’s vulnerability to climate shocks continues to threaten the lives of millions of locals who lack adequate access to government support and responsive climate planning. Recognising the particular risks to coastal villages, foreign aid funding and non-profit interventions have been channelled to the south.<sup>33</sup> The overlap between climate vulnerability, border fragility and weak governance in this region highlight the need for more nuanced understanding of the risks to local communities, and the potential solutions.

In 2024, Bangladesh experienced significant upheaval, when popular protests forced out the longest-standing Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina.<sup>34</sup> Non-violent student demonstrations turned bloody with several people killed.<sup>35</sup> In August, protesters demanded Sheikh Hasina’s resignation and she fled across the border to India with an Interim Government then formed under Nobel Laureate Dr Mohammad Yunus as Chief Advisor. Research for this study was undertaken during this period

**“Farmers cannot work for long hours anymore. Some have even suffered from heat strokes. Extreme heat is causing major problems [for us].”**

—A female farmer in Putkhali

of upheaval, changing the political context within which respondents provided their inputs, and redefining the parameters of the analysis and findings. At the time of publication, Bangladesh remains in flux, and drawing conclusive policy recommendations is not possible. Nevertheless, the data that was generated paints a picture of the country’s most vulnerable populations, highlighting the need for new governance approaches to reaffirm commitments to inclusivity and methods to achieve it.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

As the impacts of environmental challenges intensify in the south-west borderlands of Bangladesh, local societies experience layered fragilities and dispossession not solely through the measurable loss of material wealth and assets, but also through the loss of connections, traditions and peaceful living conditions. Normalisation of this constant level of threat can lead borderland communities to feel trapped.<sup>36</sup> The following section describes how climate events interact with political, social and economic orders to create fragilities in this region. It offers explanation on which factors compound vulnerability, leading to worse outcomes for some communities.

### CLIMATE CHANGE IN BORDERLANDS

**In the southwest, communities have long experienced extreme danger from climate events, though impacts are worsening and support is missing.** In the past decade, the region has been hit with at least one devastating cyclone every year.<sup>37</sup> Sudden climate disasters are so intertwined with the reality of living in the coastal borderlands, that many households hang evacuation bags on their doors, and kitchenware is divided into two sets—one for daily use, another packed away for emergencies.<sup>38</sup> During this research, Satkhira was hit with Cyclone Remal which destroyed houses and infrastructure, breached embankments, flooded farmland and fishing enclosures,

leaving over 600,000 residents without power.<sup>39</sup> Research respondents regularly fear for their own survival amid these disasters, having to rebuild from scratch time and again. They may choose to stay in their homes rather than visiting crowded and unsafe cyclone shelters, prioritising the safety of their assets.<sup>40</sup> Often displaced from their homes in the aftermath, people may become more susceptible to other forms of insecurities through lack of access to safe drinking water and sanitation, nutritious food and economic opportunities.<sup>41</sup> Particularly violent disasters, like upstream floods in 2000, Cyclone Aila in 2009 and Amphan in 2020, still haunt community members.

**“Elected officials have made plenty of promises [about building stronger embankments], but they have all fallen flat. We have since stopped asking. Now, the local community comes together to help. If the government has contributed one taka here, the community has invested 100,000 taka.”**

—Locals in Debhata



## Dispossession of Land

The emergence of lucrative tiger prawn cultivation and subsequent saltwater intrusion in local waterbodies and agricultural land has altered freshwater ecology, leaving locals unable to sustain crop biodiversity. Communities report being unable to access fertile land and cultivate their own produce. An 80-year-old man recalled his ancestors foraging in the Sundarbans forest adjacent to his village in Munshiganj, which today is impoverished. “I feel that the disconnection of our village from freshwater aquaculture is solely responsible for our current state of deprivation.”<sup>42</sup> Many households are forced to buy food items like rice and freshwater fish that once grew locally.

