

## COP26 and the Crisis of Climate Change in Bangladesh

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### Abstract

Bangladesh, a developing country located in South Asia, is one of the most environmentally vulnerable countries in the world. Global warming and climate change affect the country's ecological balance, imposing threats to the existence of humans and animals, especially in flood-prone areas. Natural calamities, including floods, upsurges, cyclones, droughts, and so on, frequently hit some parts of the country. Bangladesh has already encountered massive floods in 1974 and 1988; the giant cyclones in 1970 and 1991; Sidr in 2007, and Ayla in 2009. Floods occur almost every year; as a result, many places of the country are submerged, and people suffer colossal losses—often, their houses and crops are washed away. Many families turn homeless and destitute, living in extreme poverty, and die of hunger. Global warming and climate change are also responsible for heavy rain inundating several cities and for drought destroying crops. The government of Bangladesh attempts to draw international attention to the impacts of global warming and climate change in different forums. In COP26, which took place in Glasgow in November 2021, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh seriously addressed the issue and sought the attention of world leaders to take steps to redress the impacts of climate change and global warming. This study attempts to delve into the environmental issues, COP26, and the effects of climate change and global warming in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** COP26; Climate Change; Global Warming; Bangladesh

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## Introduction

Despite having abundant resources and ample prospects to turn into a developed and self-sustained country, Bangladesh faces numerous challenges, including threats of climate change and global warming. As global warming has already impacted the world, increasing heat to an alarming extent, Bangladesh is also under a severe threat of environmental hazards. Susmita Dasgupta et al. (2014, p. 96) assert that “Bangladesh is a global hotspot for tropical cyclones. Between 1877 and 1995, Bangladesh was hit by 154 cyclones, including 43 severe cyclonic storms, 43 cyclonic storms, and 68 tropical depressions. Since 1995, 5 severe cyclones have hit the country’s coast.” The statistics above show how environmentally vulnerable Bangladesh is and how the country’s people have suffered from time to time. The country has more risks because of its position; it has faced several disasters and tried to make up for the losses caused by the calamities. Similarly, people in coastal areas encounter floods over and over. Hugh Brammer (2016, p. 867) observes:

[s]erious floods that cause extensive crop damage have occurred . . . in 1974, 1987, 1988, 1998, 2004 and 2009 – which displaced many thousands of people, caused extensive damage to property and crops, and sometimes caused many human and livestock casualties.

Brammer (2016) categorises floods as normal, medium, and serious. Normal floods, which occur every monsoon, do not pose severe threats to people, but serious floods that Brammer singles out in his statement have caused gargantuan damage to assets and casualties to humans and livestock. Such serious floods are likely to occur frequently if proper steps are not taken. Because of people’s resilience and common people’s sincere efforts, Bangladesh has stood back on its own over and over again after encountering environmental disasters at different times. Flash floods, which occur as a result of heavy and excessive rainfall, do not last long; as a result, people do not suffer

for a longer period of time. In Bangladesh, flash floods occur between April and July and during September and October. Medium floods are more dangerous than flash or normal floods but less severe than major or serious ones. Monsoon floods caused by heavy rainfall and waterlogging are considered medium. But if the monsoon floods prompt prolonged suffering and affects life ruthlessly, often end up with large numbers of casualties, must be taken for granted as serious.

Since the whole world is concerned about climate change and the consequent environmental hazards, the United Nations (UN) has been organising a world summit for more than two decades, which is called COP (Conference of the Parties), taking place in different countries every year. In 2021, the UN organised it in Glasgow, UK, known as COP26. The world leaders, including Sheikh Hasina, the honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh, participated in the conference. The leaders addressed the issue seriously and presented the deplorable state of their own countries caused by climate change and global warming. The honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh brought the overall picture of the country in relation to climate change and global warming to the notice of the world leaders attending the summit. They also addressed the issue of climate finance at the conference. Climate finance is crucial to tackling environmental crises worldwide. Like previous conferences, COP26 also gave importance to climate finance:

One of the central topics in Glasgow was climate finance . . . public and private funds flowing from developed countries to developing countries toward mitigation, i.e. lower emissions and decarbonising economies, and adaptation, namely building resilience toward the impact of climate change. (Kaya and Stoetzer, 2021)

Former American President Barack Obama made the proposal of climate finance in 2009, which every country hailed with sincerity, but it has not yet seen the light. Rich countries are supposed

to pay 100 billion US dollars to affected developing countries to mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change and global warming. The issue, however, was discussed at the 2021 conference in Glasgow—it is assumed that the pledge of the climate finance of 100 billion may be met in 2022 or 2023. Therefore, in the next section, I focus on COP26, in which Bangladesh was one of the participating countries.

