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Accounting for Agency of Marginalised Communities in Adaptation

Policy Recommendations for enhancing adaptive capacities and localising adaptation

Key Messages

- For Dalits in Satkhira's Tala region, the most common adaptive strategy is “coping,” that is, accepting a status quo that is almost designed to put them at a disadvantage.
- Despite possessing a strong sense of individual drive, members of the Dalit community face difficulties in translating this into collective or political power.
- The absence of resources for adaptive capacity prevents potential leaders within the Dalit communities from mobilizing their community.
- There is a deep distrust in institutional processes, as the Dalit community is forced to bypass slow bureaucratic processes.
- Men in Dalit communities are more active in leadership roles, but the women engage in collective mobilisation.
- For the Dalit community, actively participating in environmental action also provides them with the opportunities to gain social acceptance and mainstream themselves into society.

Executive Summary

This policy brief highlights the urgency of recognising and empowering agency within marginalised communities in climate-vulnerable regions. It further builds upon the notion that adaptation efforts cannot succeed without addressing the intersecting challenges of caste, class inequalities, and climate risks.

Dalit communities, facing exclusion, limited education, and generational poverty, are often excluded from decision-making, making generalised strategies ineffective. To address this, the brief recommends a bottom-up approach that develops local leaders, institutionalises vision-building, uses quantitative methods to capture context-specific inequalities, and reduces bureaucratic barriers, ultimately fostering more equitable and effective climate resilience for one of Bangladesh's most at-risk populations.

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Introduction

Extreme weather events have been a historic aspect of Bangladesh, with the country directly experiencing 193 devastating tropical cyclones between 1484-2009 (Salam et al., 2021; Alam & Dominey-Howes, 2015). Cyclone Sidr (2007) killed 3,363 people and caused massive destruction, followed by Cyclone Aila (2009), which left 150 dead and damaged 200,000 homes. More recently, Cyclone Amphan (2020) devastated 17 coastal districts, killing 31 and destroying over 176,000 hectares of farmland (Dhaka Tribune, 2024).

With the growing impacts of the climate crisis, vulnerable regions with populations holding the least adaptive capacities are heavily impacted

through reduced agricultural yield, exacerbated water scarcity, and increased poverty levels due to technological, resource, and institutional constraints (IPCC, 2022; Kurukulasuriya & Rosenthal, 2013).

In coastal regions, specifically Satkhira, salinity intrusion, destruction from cyclones, and waterlogging have shaped the ecological and social realities of the region and its populace. This has left vulnerable groups, such as women, landless farmers, agricultural labourers, communities with a history of scheduled caste (castes traditionally associated with “defiling” occupations, exclusion from main residential areas,

and experiencing untouchability due to presumed ritual inferiority) or bonded labour (vulnerable labourers trapped in debt), and disabled individuals, facing the brunt of the socio-ecological impacts (Ahmad, 2007; Sorensen et al., 2018; Muthukkaruppan, 2017; Crenshaw, 1991).

Existing literature has explored how the aforementioned weather conditions or events impact certain demographics more than others in the regions of Satkhira, but has largely overlooked the ways in which vulnerabilities are produced at the intersection of historical local caste and class inequities (Sahana, 2025; Bolin & Kurtz, 2017). Caste has historically shaped the social and political fabric of areas like Satkhira, Jessore, and Khulna, but its impact is often downplayed in Bangladesh with the argument that vulnerabilities from poverty and the lack of social safety nets for many at-risk groups are more significant than caste-based discrimination. Dalit communities in Bangladesh, in this instance, face challenges related to basic societal acceptance, lower levels of educational attainment, and greater incidences of generational poverty, ultimately preventing them from implementing climate change adaptation strategies (Siddique, 2023; Uddin, 2018).

Background

Dalit communities in Bangladesh have been consistently identified as a structurally marginalised population, whose social identity is predominantly shaped by their association with stigmatised and “impure” occupations, including sanitation work and the handling of animal carcasses (Siddique, 2023; Silva, 2015; Jahan, 2025). Within administrative and development discourses, the designation “Dalit” is often employed as an umbrella term encompassing scheduled castes, tribal groups, and so-called “backward castes”—groups that constitute some of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged segments of rural society (Shivan, 2022). These communities typically endure extreme poverty, substandard living conditions, and entrenched forms of social exclusion (Bhattacharjee, 2023; Islam, 2007, 2011; Jahan, 2025).

Despite the issue of caste inequities receiving limited attention in Bangladesh, movements and mobilisation of civil society over time have advocated against the discriminatory practices that have shaped the lives of minority groups of scheduled castes, outcastes (individuals lacking caste identifications entirely) and bonded labour groups in the country (Siddique, 2023).

Nevertheless, the extreme social exclusion that Dalits face seeps into how climate change affects not only their lives, but also their capacity to respond.

Despite being deeply affected by structural marginalisation, vulnerable populations in the Global South actively exercise agency by employing diverse strategies to resist dominant systems, create alternative modes of survival, and adapt to future climatic and social changes (Brown and Westaway, 2011). This framework by Sumner (2010), which Brown and Westaway (2011) later applied to socio-economical systems, to analyse agency, helps to differentiate between coping, adaptive, and transformative responses to environmental change.

Key Findings

For Dalits in Satkhira's Tala region, the most common adaptive strategy is "coping", thus accepting a status quo that is almost designed to put them at a disadvantage. For this community, seemingly simple adaptive actions, like changing jobs or buying land, are transformative practices, as they address long-term environmental and livelihood pressures while helping them challenge deep-rooted historical barriers to employment, citizen rights, and land rights.

