



Source: ALRD

Home is Where Climate Resilience Should Be Built

A Case Study of Climate Resilience in the Indigenous Munda Community in the South Western Coastal Area of Bangladesh

By A.K.M. Bulbul Ahmed

Association of Land Reform and Development (ALRD)

Key Messages

- The Government of Bangladesh has not yet recognized the indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge, customs on conservation, nor their right to govern and conserve the Sundarbans — the home of the Munda people.
- To improve their livelihood resilience, the Munda people maintained that land tenure security is indispensable. They proposed a special policy initiative for land-based resilience building among the community.
- The current policy on agricultural *khas* land distribution among the landless can address the land rights deprivation of Munda women. If they are granted land, either individually or jointly with their husband, Munda women are capable of sustainably using and managing it.
- In consultations with the Munda community, the residents expressed what is necessary to achieve resilience. They all agreed that migration is not a sustainable solution for them, because their culture and livelihoods are closely linked to the Sundarbans. To improve their livelihood resilience, they all affirmed that land tenure security is indispensable.
- The Munda community demands their participation in any decision-making that concerns them. The top-down approach, along with the corruption and insensitivity, has undermined ongoing projects and activities that are supposed to enhance their resilience. The community said that the scenario would be much better if they could take the lead.

The Munda people are one of the 45 indigenous (Adivasi) peoples in Bangladesh. Located in Shyamnagar upazila (sub-district) of Satkhira district, the Munda community has lived beside the Sundarbans -- the world's largest mangrove forest -- for over two centuries. They have traditionally made their living from the forest -- harvesting honey, catching fish, prawns, and crabs in the forest surrounding rivers and channels, and, collecting other forest products.

This case study focuses on the Munda community in Datinakhali village of Burigoalini union in Shyamnagar sub-district.

Shyamnagar sub-district is home to 450 Munda families, of whom 148 families are landless. Many members of the community are considered as poor, earning less than 100 US Dollars per month. Having no land of their own, Munda families live in geographically vulnerable areas such as coastal embankments.

Seventy percent of Munda men rely on fishing, catching mud crab, and harvesting honey for their livelihood. However, restrictions imposed by the Forest Department have prohibited them from making a living in the Sundarbans, thus forcing them to make a living in other ways, such as by working as daily wage workers.

Since 1971, the Munda community has experienced extreme weather events, such as drought in 1974, and successive cyclones from 1988 to 2009. Tropical Cyclone Sidr, which hit Bangladesh in 2007, resulted in one of the worst natural disasters in the country. Then, just two years later, in 2009, another severe cyclonic storm, Aila, caused equally extensive damage in the country.

After a Disaster: No Land to Fall Back On

Cyclone Aila made its first landfall in the Shyamnagar sub-district, wiping out the homes of more than 34,000 people, or almost 12 percent of the population of the sub-district. Of those rendered homeless, 600 people, or 40 percent, belonged to the Munda community.



Source: ALRD

Months later, as many as 28,000 people were still staying in makeshift tents or near embankments. In addition, 359.55 square kilometers of land were completely inundated by surge water. This was particularly damaging because the vast majority of the population were engaged in agriculture and fisheries, such as shrimp culture (Baten and Kumar, 2010).

While prawn farming had been predominant in the area, a few villages in the Shyamnagar sub-district had been engaged exclusively in paddy farming. In the aftermath of Aila, the increased salinity in the soil and in the groundwater reduced crop yields. According to community members, fluctuating rainfall patterns also became a problem for rice farmers.

The Sundarbans became off-limits to people who had traditionally depended on forest products for a living. But while forest officials restricted access by poor communities, other people were allowed to enter and exploit the forest resources by bribing middlemen.

At the same time, excess salinity had begun to degrade the biodiversity of the Sundarbans. While mangrove trees like Sundori, Keora, and Hogla grow in saline water, the excessive salinity and logging of saline water are

choking them. The trees are dying and their number is falling. Native fish species are also growing extinct (Rezoyana, U., et al., 2018).