### **COP26: Background**

COP, undoubtedly the biggest world summit dedicated to a noble cause, draws the attention of the people around the world because it commits to saving the world from threats of the adverse effects of climate change. COP takes place every year, and the summit started in 1995 in Germany. The last one, COP26, which took place in Glasgow, is also known as Glasgow Climate Change Conference. One of the main objectives of the COP is to review the emissions of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and other greenhouse gases, including methane, by different countries. The Parties then offer pledges and a financial package to mitigate the damage mostly caused by the wealthy nations. In COP26, China pledges to be carbon neutral by 2060, the US by 2050, the European Union by 2050, Russia by 2060, and India by 2070 (Reality Check Team, 2021). Although Bangladesh is among the lowest emitters of carbon globally, the country has pledged to cut down 22% of carbon emissions by 2030.

The member countries promised to stop, among others, the use of coal and deforestation. Deforestation is one of the principal causes behind the rise of carbon and methane. Basically, they made pledges to keep cutting emissions, reduce using fuel fossils, and try reaching a net-zero target. All nations agreed to act toward a goal of decreasing carbon emissions, or else the planet would be exposed to more precarious catastrophes. A BBC report puts it:

Left unchecked, humans and nature will experience catastrophic warming, with worsening droughts, greater sea level rise and mass extinction of species. . . . Temperature rises must slow down if we

want to avoid the worst consequences of climate change, scientists say. . . . If nothing is done, scientists think global warming could exceed 4C in the future, leading to devastating heatwaves, millions losing their homes to rising sea levels and irreversible loss of plant and animal species (What climate change, 2021)

This observation reveals the extent and scale of loss and damage caused by climate change, for which both individuals and states or nations are responsible. Although the world is at high risk, there are potential solutions, which scientists have offered, and different nations have also realised. The issues are seriously addressed in all COPs, and in COP26, too, the leaders of developed countries have reiterated their promises to contribute to helping the poorer nations in adapting to climate change.

### **COP26, Bangladesh, and Climate Change**

Bangladesh, no doubt, is a cyclone- and flood-prone area and many scholars have addressed and critically discussed it in various forums. Saleemul Huq, one of the renowned Bangladeshi scholars of environmental studies and Director of the International Centre for Climate Change & Development, has been writing extensively on the effects of climate change and global warming on the overall socio-economic condition of the country. Huq regularly writes a column titled *Politics of Climate Change*, which is very popular among readers. He has conducted research widely on the environmental hazards in Bangladesh. He also draws the attention of the people concerned with COP26 as he did during and after other COP summits in the past, writing several analytical columns and articles in *The Daily Star*. However, scholars have been writing about the impact of climate change in Bangladesh for decades now. For instance, A. M. Choudhury et al. (1997) point out, that Bangladesh being “a deltaic region . . . is very vulnerable to natural calamities. Almost every year, this country is visited by natural disasters such as floods, tropical cyclones and storm surges, tornadoes, droughts, etc” (pp. 13-14). These calamities are more or less frequent in the

country; especially the low-lying coastal areas are exposed to floods, cyclones, and storm surges. Cyclone Sidr (2007) and Cyclone Aila (2009) have been the most devastating among the catastrophic environmental hazards in Bangladesh. They have caused colossal damage to resources and claimed human lives and animals. Such destructive cyclones occur for several reasons, among which rising sea level is one of the vital causes.

Similarly, Isaure Delaporte and Mathilde Maurel (2018) argue that “Bangladesh is increasingly exposed to frequent and extreme climatic events, like widespread shifts in rainfall amounts, extreme weather, droughts, and intense cyclones. These serious climate-related difficulties put agricultural production at risk” (p. 49). For the last decade or more, it is undeniable that weather in the country has not remained steady season-wise—it either rained heavily in one monsoon or rained very little in another. The extreme climatic events have also made life miserable; agriculture has been affected more acutely than many other sectors. As a result, the country's farmers have faced more difficulties in their everyday lives and have consequently suffered extreme poverty. In a similar context, Mehta and Kumar (2019, p. 365) argue that because of the Ganges–Brahmaputra Delta, the world's largest delta, Bangladesh “is particularly prone to future climate change-related migration flows, as it is a particularly low-lying and therefore, vulnerable coastal zone.” Migration is another consequent phenomenon which is happening because of regular climate-driven changes in the environment. As extreme weather triggered by climate change disrupts life and dwindles resources, people tend to migrate to safer and better places. Consequently, mass displacement will soon be a new and uncontrollable crisis in the country.