Government-owned *khas* land, which may be gained from auctions, confiscations of estates, or reclaiming of newly emerged lands from the sea or rivers, is supposed to be distributed to the landless poor according to Bangladesh’s land policy.<sup>43</sup> If properly implemented, this mechanism could provide solutions for landless climate migrants, though at this time it is estimated that 90% of agricultural *khas* land is illegally occupied by vested interest groups rather than the marginalised populations it was intended for.<sup>44</sup> *Khas* land distribution processes have been rife with corruption and powerful actors are able to manipulate complicated bureaucratic processes in their own interest. Local elected officials who are key to successful restitution and advocacy efforts, may themselves be involved in environmentally harmful businesses, with profits prioritised over local peoples’ needs.<sup>45</sup>

Socio-ecological conflicts in border regions can become violent blurring the split between victims and perpetrators. In 2008, 4,000 landless people in Debhata occupied 500 acres of *khas* land to protest corruption by land authorities. Eight hundred protestors were sued with ‘land grabbing’ charges.<sup>46</sup> In 2024, mob violence led to a civilian death, but it was unclear whether the conflict was in connection with *khas* property or armed gang activity, not uncommon in border towns like Debhata.<sup>47</sup> Local NGOs advocating for the landless may face backlash from authorities. “Our priorities were dictated by what the locals wanted... they wanted us to lead the land rights movement. In the initial days of our work, our founder had 22 police cases lodged against him.”<sup>48</sup>

**Weak infrastructure and lack of government support leaves local populations vulnerable and politically disenfranchised.** The Ichamati river demarcates the border with India. High tides and weak embankments, due to poor planning and inadequate investment in construction materials, have led to erosion.<sup>49</sup> Alongside unpredictable weather patterns, the sense of neglect by government institutions has left locals feeling angry, distressed and disenfranchised from the political system.<sup>50</sup> Further south, community members in Gabura and Munshiganj view saltwater intrusion as a priority issue, as the nearest freshwater source is two hours away and residents pay for it out of pocket when their rainwater reservoirs run dry.<sup>51</sup>

## (IM)MOBILITIES

**Migration is a major coping mechanism for people affected by slow onset climate changes or sudden climate disasters, though drawing direct causal linkages is often difficult.**<sup>52</sup> Research respondents listed many factors in their decision-making around migration, from border conditions (former periods of openness vs recent securitisation measures), to livelihood opportunities, and familial obligations.<sup>53</sup> Existing socio-economic pressures may be compounded by

environmental changes, and over time these could lead to increased movements of people, mostly within Bangladesh. Internally displaced persons are not always guaranteed basic rights in their new homes, and are often socially isolated, barely making ends meet.<sup>54</sup> “After Cyclone Aila, the entire area was underwater. People had no option but to leave,” a Gabura resident noted of the 2009 disaster. With an increased frequency in climate shocks, a smaller proportion of local households are able to recover from them.

**Informal cross-border movement has been systemically curbed in the last two decades, but trafficking and other illicit activities have persisted.** A steady securitisation of the border has affected migration patterns and perceptions about cross-border mobility. Research respondents confirmed that informal border crossing continues within a relatively limited scope, and temporary migration to Malaysia or Saudi Arabia for work, where salaries are higher and religious affinity can provide added comfort, is a more attractive prospect.<sup>55</sup> The land port of Benapole accounts for half of all human trafficking incidents recorded between Bangladesh and India.<sup>56</sup> Women and children, facing a rise in coercive and illegal marriage practices due to socio-economic pressures, are most vulnerable to scams involving bonded labour, sex work and organ harvesting.<sup>57</sup>

## ECONOMIC INSTABILITY

**Respondents noted cascading climate impacts that exacerbate economic losses and the resulting pressures.** A failed paddy harvest linked to erratic rainfall results not only in the loss of income and consumable products, but also a shortage of dry grass to feed livestock which may force farmers into paying four times the ‘normal’ price, pushing them deeper into debt cycles.<sup>58</sup> Historical water manage-

### Dispossession of livelihoods and connections

*“Fish farming is very methodical, like clockwork. I know which month of the year it is best to release fish for the best outcome, but now, fish die from extreme heat, or they do not grow well. My previous routine is no longer working as it did.”* (A fisher in Gabura)

