

Exploring Bangladesh's Rural Capacities

After one month working as a visiting researcher with the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) in Dhaka, I joined my colleagues on a fieldtrip to the Bagerhat and Gopalganj District in the South of Dhaka. When we were setting off just after sunrise the energetic capital was already buzzing - sellers prepared for good deals at their colourful markets and roads were about to fill up with commuters. Our bumpy journey took us through riverine and misty landscapes, past an army of brick chimneys, across the mighty Ganges and into the lush scenery of rice fields. It was the beginning of an inspiring three day experience that gave me a fraction of an insight into the variety of livelihoods and climate challenges in Bangladesh as well as the opportunity to see what the academic buzzwords of 'climate risks' and 'climate adaptation' actually mean in the real world.



Rural Beauty and its Challenges

Once arrived in the green wetland paradise I, being a country bumpkin myself, could hardly comprehend why anyone would move from this beautiful countryside to an overcrowded space within the world's second most polluted city. From raised streets we fully appreciated Bangladesh's Delta location and admired its low-lying land for miles and miles. Living on its low-lying land, however, turns the story around. What looks like a paradise during the dry season turns into a mighty lake that shifts income earning activities from rice cultivation towards fishing and makes boats the new way of transportation between houses and markets. Thinking of Venice this still sounds romantic, right? Well, the idea of flooded houses, damaged or lost assets, diseases, isolation, water snakes, drowning and overfishing let its appeal certainly fade. While it is widely stressed by scientists and academics that Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change, its increasing impacts with more intense and severe floods are strongly felt within rural areas. The question is how rural Bangladesh deals with this.



Shall I stay or shall I go?

Well, there are two paths I would like to address - the ones who embrace it and the ones who leave. People with the necessary resources or connections leave with high expectations for a better city life and in hope of enhanced education, health care and job markets. Particularly speaking to some young men, I realised that following their father's footsteps as farmers or fishermen is not necessarily the most desirable option to them. This trend of ageing farmers without new generations taking up this role is already present in many other countries and will certainly change the landscape of farming. Other opportunities, however, rarely exist and the lack of resources and support may cross their desired path of resettling or working within a different sector.



Yet, I was impressed with the innovative and entrepreneurial strategies of so many people who cannot or decide not to leave the countryside or the agricultural sector. Besides all the wonderful shops and the acquisition of boats, people harvest rainwater or use irrigation systems to grow rice once a year before they start fishing with a variety of nets or are involved in freshwater prawn farming. The story of prawn cultivation has stuck with me - A farmer, who discovered prawns in his pond after a flood, decided to carry out some cultivation experiments in the 1980s which turned out to be successful and have been copied by many farmers since. While this is now considered as a forward thinking idea in terms of increasing water levels, climate change is likely to require more local action.

How can we 'Make Rural Areas Great Again'?

As a research newbie with all my visions of improving poor people's livelihoods, fostering climate adaptation, gender equity and cultural acceptance, I felt quite overwhelmed by all the barriers and challenges and certainly less powerful than any of the local people themselves. Already on my first day I realised that I need to put aside my abstract academic theories and simply listen. I needed to listen to people's stories to not only understand local struggles and dynamics, but also their skills and ideas. Local capacities and innovations need to be appreciated and their transformation into actions facilitated. Two key players in this area are the local NGO ADAMS and the Wetland Research and Training Centre (WRTC). They have helped to build walls and to raise land for some of the poorest communities which has enabled them to have flood-free houses, toilets, barns for their animals and places to gather. While WRTC has also conducted several



experiments on rising houses, floating vegetable beds and snail colonies, ADAMS has provided preschool teaching, microfinance as well as sewing classes for women and automobile maintenance classes for men to create more opportunities and feed people's hunger for knowledge and skills. This hunger could be clearly seen by the training application numbers which always exceed the training centre's capacities as well as by people's own abilities to cope with floods.

Before I went on this fieldtrip, I read an article which stated that Bangladeshis are too risk-averse. But in fact, I do not know any other nation that is as risk-embracing. I mean has the author of the article watched how people cross the streets or race like Formula-One-drivers through the city and the countryside? On a more serious note, there are people who live in flood-prone areas despite increasing water levels, take loans without collateral and set up a shop that's the same as five others down the road. This all seems irrational? Well, it's perfectly rational if there is no other choice. And interestingly if there are choices, people are very willing to take new risks, to invest their money and time in training courses during which they could also work on their father's field and earn money, but instead invest in a better future. This experience has not only shown me that neither climate change nor development can be approached in isolation, but that the acknowledgement and support of local knowledge and abilities can achieve very valuable and beneficial impacts. So considering that locals have been coping with climate change and other development challenges, what's left for us to do?

Strengthening Local Capacities

Besides continuous support through local practitioners, I do think there is a need to further unpack local dynamics and understand roles, barriers as well as capacities of specific social groups such as men, women, elderly, children, disabled people and people of different religions and ethnicities. Interesting to me was for example the fact that women do not work on farms in Muslim communities unless they are very poor while women in Hindu communities do work on farms. This might seem unspectacular but such cultural roles of locals as well as institutions such as ADAMS and their impacts on livelihoods and climate adaptation need to be addressed in more depth. This is best achieved with inclusive approaches which not only require dialogues across all scales in order to create a 'framework' in which locals can fully unfold their potential, but to also develop local capacities and make them active agents - a capacity building approach which is one of ICCCADs current targets that I am excited to be part of.