Dasgupta et al. (2014) observe that “increase in sea surface temperature and sea-level rise (SLR) in a changing climate may exacerbate Bangladesh's vulnerability to cyclones. Larger storm surges will then threaten greater future destruction, because surges will increase the depth of inundation and will move further inland

– threatening larger areas than they did in the past” (p. 96). Sea-level rise is an alarming factor that threatens the environmental equilibrium in Bangladesh. As the above remark suggests, if the situation cannot be controlled and the crisis is not well-handled, the country will face more high-risk calamities in the future. It is crucial to conduct more research on coastal protective measures and present the results of case studies to the government so that further catastrophes can be tackled. Some case studies have been conducted, but they are not adequate to redress the crisis on a broader scale. Nevertheless, in their recent study, Ahmed and Eklund (2021) find that “[f]or almost 180 million people in Bangladesh, any change in weather and climate patterns is a major developmental and sometimes existential threat” (p. 156). The lead researcher, Ahmed, visited the coastal areas in person and talked to the victims of climatic events such as floods and cyclones.

Ahmed physically went to the coastal areas and lived there for about eight months in 2017 and 2018. He talked to local people, especially farmers, to understand how they cope with weather and climate-related events throughout his visit and time here. He conducted 250 interviews with the affected farmers, who shared their experiences of suffering due to floods and cyclones. In this respect, he also talked to some local government officials who were then working in those areas (p. 163). Since the study took place in 2017 and 2018, the research findings can give us an overview of the people's recent and also present conditions in coastal areas. The results reveal the stark reality of the people in those areas as they suffer increased poverty for reduced food supplies and crop yields, hunger, malnutrition, forced migration, and lower enrolment in educational institutions. The government needs to focus more on developing the adaptation of eco-friendly infrastructure, especially in low-lying coastal areas of the country. In this context, Mehta and Kumar (2019) argue that hundreds of thousands of people from Bangladesh will severely be affected at the end of the century. Their estimate shows that about 125 million people could lose their homes, and among them,

about 75 million Bangladeshis could be homeless and therefore hapless. Moreover, 70 to 80 million Bangladeshis might be climate refugees taking shelter in India (p. 364). The estimate of losses and damages that Mehta and Kumar (2019) reveal is indicative of the dangers that the people of this region are going to face. The range of destructions and casualties that the above remark shows is obviously threatening for a country like Bangladesh.

In COP26, the premiers of the concerned countries agreed that the world needs to tackle the negative impacts of climate change and reduce carbon emissions. It is highlighted that every country has to deliver on the promises offered at the summit so that the world can be saved from further vulnerabilities. The participants in COP26 emphasised the balance between nature and biodiversity and collaborative efforts to tackle climate change. As an essential participant from an affected country like Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina gave a speech at COP26; her remarks in the form of a proposal in COP26 are worth noting. Huq (2021, 23 October) refers to Prime Minister's address:

As Prime Minister Hasina has rightly proposed, it is now time for the vulnerable developing countries to move forward to become prosperous in the face of climate change, and investment in research is an essential element in achieving that transformational objective. Bangladesh will be the first CVF (Climate Vulnerable Forum) country to launch a climate prosperity plan—Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCP)—with the aim to transform the country in the coming decade, through mitigation as well as adaptation, for which investment in quality research will be a necessary condition.

Huq (2021) further wrote about the effects of global warming and climate change in Bangladesh. He has also researched the areas focusing on Bangladesh. Therefore, he has been aware of what COP26 had to offer. The authorities at the national levels need to

improve adaptation capacities and strengthen resilience, enhance planning, and cope with the global concerns about the dangers of climate change. The focus was given on the loss and damage impacting the lives, livelihoods, and ecosystems. There was a unanimous agreement on the importance of nature and ecosystems among the participants. They believe that the people growing awareness of preserving nature can save future generations from various threats of human-induced climate change.

Among scholars and policymakers of Bangladesh, the concept of adaptation has been in discussion for more than the last two decades. When disasters are inevitable, people need to learn to adjust to the consequences. Adaptation “refers to the ability of natural or human systems to adjust to climate change in order to cope with the inevitable consequences” (Delaporte and Maurel, 2018, p. 50). Although most calamities and disasters like cyclones, floods, and droughts are natural, they are certainly intensified by mindless acts of human beings. As a result, both the common people who become victims of disasters and the authorities, especially the people of the government, should focus on adaptation. Since they are confident that disasters are unavoidable, adaptation needs to be given more importance. The people in coastal areas of Bangladesh have started learning to cope with catastrophic cyclones and floods. Consequently, the losses and damages in natural disasters in the last decade or so were fewer than those in previous occurrences. In COP26, the world premiers also emphasised adaptation measures besides the other steps of tackling calamities.