In Datinakhali village, in particular, Cyclones Sidr and Aila swept away all houses and properties. Many shrimp and soft-shell crab farms that used to dominate the landscape of the village were wiped out. Livestock, such as cows, goats, and chickens, became a rarity. According to members of the community, the high salinity of farmlands following the cyclones affected the growth and quality of livestock. Thus, following Tropical Cyclone Aila, eight Munda families left Datinakhali village and migrated to other places.

Disasters Take a Toll on a Community's Cultural Traditions

The Munda rituals and festivities have remained integral to the lives of the agrarian communities in Bangladesh's coastal districts. However, changes in land-use patterns due to increased land and water salinity and sea-level rise have led to a sharp decline of such traditions.

An elderly member of the Munda community in the village of Datinakhali, in Burigoalini union of Shyamnagar upazila, relates, “When we cultivated rice, we used to hold celebrations and festivities to appease the deities. Now that we have no land to grow rice on, these ceremonies have lost their importance.”

Karam Puja (festival of harvest)

The practice of Puja — a Hindu ritual that involves offering flowers, light, fruits, and water to help reduce anxiety (Garai, 2017) — has been affected by challenges to growing flowers and fruit trees. Rats, snails, and frogs from agricultural fields are cultural foods for the Munda people. However, due to shrinking agricultural lands in both unions (Burigoalini and Gabura), the Munda people now have to travel to other places to collect them. They also used to sacrifice hens, but because they can no longer raise these in adverse conditions in their community, they now have to buy them at the market. However, the hens on sale are not always the correct color for the religious/cultural ritual. Moreover, one community member relates that another festival is no longer observed because the designated place for it had been lost to riverbank erosion.

Krishnapada Munda, executive director of Sundarban Adivasi Munda Sangsha (SAMS), shares that before cyclone Aila, they used to celebrate the “Karam” festival, one of the biggest celebrations of the Munda community. However, after the cyclone, that festivity can no longer be observed because the central element of the celebration, the Karam tree, is now nowhere to be found in the community. The last Karam tree was uprooted during the tidal surge caused by Cyclone Aila. Thus, today, if any of the Munda people want to celebrate this festival, they will have to travel for hours to reach the Northern part of the country where the Karam tree still stands. This is an expensive journey that few Munda people can afford.

The community members say that they are still able to celebrate their other festivals, but less frequently than before or on a smaller scale.

Responses by the Community

Agricultural households often adopt various disaster-response strategies to reduce the impact of climate change on their livelihood, such as diversifying their income sources, changing cropping practices, and crop



Karam tree and celebration of Karam festival in Jharkhand State of India (Source: Ranchi District Administration, Jharkhand/Tourism Ministry, India). Source: ALRD

diversification (McLeman, 2014). The coastal communities affected by Cyclone Aila were encouraged to adapt to climate change or to reduce their vulnerability to natural disasters by, among others, shifting to saline water-tolerant crops and diversifying into vegetables, such as eggplant and spinach that do not require major irrigation systems (Rabbani, et al., as cited in Subhani and Ahmad, 2019). Other adaptation strategies included growing vegetables on Mud Towers and dams; cultivating saline-tolerant vegetables around the shrimp ponds; applying recycled household water for irrigation and vegetable production; installing Pond Sand Filters to filter water; rainwater harvesting; rearing livestock in other parts of Shyamnagar; and, forestation in the islands.

Following Cyclone Aila, eight Munda families migrated to other places. Most of them found refuge in a CSO-led shelter initiative in the Tala sub-district of Satkhira, while the rest stayed in a government-shelter barrack in some distance village from the Sundarbans. Each of the migrant families received a piece of land with house built in Tala sub-district, under the auspices of Sundarban Adivasi Munda Sangstha (SAMS), a Munda community-led local NGO. The families also received few small ponds/tanks which they could use for fish farming. They likewise practiced homestead vegetable gardening in the small space between the houses. SAMS facilitated this kind of rehabilitation for a total of 87 Munda families from Shyamnagar upazila of Satkhira and Koyra upazila (adjacent to Shyamnagar) of Khulna district.

Meanwhile, three Munda families ended up living in the government funded shelter barracks in Burigoalini village which were built in the 2010s to resettle 100 families affected by Cyclone Aila. This barrack has ten rows of combined houses on comparatively bigger land for each of the 100 families. There are also three large ponds that the families can use. However, the occupants subsequently left these houses because of adverse living conditions there, such as damage to the shed houses from heavy rains, and the fact that there were no livelihood options available nearby.