Beyond this, other key findings from the study include:

- Despite possessing a strong sense of individual drive, members of the Dalit community face difficulties in translating this into collective or political power. Therefore, the primary barrier in achieving effective adaptation strategies does not stem from a lack of individual motivation, but rather a lack of structural support for group mobilisation and political influence within the social fabric of the community.
- The absence of adaptive capacity (various forms of assets, social networks) prevents potential leaders within the Dalit communities from mobilising

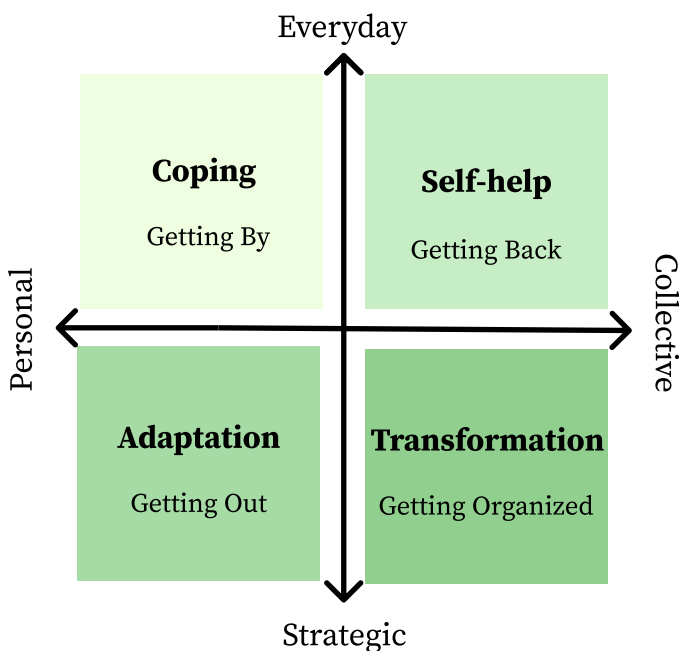


Figure 1: Lister's taxonomy adapted by Brown and Westaway (2011)

- their community and responding to environmental crises themselves. This is further exacerbated by ecological degradation and a growing frequency of extreme weather events.
- Dalit community members are often forced to bypass the slow and exclusionary bureaucratic processes, opting for their own non-institutional solutions for the betterment of their immediate localities. This displays a deep distrust in institutional processes and the failure of existing top-down approaches to effectively include and address the structural marginalisation of minority groups like the Dalits.
- While the men in the Dalit community may be more active in leadership roles, gendered exclusion is commonplace in collective mobilisation efforts, livelihood diversification efforts, children's education, and involvement in NGO-led projects.
- The extreme climate vulnerabilities of the Dalit communities are compounded by deeply ingrained social and economic marginalisation, severely compromising their collective agency. Therefore, participating in environmental action provides Dalit communities with opportunities to gain social acceptance and mainstream themselves into society.

Policy Recommendations

It is essential to prioritise efforts to strengthen political agency among marginalised communities and youth populations in climate-vulnerable areas. This includes creating an enabling environment for community-driven decision-making, investing in local leadership, and supporting grassroots organisations. By embedding these concepts within locally-led adaptation (LLA) frameworks, interventions can move beyond static solutions to empower communities as active agents.

Specific recommendations that can be implemented in Bangladesh and a wider Global South context for Dalits and other minority communities:

- ***Prioritising the development of leadership and political awareness within locally-led frameworks for adaptation:*** A leadership platform can be created in order to identify, train, and support the emerging leaders from the different Dalit localities. Visibly supporting and investing in local leaders can help to bridge the gap between individual and collective agency, thus motivating other members of the community.

- ***Institutionalising vision-building into adaptation frameworks of local government:*** Vision-building is an effective tool for driving systemic change, particularly in contexts where community ownership and long-term transformation are essential. As such, community “vision circles” can be created, composed of diverse representatives from within minority communities (Dalit women, disabled Dalit populations, Dalit communities in more remote and poorer areas). These circles can be supported through low-cost, participatory workshops facilitated by trained local mediators using storytelling, scenario-mapping, and visual tools. This approach ensures that systemic adaptation efforts reflect the lived realities and ambitions of those most affected by climate change, while requiring minimal infrastructure and leveraging local knowledge systems.

- ***Incorporating more robust and updated qualitative components in climate vulnerability assessments:*** In order to generate context-specific evidence on power imbalances within and between vulnerable groups, climate vulnerability assessments must incorporate long-term, community-based,

and participatory methods, especially in regions with a history of political and social marginalisation.

- ***Dismantling bureaucratic procedures around locality-specific community-led solutions for adaptation:*** In order to overcome bureaucratic delays that often hinder timely support for vulnerable communities, direct and “no strings attached” community funds need to become institutionalised. Such fund pools should be managed at the union or upazila level by trusted local intermediaries (such as NGOs or community-based organisations), with simplified application procedures that rely on community validation, basic expenditure records, and participatory monitoring rather than formal registration or institutional status. Over time, this may develop confidence and skills within communities, reinforcing their collective agency in the long run to manage resources, negotiate with authorities, and shape adaptation agendas.

In resource-scarce contexts like Bangladesh, these recommendations aim to ensure that adaptation efforts are locally relevant, socially accountable, and capable of driving systemic transformation.

NOTE:

*This policy brief is based on CCD 2022-23 COLOCAL Fellow Ishrat Jahan's thesis titled, "**Agency & Adaptive Responses: The role of individual and collective agency in shaping responses to climate change impacts among Dalit communities in Satkhira, Bangladesh**". The master's thesis was part of the COLOCAL project's initiative to develop a greater evidence base on locally-led adaptation in Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Funded by the NORHED II programme, the project's overall objective is to foster collaborative learning and capacity building in the Global South, with Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) as a partner in Bangladesh.

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