Adaptation is deeply connected to sustainability, which is very important for humankind worldwide. If the sustainability of the people of Bangladesh and the development of the country are taken into consideration, there is no alternative to giving importance to preserving nature and maintaining ecological balance. Judy L. Meyer and Gene S. Helfman (1993), eminent scholars of ecology, reflect on sustainability:

A ‘sustainable biosphere’ can be envisioned in which the diversity of life

on earth persists, where the biosphere supports the current generation of humans while leaving an equitable share of resources for future generations. This concept of intergenerational equity is the backbone of sustainability. Sustainable resource management means far more than continued commodity production at some rate. It also addresses the social and environmental issues associated with harvesting the resource. (p. 569)

As far as the above reflection on ecology and biosphere is concerned, the world's present population should think about the next generations so that they can live in an ecologically balanced world. In doing so, the people of the current world need to do justice to the environment; and the same responsibility incurs upon the people of Bangladesh—they should make the country habitable for their next generations. It is also crucial for the people of Bangladesh to ensure justice to the society and environment so that resources can be harvested properly. Without giving serious attention to sustainability, no nation can claim to make progress for or contribute to humanity. As people consider nature their kin, they should behave appropriately with it. John P. O'Grady (2003) contends:

Love them or hate them, we treat our kin differently, knowing that they are not far removed from ourselves. We are more alike than not. We are never isolated from each other. We share something, participate in the same coursing life. And though we may not always be able to perceive the connection, or perhaps we even resent it, it remains intact and cannot be severed. Trusting that this connection persists, we each endeavor to improve our perception, which is directly linked to how we live our lives. (p. 8)

Nature is undoubtedly very close to human beings, who should treat it accordingly. If it is the case, they should take all measures and steps to save nature from destruction. It is not possible to isolate humans from nature or vice versa. Humans ought to treat nature with a deep sense

of connection and belonging for a balanced course of life. Human life is intrinsically connected to nature's life cycle—both follow an identical "coursing life." It is widely acknowledged that ecological balance contributes to people's smooth course of social life.

It is undeniable that the world has already started encountering calamities of climate change, so the urgent global response is a compelling need to tackle further crises and dangers. In this respect, more scientific research needs to be funded and promoted. For example, Mehta and Kumar (2019) show that the whole world, without a doubt, would be affected, and people would experience unending suffering. But they find that the Bay of Bengal region is the most vulnerable and susceptible to climate-related hazards (p. 363). Although Mehta and Kumar (2019) indicate that the whole world is vulnerable, they particularly refer to the region surrounding the Bay of Bengal, which is more exposed to climate catastrophes and human suffering. Margaret Alston and Badi Akhter (2016) argue that climate changes will worsen the already vulnerable condition of the country and deepen the crises of poverty, hunger, and food security (p. 1451). Most of the scholars who have conducted research on the effects of climate change in Bangladesh have this view in common that Bangladesh will face challenges of extreme poverty, food security, mass migration, and other physical conditions if the climatic events are not managed successfully or measures are not taken to decrease the risks of climate hazards.

Like several other countries, the required research on the impacts of climate change in Bangladesh has not taken place. Only a handful of researchers devoted to environmental justice and ecosystems have attempted to deliberate on the issue. For example, Alston and Akhter have conducted a study on food insecurity and gender impacted by climate change. Their findings (2016) demonstrate that floods, heavier rainfall, hotter periods, more dangerous cyclones, the rise of temperatures, and so on will increase to a broader range due to climate

changes (p. 1452). A few experts continue writing newspaper columns addressing the internal environmental crisis of the country. Still, significant research work on a larger scale on the overall crises and their solutions have failed to catch our eyes. There is no denying that Bangladesh is conducive to environmental hazards. Thus, if proper measures are not taken to reduce the emission of carbon waste and if the adverse situations are not dealt with satisfactorily, the country would be exposed to unprecedented threats because of an imbalance in ecosystems. Dasgupta et al. (2014) state that “by 2050, an additional 7.08 million coastal residents would be exposed to storm surges caused by climate change, 456,690 primary school students (2283 primary schools) and 312,957 secondary school students (2086 secondary schools) would be at risk” (p. 102). The above estimate reveals the potential threat to humans and assets of Bangladesh; the danger is increasing every day, and it is happening because of the lack of awareness among people and lack of sincerity among the concerned authorities to address the issue and to redress the crisis. If wide-scale research is promoted and funded by the government, the researchers will be able to identify the genuine causes and threats of environmental hazards. And the government then may initiate dialogues with national and international experts and other world leaders to tackle extreme climatic events.