Many agrarian livelihoods in the southwest are threatened by erratic weather patterns. Climate shocks can halt income flows for day labourers if crops are ruined and the harvest fails. Landowners, struggling to employ labourers in their fields who may prioritise more stable work, lease their properties and take up other forms of work, like passenger driving.<sup>63</sup>

*“Our backbone is agriculture. Farming is our primary source of income. Any setbacks in this sector can break our backs.”* (A landowner in Munshiganj)

Migration is a complicated, isolating, and often reluctant decision. A respondent in a one-income household became indebted when remittances from the earning family member stopped, signalling problems in their overseas employment.<sup>64</sup> In 2023, over 80% of surveyed migrants returning to Bangladesh reported that they lacked legitimate work permits, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation.<sup>65</sup> Internal migrants are also susceptible to unfair treatment, particularly in the brick-making industry where migrants are found working for months in harsh conditions only to be paid a fraction of what was promised.<sup>66</sup>

*“In India, the water is sweet [not affected by salinity], the soil is sweet – crops grow in abundance.”* (A Munshiganj resident on their relative’s decision to settle in India)

ment practices become obsolete as irrigation machines are needed during dry seasons and farmlands are flooded during monsoon.<sup>59</sup> In border-towns, where informal trade and cross-border smuggling can be common, crackdowns impact local economies and household income. Small-scale informal traders, the “foot-soldiers”, are more likely to be apprehended than wealthier and more powerful traders who continue to operate.<sup>60</sup> To alleviate the burden of border policing and prioritise national security risks, legalising prolific cross-border trade has also been debated.<sup>61</sup> However, not all businesses in the south-west have incurred losses, with freight and inter-city commerce in Satbaria benefiting from road construction connecting land ports.<sup>62</sup>

## COMMUNAL DISCORD

**Disputes over assets like land, homes and livestock are the main threats to social cohesion, and risk growing as climate change induces scarcity over common resources, though fears stemming from religiously-motivated violence increased since August 2024.**

Socio-economic pressures linked to climate change can exacerbate tensions, with communities less willing or able to share resources.<sup>67</sup> Climate-induced losses have also restricted income opportunities and community members compete over limited work and aid deliveries. While “development brokerage” is not new in Bangladesh, a worsening climate reality has increased community dependence on non-governmental organisations, risking a greater impact on social connections.<sup>68</sup> The political upheaval which took place in Bangladesh in August 2024 has weakened rule of law, and there have been widespread cases of vandalism, looting and chaos, in which minorities were particularly victimised.<sup>69</sup> The closure of border crossing points and media reporting on risks of violence against minority groups caused heightened concern among borderland communities.<sup>70</sup> The research team interacted with several members of these minority groups at the time, and heard that a strong sense of fear prevailed though no direct harm or communal violence had been experienced by them.<sup>71</sup> Border closures left traders on both sides as well as Bangladeshi labourers, without access to their regular livelihoods, a critical part of the security discourse that is not well covered.<sup>72</sup>



## STRUCTURAL NEGLECT AND COMPLEXITIES

**Social inequities and exclusion from public institutions is exacerbated by increasing climate threats, and communities largely rely on their own networks to respond to disasters.** Poverty has prevented community members from pursuing education, pushing them into agricultural work or cross-border trade at a young age.<sup>73</sup> Outdoor work on fields or boats is the primary occupation within low-socioeconomic households, increasing vulnerability to climate-related health risks while access to care is inadequate.<sup>74</sup> In Gabura, residents travel almost two hours to access emergency services. Institutional marginalisation is significant in the context of heightened climate disasters. A respondent in Satbaria, an area affected by prolonged heat waves as recently as mid-2024, attested that their last government aid package was received after a flood in 2000.<sup>75</sup> Another who lives with a physical disability was not supported to access eligible benefits.<sup>76</sup> Residents reported being most disappointed by local elected officials who are seen to prioritise political power and economic gain over community needs.<sup>77</sup>

**Local authorities shape the day-to-day lives of communities by deciding how central state policies and directives are carried out, leaving locals to navigate unpredictable and often inequitable systems.** Though the central government applies the “broad direction” of border management, these are translated via local elites whose affability may vary.<sup>78</sup> Border town residents also negotiate volatile security dynamics, with experienced travellers identifying when it is safe to cross and when it is not. In this context, trust-building is a significant challenge and development actors may struggle to engage substantively with local communities.

