

Vulnerable livelihoods on Bangladesh's Hatiya Island: It's not just the climate



MA SUZA

The past decade has seen heated discussions about if and how climate leads to conflict. Bangladesh is often presented as the 'poster child' of climate change, and dire scenarios are painted of climate disaster, migration, and conflict. Is climate indeed a determining factor on a remote, cyclone-prone coastal island such as Hatiya Island in southeastern Bangladesh? Hatiya, a densely populated sandbar, sheds light on the interplay between environmental and climate challenges on the one hand and a web of vulnerabilities extending beyond climate concerns on the other (Koubi, 2019; Ide et al., 2016). This article draws from a year-long immersion in the island's local dynamics and insights gathered through focus group discussions.

On this island, climate events have transformed from occasional disruptions into frequent occurrences, exacerbating pre-existing social stress and insecurity and pushing vulnerable communities to the edge.

Hatiya Island is a stark illustration of extreme climate vulnerability, defined by its low-lying terrain and susceptibility to climate-induced events. These include the relentless erosion of riverbanks, the onslaught of cyclones, recurrent coastal flooding, encroaching saltwater intrusion, and capricious rainfall patterns (Kabir et al., 2020; Parvin et al., 2008). The island's inhabitants, especially those dependent on farming and fishing, deeply feel the impact of these events. Saltwater intrusion has compromised freshwater reservoirs and rendered fertile lands infertile, posing significant challenges to

crop production. Homegrown vegetable patches have dwindled, while cyclonic disruptions have decimated homes, fishing crafts, and equipment. Fishermen face unpredictable oceanic conditions, often compelling them to cut short expeditions. Furthermore, extreme heatwaves and stormy conditions intensify the residents' susceptibility to climate setbacks. These factors have jeopardized food availability and intensified malnutrition, with women and children bearing a disproportionate burden of these adversities.

However, it is imperative to question whether climate events possess the solitary power to disrupt livelihood and food security on Hatiya Island. Roksana et al. (2014) underscored the persistent vulnerability of the food security system, citing factors such as production shortfalls, limited food availability, and distribution inefficiencies. This vulnerability extends to natural disasters and price fluctuations, rendering the system ineffective for those living below the poverty line. Moreover, Assari

et al.'s (2022) research in the district of Tangail, central Bangladesh, highlighted a scenario where flood disasters leave many individuals isolated, particularly if they lack political connections.

From the perspective of the island's underprivileged, there is a palpable absence of substantial economic or infrastructural development. Services such as healthcare facilities are often centralized, and distant government schools are often inaccessible to remote communities, raising questions about affordability and access to islanders. In discussions about government support and social safety net programs for the impoverished, island residents expressed a sense of disillusionment. They noted that government assistance rarely reached them, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many view local authorities as indifferent to the plight of the poor and vulnerable, contending that their lives could not hinge on government intervention.



Small businesses in Hatiya just steps away from nature's persistent challenge (Photo by author.)


Land-related disputes remain a common source of tension on the island. These disputes manifest as verbal confrontations, particularly among women, owing to cramped living conditions. However, residents do not explicitly connect social tensions and conflicts with food insecurity and climate-induced challenges. They argue that hunger weakens their physical strength, dissuading individuals from engaging in disputes over food. While political conflicts exist on the island, residents who abstain from political involvement perceive minimal physical security threats. Focus group discussions have

revealed that people on the island have little expectation of government assistance and struggle to recall any past government interventions that have benefited them. As a result, they prioritize their daily survival over agitation, even when facing temporary hunger, ultimately resigning themselves to their circumstances.



Residents in Hatiya cling to their homes as erosion threatens their future (Photo by author.)

On this island, climate events have transformed from occasional disruptions into frequent occurrences, exacerbating pre-existing social stress and insecurity and pushing vulnerable communities to the edge. The shared sentiment among many has highlighted the widespread grievances directed at local leadership. Instead of contesting authorities, frustrations and tensions among people are primarily expressed internally, often resulting in violence against women, which is of grave concern. Regrettably, the overarching challenges faced by the residents of Hatiya remain overshadowed in governmental and academic discourses. The focus has

predominantly centered on climate factors as the drivers of resource vulnerability in coastal Bangladesh. The plight and resilience of the population in Hatiya and elsewhere have yet to receive the attention they rightly deserve. A comprehensive examination and intervention are required to tackle the intricate network of vulnerabilities on the island, looking beyond the perspective of climate change and variability. 

Keywords: climate, Hatiya Island, Bangladesh, food security, social tensions

About the Author

Ma Suza is a community-focused Environmental Sociologist pursuing my Ph.D. at Wageningen University and Research (WUR), specializing in climate security in Bangladesh through a collaborative effort with CGIAR and SIPRI. As an Erasmus Mundus Master's scholar, Ma received comprehensive training from Portugal, the Netherlands, and Germany. Her research expertise spans mixed methods, with a particular passion for qualitative research. Looking ahead, she is excited to leverage the knowledge she has gained in climate security and deepen her understanding of its complexities. Outside of academia, Ma is an avid globe-trotter, constantly seeking new horizons to explore. [LinkedIn](#)

Suggested citation

Suza, Ma (2023, October 15). "Vulnerable livelihoods on Bangladesh's Hatiya Island: It's not just the climate." *Trends in Peace and Sustainability* 1(4): 1–3. <URL> Access date.

References

- Ansari, M. S., Warner, J., Sukhwani, V., & Shaw, R. (2022). Implications of flood risk reduction interventions on community resilience: An assessment of community perception in Bangladesh. *Climate*, 10(2), 20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/cli10020020>
- Ide, T., Michael Link, P., Scheffran, J., and Schilling, J. (2016). The Climate-Conflict Nexus: Pathways, Regional Links, and Case Studies. In H. G. Brauch, U. Oswald Spring, J. Grin, and J. Scheffran (Eds.), *Handbook on Sustainability Transition and Sustainable Peace* (pp. 285–304). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43884-9_12
- Kabir, M. A., Salauddin, M., Hossain, K. T., Tanim, I. A., Saddam, M. M. H., and Ahmad, A. U. (2020). Assessing the shoreline dynamics of Hatiya Island of Meghna estuary in Bangladesh using multiband satellite imageries and hydro-meteorological data. *Regional Studies in Marine Science*, 35. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rsma.2020.101167>
- Koubi, V. (2019). Climate Change and Conflict. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22(1), 343-360. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050317-070830>
- Parvin, G. A., Takahashi, F., and Shaw, R. (2008). Coastal hazards and community-coping methods in Bangladesh. *Journal of Coastal Conservation*, 12(4), 181–193. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11852-009-0044-0>
- Roksana, F., Jalil, M.A., and Alam, M.M., (2014). Strategic Approaches to Food Security in Bangladesh. *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*, Vol.5 (1).

The editorial team welcomes submissions from a diverse range of individuals, be it students, scholars, activists, practitioners, or anyone else possessing valuable insights or opinions focused on peace, sustainability, or the convergence of these two themes.

For submission guidelines, visit www.nerps.org.