

Bangladeshis have become activists in the fight against climate change

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Aid agencies continue to raise money by portraying Bangladeshis as helpless victims displaced by climate change who need our charity. But that is wrong, **Joseph Hanlon** argues in a new book, because it totally misunderstands the ecology and history. Bangladesh is hugely vulnerable to climate change, but refuses to be a victim.

Bangladesh confronts climate change: Keeping our heads above water, by Manoj Roy, Joseph Hanlon, and David Hulme, will be launched Wednesday 16 November at 18.00 at the LSE New Academic Building 2.06.



Bangladesh is densely populated but is able to feed itself because it is on a rich delta. However there are huge climate variations within this small country; weather and floods vary dramatically from one year to the next. Flood waters often pour down from the Himalayas and devastating cyclones come up the Bay of Bengal. Bengalis have been adapting to this difficult environment for centuries, but the real advances have only come in the 45 years since independence.



Image: Aftermath of Cyclone Sidr. Credit: [Direct Relief](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Cyclone protection is the most dramatic change, yet is probably least known outside the country. There have been three 'super cyclones' in the past 50 years with wind speeds over 222 km/h: Bhola in 1970 killed up to 500,000 people; Gorky in 1991 left 138,000 dead. Sidr in 2007 killed 3,363 – still too many, but less than 1 per cent of the fatality rate of 1970. This huge drop is due to national actions – better early warning, cyclone shelters and higher coastal dykes.

Climate change is a very real threat and if it is not checked, will have devastating consequences for Bangladesh in the form of sea level rise and more damaging cyclones and floods. Bangladeshi scientists, government officials and communities know what to expect from climate change, and for two decades they have been active in international climate change negotiations, trying to slow global warming. They will play an important role in the next round of talks in Marrakesh, Morocco 8-17 November. And the country is already adapting to expected climate change, better flood protection, improved rice and other crops, and methods to deal with sea level rise.

Thus when aid agencies talk of helpless victims displaced by climate change who deserve our help, they are wrong

in three ways. First, Bangladeshis are not helpless victims – they are active in adapting to climate change and in campaigning for reduced greenhouse gas emissions. The second mistake is the charity approach. Bangladesh did not cause climate change, so the country does not need “aid”; instead it needs compensation for the damage already done – an important success of Bangladesh’s negotiators was to put the concept of “loss and damage” into the agreement at last year’s Paris climate change conference.

The third error is more complicated. Oxfam and Christian Aid talk of climate change refugees; even DfID says that Bangladesh is “already experiencing the effects of climate change.” But that is not true. Bangladesh has had environmental refugees due to floods and cyclones for centuries. The climate in Bangladesh is hugely variable. The worst flood in a century was in 1998 when 68 per cent of the country was flooded, but that flood came only four years after the driest year, 1994, when a mere 0.2 per cent of Bangladesh was flooded. Scientists can show that climate change is having a steady impact, but so far the changes are too small for people to notice. The floods and cyclones are not worse – yet. But in the decades to come, they will be, because the greenhouse gases already emitted will remain in the atmosphere and continue to increase temperatures.

So what should aid agencies do instead of asking for charity for non-existent helpless climate change refugees? Their first responsibility is in Britain and the United States – convincing their own governments that only through much more substantial cuts in greenhouse gas emissions will they prevent the creation of climate change refugees. Second, agencies should stop asking for charity, and instead ask people in industrialised countries to pay for the damage already done. Third, they should link more with Bangladeshi scientists, engineers and community activists who are already pushing forward on climate change adaptation; they know what to do, and do not need advice, but Bangladesh is still a poor country and it does need money.

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Bangladesh confronts climate change: Keeping our heads above water is published by Anthem and will be available from 21 November, and at the 16 November launch. Review copies from j.hanlon@lse.ac.uk.



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