### **The Way Forward**

Before falling into more severe climatic events, Bangladesh needs to look into drawing long-term blueprints which contribute to a healthy and eco-friendly, agriculture-friendly atmosphere. Suppose, farmers in cyclone- and flood-prone regions are not ensured safety and security from the dangers of climatic events. In that case, they will stop farming and start migrating to cities, a phenomenon which poses another threat to society. Since Bangladesh is an agro-based country, it is indispensable to prioritise the sector. Catastrophic events triggered by climate change bear down on the production of crops; as a result, the world will face a food crisis soon. The Bangladesh

government should also prioritise agriculture and the environment to protect the larger interests of the people of the country. In so doing, they need to zero in on acting toward the reduction of the effects of climate change. As the present world depends on ICT, the government may also encourage the utilisation of technology to reduce climate hazards. People in coastal areas may be trained to adopt new technologies and adapt to a new phase of socio-economic development in the country.

Rich countries are primarily responsible for the calamities induced by climate change around the world, as they contribute a significant proportion of emissions. In this case, developing countries' responsibilities are minimal compared to developed countries. Here is a comparative picture which Durbin and Bowden (2021) have portrayed. They argue that developing countries emit very little carbon compared to rich countries. According to them, the wealthiest consist of only 1% of the world's total population, but their emissions almost double the combined emissions of the rest. As the rich countries pledge to help poorer countries tackle climate change, those countries should restate their claims repeatedly so that they can take quick steps with the money. Whereas there is a 100 billion financial package declaration by wealthy countries to the poor ones, the UK pledges £290m in COP26. The quicker they move the money, the better it is for the poor countries. This amount of money will help the Asian and Pacific countries so that they can “plan and invest in climate action, improve conservation and promote low-carbon development” (Durbin and Bowden, 2021). I argue that climate action is an immediate need for vulnerable nations.

Moreover, attempts to control carbon emissions are much needed, and people can do this by redesigning their everyday life patterns, and changing some of their habits. In this respect, Daniel Kraemer and Joe Whitwell (2021) offer some suggestions to reduce emissions on a personal level. They prompt people to “insulate homes, cut out food waste and cut down on red meat, drive less and fly less, and think before buying new products.” Insulating homes can

contribute to the protection of the planet from extensive emissions. A study finds that livestock creates carbons, and eating less meat, especially red meat, can help people on a wider scale. Transports emit most carbons, so it is obvious that if people use transports less, the planet benefits from it. Finally, people need to adjust to the use of derivative products instead of buying new ones, especially clothes, because enormous natural resources are required to manufacture new products. Following Kraemer and Whitwell's recommendations, the people worldwide can help the planet.

Disasters, which we usually call natural but actually most of which are human-induced catastrophes, exert direct adverse effects on the society and economy of Bangladesh. Having several rivers and the Bay of Bengal, the country needs to remain alert to climate change. Being a small country, it must have a clear climate map and probable environmental hazards. The government needs to address the preservation of nature seriously, making the people of the country aware of the importance of the environment so that they do not yield to unscrupulous acts of destroying forests, rivers, lakes, fields, trees, etc. Unfortunately, many small rivers and lakes of the country have already disappeared from the map of Bangladesh. It has happened because of a handful of land grabbers around the country.

Moreover, siltation has also been another factor responsible for the death of rivers. To save rivers and maintain the continuous and smooth flow of river water to tackle floods, dredging of rivers should be a yearly routine work. Huq (2021, 1 December) rightly observes:

Bangladesh has an opportunity to be a leader in tackling loss and damage, as it has been on adaptation, going forward. This will require another all-of-society approach by government, parliament, NGOs, academics, media and youth working together at the local and national levels and also linking with other countries through South-South as well as South-North collaboration.

Global warming and climate change are the heated issues in the present world. Since the developed countries emit a major portion of carbon, they should play the key role in mitigating the crisis. As a developing and affected country, what Bangladesh can do—which it has already done in COP26—is to address the issues in global forums and intensify their demand to the rich countries to compensate for the loss and damage in less developed countries. But the world's leading countries ought to take proper and necessary measures to decrease the emission of carbons and play an active role in saving the world from further devastation and pushing the already vulnerable countries into more severe poverty. Therefore, it is urgent that Bangladeshi people from all levels—from politics to academia, from NGOs to media—contribute to overcoming the challenges of climate change and global warming.

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There is no conflict of interest reported by the author.

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