

“WE NO LONGER KNOW OF THE PEACE WE ONCE HAD”

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

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Bangladesh, one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, experiences regular and devastating climate shocks like floods, cyclones and tidal surges, and slow climate disruptions such as extreme heat, erratic rainfall, and saltwater intrusion. In the coastal southwest, local communities contend with these challenges while also experiencing social, political and economic tensions associated with the nearby border to India. The Centre for Peace & Justice (CPJ), an institute of BRAC University, with support from The Asia Foundation through the UK-funded XCEPT research programme, conducted a year-long research project to study the ways in which climate change interacts with and compounds fragility in Bangladesh. The objective of the initiative is to understand what effective climate action looks like in areas of weak or dysfunctional governance. Data collection was undertaken between June-September 2024 by a team of researchers from Dhaka and from the southwestern study sites, following CPJ’s community-based participatory research methodology.¹

1 Centre for Peace and Justice, *Community-based participatory research*, 4 March 2025, XCEPT: Online.

CONTEXT

This region has seen billion-dollar cross-border investments into land ports and construction projects and substantial Bangladeshi patronage in Indian markets and hospitals, while populations sharing cultural and linguistic similarities. Foreign aid targets vulnerable coastal villages and supports conservation efforts in fragile ecosystems. Living in interaction and proximity with the border can create opportunities for communities, but it can also cause instability that shapes future mobility patterns. Shared waterways provide uneven benefits, and the trade balance and use of resources is skewed, in the absence of functioning mechanisms to resolve disputes.¹ Political upheaval in Bangladesh in 2024 added further pressure on the bilateral relationship. As environmental challenges intensify in the south-west borderlands, local communities 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. Research findings offer an explanation of the factors that compound vulnerability, leading to worse outcomes for some population groups.

DISPOSSESSION OF LAND

In coastal villages, the emergence of lucrative tiger prawn cultivation and subsequent saltwater intrusion local rivers and agricultural land has altered freshwater ecology, leaving locals unable to sustain crop biodiversity. Many households are forced to buy food items like rice and freshwater fish that once were farmed locally. Moreover, 90% of government-owned Khas land, instead of being distributed among landless poor groups, remains illegally occupied by vested interest groups accused of colluding with local elected officials and bureaucrats.² Conflicts over land can quickly become violent, with local leaders advocating for the landless facing judicial persecution.

DISPOSSESSION OF LIVELIHOODS AND CONNECTIONS

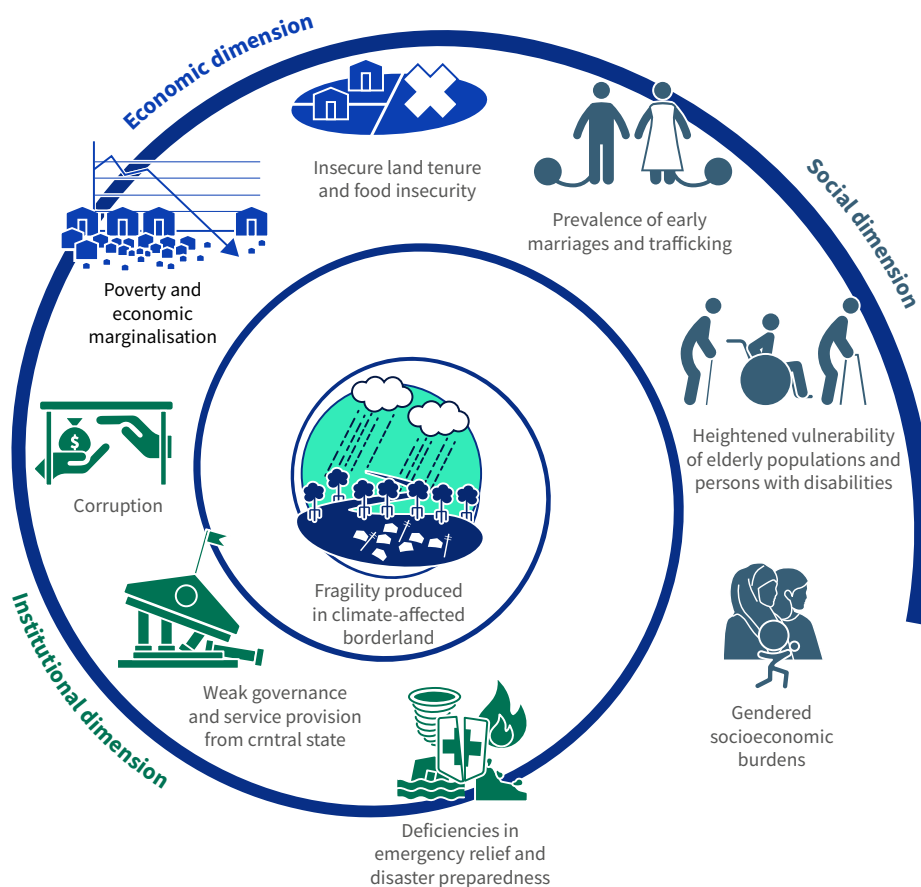
Many agrarian livelihoods in the southwest are threatened by erratic weather patterns. Landowners, struggling to employ farmers in their fields who may prioritise more stable work, lease their properties and take up other forms of work. The decisions people make to migrate for work and separate from their families is not without complications or reluctance. Both internal and overseas labour migrants are susceptible to unfair treatment, systemic exploitation and insecure wages.

DISPOSSESSION OF TRUST AND PEACE

The lack of institutional support for communities in southwest Bangladesh creates trust gaps which uphold a culture of anxiety, instability and negative peace. Most research respondents reported being in debt to make up for lost income or to recover from natural disasters, trapping households in financial precarity. The culture of impunity that protects corrupt officials overseeing the distribution of government benefits and aid further erodes trust.

1 Ashok Swain, 'Displacing the Conflict: Environmental Destruction in Bangladesh and Ethnic Conflict in India,' *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (May, 1996), pp. 189–204.

2 *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.



KEY FINDINGS

In southwest Bangladesh, communities have long experienced extreme danger from climate events, though impacts are worsening, and support is absent. Research respondents regularly fear for their own survival amid disasters, having to rebuild from scratch time and again.

Weak infrastructure and lack of government support leaves local populations vulnerable and politically disenfranchised. Due to poor investment in construction materials of embankments, high tides on the transboundary Ichamati river have led to erosion. The sense of neglect by government institutions has left locals politically disenfranchised.

Migration and informal movement across the border are major coping mechanisms for people facing socio-economic pressures. Cascading climate impacts exacerbate economic losses, and an increasingly securitised border is curbing the mobility of local populations.

Social inequities and institutional exclusion are 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.

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. In this context, trust-building is a significant challenge and development actors may struggle to substantively engage with local communities.

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. Socio-economic pressures linked to climate change can exacerbate tensions, with communities less willing or able to share resources. Climate-induced losses have also restricted income opportunities and community members compete over limited work and aid deliveries.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Improved governance systems and more constructive 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. There may be opportunities for governments on both sides of the border to collaborate around shared environmental safeguarding and climate change adaptation objectives.

- Local knowledge of climate change impacts and environmental degradation must be included in decision-making around effective climate mitigation and adaptation.
- Climate disaster responses must consider vulnerable community members to ensure support is effective and accessible to all.
- Investments in improved public relations and a focus on creating accountable and transparent bodies are needed to deliver climate change support.
- Greater cross-border engagement on environmental considerations is needed to improve coordination around shared waterways and resources.
- 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.
- In the aftermath of climate disasters, local support networks can be mobilised to help maintain social connection and address mental health and psychosocial support needs.