Source: ALRD

Another 18 Munda families from different places in Sathkira and Kulna districts were resettled in Jelekhali Mundapara under an arrangement similar to that in Tala sub-district and which was also facilitated by SAMS.

In both Tala and Jelekhali sub-districts, however, none of the resettled families received agricultural land. Both male and female family members took on wage work, either on other people's land or in local crab and shrimp processing farms, while some male family members left to find work in brick clines or on farms in other areas. In focus group discussions organized by ALRD, these families said that if they had been allocated agricultural land, then they would have been self-reliant. However, despite a national policy to distribute agricultural *khas* land to landless families, the government has not put in place a program to implement it despite the applications submitted by several of these families.

Responses by Authorities

The devastation wreaked by Cyclones Sidr and Aila put a spotlight on Shyamnagar in national and international discourses on climate change and disaster risk reduction (DRR). This generated considerable external

investment in development programs in the area. Shyamnagar became a test site for climate change adaptation and DRR projects of local and international donors and NGOs. Programs on gender empowerment, women's education, and connectivity through mobile communication were also implemented in Shyamnagar.

Cyclone Aila hit the southwestern coastal region just when the government was rehabilitating areas damaged by Cyclone Sidr. Thus, some funds and a number of projects that had been earmarked to support recovery from Cyclone Sidr were realigned to initiate Cyclone Aila recovery projects. For example, damaged rural roads were reconstructed by modifying the World Bank's Emergency 2007 Cyclone (Sidr) Recovery and Restoration Project.

Subsequently, the government developed plans specifically for the Aila recovery. These plans followed two approaches: (1) segmenting and prioritizing the reconstruction activities under the Annual Development Plan (ADP) of the government; and, (2) formulating special initiatives (with foreign aid) for large-scale projects.

The ADP and the Rehabilitation of Aila-Affected Rural Infrastructure Project (RAARIP) were designed to complete the unfinished rehabilitation tasks (Sadik et al., 2017). However, not one of these projects incorporated new DRR measures (Sadik, et al., 2018). At the same time, these plans were focused on long-term initiatives and not on addressing immediate needs.

Lacking prompt support from the government, the affected communities used what little savings they had, reduced spending on health, stopped sending their children to school and putting them to work to augment the family's income. HM Golam Reza, the parliamentarian from this constituency (Satkhira-4- Shyamnagar and Kaliganj upazilas) admitted that "the fund allocated for rehabilitation of the Aila-hit homeless people is scanty" (The Daily Star, 2009).

Assessment and Way Forward

According to the Munda community, inadequate responses to disaster events, particularly a lack of clear understanding of tenure issues, impacted negatively on their lives and livelihood in the context of natural disasters and the impacts of climate change. Thus, it is important to address land tenure issues in early efforts at building resilience and disaster preparedness.

The Government of Bangladesh has not yet recognized the indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge, customs on conservation, nor their right to govern and conserve the Sundarbans. One such traditional practice that the government has yet to acknowledge is the Munda community's adherence to the ethos of Bonbibi -- a legendary guardian spirit of the forests who is venerated by residents of the Sundarbans. The community's deference to Bonbibi is demonstrated by their observance of customary no-take zones, core protected area formations, and no-fishing days. The Munda people have sustained these practices on their own initiative rather than through top-down law enforcement (AIPP, 2021).

In consultations with the Munda community, they expressed what is necessary to achieve resilience. They all agreed that migration is not a sustainable solution for them, because their culture and livelihoods are closely linked to the Sundarbans. To improve their livelihood resilience, they all affirmed that land tenure security is indispensable. They proposed a special policy initiative for land-based resilience building among the community.

Availability and access to financial capital often help poor and marginalized families to diversify their income opportunities and family incomes. In Bangladesh, there are various formal and non-formal micro finance facilities available. Local people have access to two different forms of credit systems: (1) loans from local wealthy people, or the *mohajon*, who charge high interest rates of 100 percent per year; and, (2)



Source: ALRD

microcredit from NGOs, who charge around 15 percent annual interest. Unfortunately, extremely poor households, cannot afford loans from the mohajon, and are usually excluded from access to NGO loans.