## IDENTITIES AND INTERSECTIONAL VULNERABILITY

The research was designed to test socio-economic factors which left certain individuals more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change than ‘average’ households. The purpose of this analysis is to underscore the importance of equitable climate-response mechanisms, only possible through meaningful engagements with different community members. Inspired by an existing theorisation of climate-fragility risks, “A New Climate for Peace”, **Figure 2** illustrates how vulnerability to climate-induced fragilities is compounded by specific identity markers.<sup>83</sup> The conceptualised figure is limited to observations made within the span of this research and does not claim to be all-comprehensive or establish any hierarchies of vulnerability. Systemic injustice in borderlands interacts with climate change in ways that are constantly changing, which is a critical factor in designing appropriate and effective solutions.

## Dispossession of trust and peace

*“The question of what we will eat tomorrow mentally exhausts us. This constant worrying makes people sick.” (A Satbaria resident)*

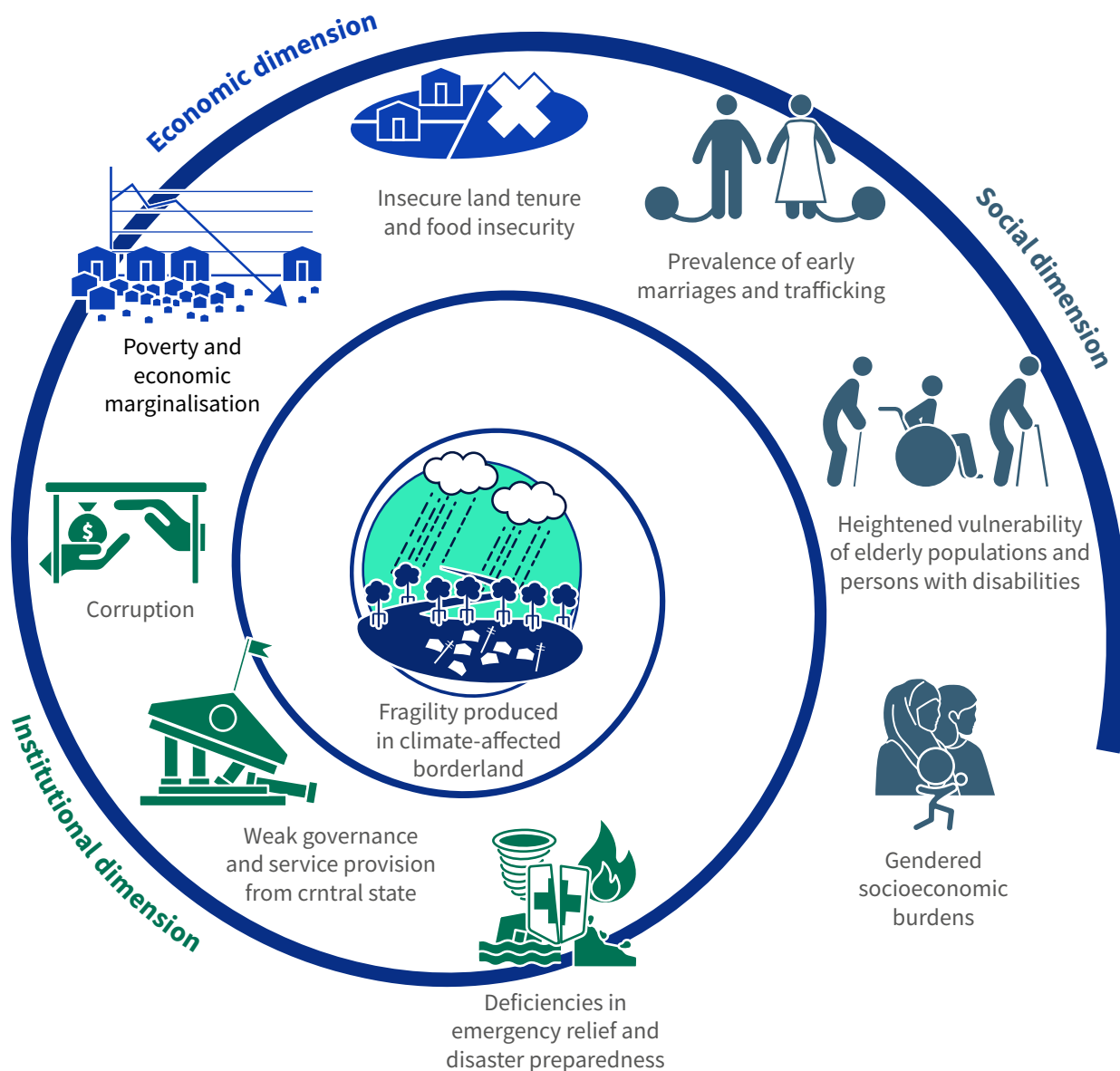
The lack of institutional support for agrarian communities in the southwest creates trust gaps, which uphold a culture of anxiety, instability and negative peace. Most respondents reported being in debt to make up for lost income or to recover from natural disasters, trapping households in financial precarity.<sup>79</sup>

*“All of you just have very bad luck...eat the free rice and rebuild your homes.” (Local officials, as told by community members in an FGD)*

Generally, public benefits are seen as unattainable with research respondents viewing eligibility processes as corrupt and unaccountable. Police are often seen to demonise the poor while protecting the rich.<sup>80</sup> Government support, though available for particularly vulnerable community members like persons with disabilities or elderly people, is insufficient. Local officials in charge of distributing such aid are often viewed with mistrust by the public who reported experiencing harassment and humiliation.<sup>81</sup> Many officials fled their positions after the fall of the Awami League government, fearing reprisals.<sup>82</sup>

**“During that time [amid climate shocks], those who are destined to, only they survive.”**

—A Putkhali resident



**Figure 2:** Intersectional identities and compounded fragility-risks

**Gender:** Most of the men interviewed for this study were the sole earners in their households and carry financial responsibility for many family members. Men are also often the first to migrate away from their communities as income generation becomes difficult. Women who are left behind may face new hardships including abandonment if their husbands do not return, threatening their position in society. In the southwest, women are often involved in fishing, farming and livestock management, on top of home-based and caring responsibilities.<sup>84</sup> In their interviews, female respondents spoke about their shared struggle of being unable to feed their families and themselves during climate shocks. When roads are blocked, children cannot go to school, and in the long term, as climate precarity

depletes a household’s income and savings, some children are forced to drop out. The physical space where female children in particular can exercise their rights shrinks, as local ecology shifts in coastal regions.

**“Saline water makes their [local girls’] skin darker. Fearing that she will not find any eligible prospects for a husband, parents marry off their daughters early.”**

—A Gabura resident

**Age and impairments:** During climate emergencies, people with reduced mobility and higher support needs, such as elderly people and those with disabilities, immediately face greater vulnerability. Arranging a climate-safe space that can accommodate their needs, to avoid abandonment or separation, places an additional burden on family members. Divorced or widowed women, who may already be experiencing social isolation, face additional risks. In the absence of state-sponsored carers, a person with disabilities can find navigating through climate-induced challenges extremely difficult without regular support from family members.

**“Others can run, but I cannot. They can rush to cyclone shelters, but I have to stay back,”**

—A 70-year-old Gabura resident

**Access to assets:** For the average Bangladeshi household, land is likely to be the most valuable asset. For rural populations in particular, “if one has land, they have dignity,”<sup>85</sup> because it equates to better food security for farmers and fishers, who otherwise have no power over the type of crops fish they farm. During climate disasters, people may prioritise the protection of assets like land and homes over saving their own lives, as illustrated by a community researcher’s own account: “In the middle of Cyclone Remal, a woman [from my village] was seen putting her kantha (traditional quilt) on the local, weakened embankment, hoping to keep the structure from collapsing. She then placed herself on top, sitting and

holding tight as the storm worsened.”<sup>86</sup> Community-led efforts, when state-sponsored emergency relief fails, are critical, though climate disruptions reinforce social inequalities, with poor households further trapped into poverty while wealthier families who live with brick walls, sturdy roofs and “back-up generators,” recover.