The other means of accessing capital is through the *dadon* system. A trader provides an advance to fishers, crab collectors, shrimp farmers, and rice farmers on the condition that he or she must sell their produce or harvest at lower-than-market prices.

On the other hand, bank loans require land as collateral with all the requisite land documents. Land documents are also a prerequisite for obtaining the farmer's card. Clearly, land tenure security is necessary to access credit and government agriculture services that include incentives, subsidized equipment, seeds, fertilizers, among others. As access to these support services can help rebuild after climate shocks, Munda community members think that land tenure security can positively change their lives.

The current policy on agricultural *khas* land distribution among the landless can address the land rights deprivation of Munda women. If they

are granted land, either individually or jointly with their husband, Munda women are capable of sustainably using and managing it. Aside from distributing *khas* land, the government can confiscate waterlogged areas from illegal occupants and encroachers and allocate them to the community. Even poor-quality land such as this can be used by the community for crab fattening or for cultivating salinity-tolerant crop varieties.

Lastly, the Munda community demands their participation in any decision-making that concerns them. The top-down approach, along with the corruption and insensitivity, has created gaps in ongoing projects and activities that are supposed to enhance their resilience. The community said that the scenario would be much better if they could take the lead. ■

References:

- Amin, R. and Shammin, Md. R. (2022). A Resilience Framework for Climate Adaptation: The Shyamnagar Experience. International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).
- Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD). (2022, September 30). Struggle for the Survival of Indigenous Munda Women in Shyamnagar: A Story of Anondini Munda. In International Land Coalition Asia (ILC-Asia). <https://asia.landcoalition.org/es/newsroom/struggle-for-the-survival-of-indigenous-munda-women-in-shyamnagar-a-story-of-anondini-munda/>
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). (2002). Land tenure and rural development. FAO LAND TENURE STUDIES 3. FAO.
- Hafiza, S. and Neelormi, S. (2015). Climate Resilient and Empowering Livelihoods for Women. UN Women
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2007). Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel. Cambridge University Press.
- Mowat, H. and Veit, P. (2019, August 8). The IPCC Calls for Securing Community Land Rights to Fight Climate Change. In World Resources Institute. <https://www.wri.org/insights/ipcc-calls-securing-community-land-rights-fight-climate-change>
- Pain, A., and Levine, S. (2012). A Conceptual Analysis of Livelihoods and Resilience: Addressing the “Insecurity of Agency”. HPG Work Paper, 18 p.
- Perucca, C. (2013) Social water management among munda people in the Sundarban. University of Liberal Arts.

- Rahman, M. M., Tasnim, F., Uddin, A. Chayan, M.S.I., Arif, M.S.I., Asikunnabi, and Hossain, M.T. (2023). Assessing vulnerability in ethnic Munda community: A study on a cyclone-prone area of Bangladesh. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*.
- Rezoyana, U., Tushar, Md. K., and Islam, Md. A. (2023), Impact of Salinity: A Case Study in Saline Affected Satkhira District. *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 11(05): 288-305.
- Roy, S., Tandukar, S., and Bhattarai, U. (2022). Gender, Climate Change Adaptation, and Cultural Sustainability: Insights from Bangladesh. *Frontiers in Climate*.
- Sharmeen, S. (2013) Politics of development and articulation of indigenous identity: The formation of Munda Identity in Barind, Bangladesh. *IJAPS* 9(1): 142–160.
- The Daily Star. (2009, September 5). Aila-hit Satkhira people still live in utter misery. In The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-104566>

Citation:

Bulbul Ahmed, A. K. M. (2023). Home is Where Climate Resilience Should Be Built: A Case Study of Climate Resilience in the Indigenous Munda Community in the South Western Coastal Area of Bangladesh. Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC). [Paper prepared by the Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD) for the pilot phase of the Collective Action on Mainstreaming Land Rights of the Rural Poor in the Climate Discourse in Asia Pacific, zooming in on Bangladesh]. This collective action is supported by the Global Forum on Agricultural Research and Innovation (GFAR/GFAiR) and the European Union (EU)].