**Borderland livelihoods:** As noted above, informal border traders are most at risk of losing their livelihoods (and lives) in the increasingly securitised border environment. Another vulnerable profession is that of fishers, for whom the implication of crossing the maritime border is significant, with hundreds of Bangladeshi fishers in Indian jails, some for over five years.<sup>87</sup> Even in cases of accidents or emergencies, returning home can take months.<sup>88</sup> A lack of regional negotiation and alignment on fishing bans means that national measures are not proportionate or coordinated.<sup>89</sup> Fishing communities are not consulted in policy decisions, and their uneven application creates an opaque context where impacts are not well-known. Overfishing and climactic changes resulting in lower fish stocks have become an increasingly precarious livelihood.<sup>90</sup> The poorest fishers who do not own boats and may be trapped in exploitative labour systems are also among the most vulnerable. Faced with allegedly corrupt government regulatory processes and a lack of viable alternative livelihoods, fishers in this region face immense challenges in securing incomes and growing capital.<sup>91</sup>

**“How can you see the border when you’re in the sea?”**

—A marine conservationist

## POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

**“[Our] climate has seen drastic changes. We no longer know of the peace we once had.”**

—A family caregiver in Munshiganj<sup>92</sup>

This section of the report highlights key considerations for policymakers and other relevant actors seeking to address the fragility of the southwest borderlands. Improved governance systems and more productive bilateral engagement on regulating border activities are critical to ensuring that climate action in the southwest

region is effective and able to support the most vulnerable communities. Climate response in the development sector should not bypass or replace state responsibility to protect citizens, and an effective and inclusive response apparatus requires government and non-government entities to play a role.<sup>93</sup> Bangladesh’s non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector plays a significant role in delivering welfare and advocating for rights, particularly where state structures are absent or non-functional, however systematic and long-term solutions should be led by public-sector actors who are subject to scrutiny and can be supported to be transparent and community-responsive in their delivery.<sup>94</sup>



Additionally, there may be opportunities for governments on both sides of the border to collaborate around shared environmental safeguarding and climate change adaptation objectives. Such initiatives could then be used to build trust and improve relationships at local or even national levels. In the meantime, there are several tangible actions that international and national policymakers as well as local government officials, can consider, to improve the safety and quality of life of communities in Bangladesh's climate-vulnerable regions.

**“A political process is always better than a non-political process, since elected officials will always have to be more accountable than [aid workers].”**

—A national climate expert

The research team also encourages policymakers, analysts and academics to expand the ‘climate-peace-security nexus’ concept to consider fragile contexts which do not experience active violence, such as Bangladesh.<sup>95</sup> These regions have much to contribute to more nuanced understandings of the ways in which insecurity and structural violence can be compounded by climate change, and highlight where weak or dysfunctional governance systems prevent climate change affected communities from accessing international support and financing.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCALISED ACTION

Alongside the priorities voiced by community members below, the research team identified a number of areas where increased investment and action could support improved outcomes for the southwest and other fragile, climate-affected border regions.

**Local knowledge of climate change impacts and environmental degradation must be included in decision-making around effective climate mitigation and adaptation.** Coastal communities regularly protest against harmful farming practices like brackish tiger prawn cultivation which permanently degrades agricultural land.<sup>96</sup> These voices have been marginalised for decades in favour of private sector elites, though the new political order in Bangladesh may provide opportunities for greater social accountability.<sup>97</sup> Community organisations who have long advocated for systemic changes in these regions can provide important expertise for national and international policymakers. Consultations with fishing communities are needed to ensure that national and transnational regulations are designed and enforced appropriately.

**Climate disaster responses must consider vulnerable community members to ensure they are effective and accessible to all.** Ensure that shelters and other climate-safe spaces can accommodate the needs of people with reduced mobility. This may involve working with family members to set up appropriate physical spaces and ensure that individuals are able to access services. Social services and medical care should be expanded to rural and coastal communities to improve their day-to-day quality of life and ability to recover from disasters.

**Investments in improved public relations and a focus on creating accountable and transparent bodies are needed to deliver climate change support.** Experiences with corrupt officials, information gaps, scams and extortion leave some populations reluctant to receive aid or other forms of support.<sup>98</sup> Digital governance mechanisms could be used to ensure more transparent and accessible systems for local engagement.

**Greater cross-border engagement on environmental considerations is needed to improve coordination around shared waterways and resources.** Achieving greater alignment on fishing bans in coastal border areas can reduce offenses and improve the safety of fishing communities. Devastating floods along the northern border were attributed to irresponsible dam management, highlighting how growing climate threats can translate into political and security concerns if not properly managed.<sup>99</sup>

**Communities are often the main source of support in situations of physical disaster, financial hardship, and health decline, and can be mobilised as part of systematic climate change response and adaptation efforts.** Micro-loan systems are offered by community-based committees headed by local leaders, providing safety nets for poorer community members.<sup>100</sup> Existing local strategies can be supported and scaled up to address short-term needs when faced with inconsistent or inaccessible government response efforts. Global climate financing must recognize community voices and integrate their knowledge and experience when allocating adequate resources to climate-vulnerable regions.

**In the aftermath of climate disasters, local support networks can be mobilised to help maintain social connection address mental health and psychosocial support needs.** Community spaces and institutions play a vital role in preventing vulnerable groups from being socially isolated and improving ‘self-efficacy’. Ensuring that schools reopen as soon as its safe helps children to cope with the destabilising effects of disasters.

## Voices from the borderland

In an effort to elevate community views about the changes they wish to see, this section presents an overview of stakeholder action points as relayed by study participants.

### Non-governmental organizations involved in the climate-response apparatus should

*Incorporate community input in producing ‘beneficiary lists.’* Engaging locals only at the far end of climate-response programming risks misreading the actual need of support felt by communities. The use of tools like household surveys at the onset could help ensure that resources are allocated equitably and among the most deserving.

*Adapt development interventions to be sustainable, flexible and holistic.* Instead of providing seasonal solutions, financing projects that bring long-term benefit is critical, i.e. investing in irrigation machinery or agro-products storage facilities. Flexible microloan repayment options could be made available to those with border-dependent and climate-fragile professions. Further, youth-centric training initiatives to develop professional and technical skills could help diversify employment opportunities in the region, cultivating autonomy and future resilience to climate precarity.

*Prioritise providing communities with clean and affordable water.* Beyond drinking, safe water must be available for daily use like cooking and washing. Also, following a climate shock like floods or cyclones, solutions like deep tube-wells could be instrumental in mitigating water insecurity.

### The Bangladesh government should

*Stabilise prices of agro-goods and commodities.* In the face of farming cycles being disrupted by climate events, farmers find it difficult to cope with hiked prices of indispensable agricultural products such as seeds and fertilizers. A price-ceiling on such commodities would help strengthen agrarian resilience to climate change.

*Improve accountability mechanisms to subvert corruption in government offices.* The poor and vulnerable are subjected to disproportionate levels of harassment over bribes.<sup>101</sup> Independent and local-level task forces can be organized to combat corruption in bureaucratic offices and help rebuild community trust on government institutions.

*Build embankments and connectivity infrastructure.* Strong embankments that are local-ecology informed can safeguard coastal communities from the constant threat of displacement. Infrastructure development like better transport systems will allow peripheral communities to access regional trade markets, increase job opportunities, and improve district-wide connectivity to emergency services.

*Review the efficacy of existing social protection schemes.* Streamlining systems to avoid sporadic payouts and evaluating the impact of protection schemes on borderland communities is important to improve institutional social protection programs.

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