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Strengthening Climate Resilience Through Local Action

A framework for locally-led adaptation in coastal Bangladesh

Key Messages

- There is no clear or universally accepted definition of LLA, either within the community members or the external bodies.
- The adaptation projects primarily rely on a top-down approach, which leads to non-contextual solutions that do not reflect lived realities.
- Inadequate or absent Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems make it difficult to track progress related to project objectives and achievements.
- Lack of transparency regarding budget allocation undermines trust and accountability
- Men in Dalit communities are more active in leadership roles, but the women engage in collective mobilisation.
- Due to the limited collaboration between governmental projects and NGOs, a rift is created rather than an integrated system when it comes to sustainable adaptation, especially since both sides offer varied strengths in different areas.

Executive Summary

This policy brief calls for a shift from top-down climate adaptation to genuine Locally-Led Adaptation (LLA) in Bangladesh. By prioritising local participation and context-specific solutions, LLA can strengthen climate resilience and sustainability. Despite growing recognition, implementation gaps persist due to weak local leadership, limited financial access, low transparency, and capacity constraints. Political influence and bureaucratic barriers further undermine the effectiveness of LLA, particularly in government-led initiatives.

To address these challenges, the brief recommends targeted reforms to strengthen local decision-making authority, ensure transparent allocation and tracking of adaptation resources, expand direct financial access for local actors, and invest in ongoing capacity building. These measures are essential to move beyond rhetoric and establish LLA as an effective, fair framework for climate resilience.

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Introduction

Bangladesh has historically suffered from extreme weather events, with the Global Climate Risk Index (CRI) identifying Bangladesh as one of the world's most climate-vulnerable countries from the period of 2000 to 2019 (Eckstein et al., 2021a; Amin, 2021). Overall, it ranked 7th among the most affected nations, placing 9th for annual casualties and 13th for total economic losses (Eckstein et al., 2021b).

For the last two decades, Community Based Adaptation (CBA) has been one of the dominant approaches in handling these impacts.

CBA is rooted in a community-led and driven process, paving the way for partnerships between the affected communities and institutions, rather than imposing inflexible solutions on the locals (Kirkby et al., 2015). However, CBA itself faces a multitude of challenges and bottlenecks, as it has become more externally driven and focuses more on a spatial rather than social definition of community (Vincent, 2023).

Other key flaws weaken and obstruct socially just CBA in Bangladesh: top-down project design, monolithic or overly simplistic ideas of “community,” a severe lack of

downward accountability, inadequate allocation of climate funds, and rushed timelines for the completion of projects, all of which ultimately hinder meaningful local participation (Masud-All-Kamal & Nursey-Bray, 2021; Soanes et al., 2017).

Locally Led Adaptation (LLA) emerged as a response to the aforementioned limitations. The main difference between the two is a core conceptual shift, where LLA aims to empower the agency of the local people through their direct involvement in the development process of adaptation projects, thus shifting power to the community members who are most affected rather than external institutions. (Rahman et al., 2023). In the context of Bangladesh, LLA shows great promise, as studies conducted in climate vulnerable regions show that communities equipped with indigenous knowledge provide valuable input in developing context-specific interventions related to water management, survival strategies in the face of extreme weather events, conservation efforts, etc (Sultana & Luetz, 2022; Mohiuddin et al., 2021).

In spite of LLA’s focus on the local actors, participatory projects still require aid from formal institutions, meaning that most LLA efforts still face similar obstacles as CBA,

with the added detriment of not being as widely acknowledged (Islam, 2022). Additionally, implementation of adaptation strategies becomes tenfold more difficult in weak states without strong central support (Mansuri & Rao, 2012).



Figure 1: The Eight Principles of LLA by International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) (2021)

The study, which provides the foundation for this policy brief, was conducted in Khulna and Bagerhat districts, aimed to examine the current status of LLA efforts in the regions and the roles that different actors (specifically NGOs and governmental bodies) play in the landscape of meaningful climate resilience.

Background

The study was conducted in Bagerhat and Khulna districts, focusing on Paikgachha and Koyra Upazilas in Khulna and Morrelganj Upazila in Bagerhat. These locations were selected based on high poverty levels, pronounced climate vulnerability, and significant exposure to food and water-related threats. Selection was systematic, ensuring the chosen Upazilas shared similar socio-economic, environmental, and climate risk characteristics.

The exploratory study primarily applies qualitative research methods. Primary data was gathered through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with government and NGO representatives to obtain insights on LLA, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with community members to capture their views on LLA initiatives, including their use, effectiveness, and future potential.

Secondary sources, including scientific journals, statistical datasets, and reports, were also examined to evaluate project funding, objectives, activities, and the systems for monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL).

Key Findings

- ***Ambiguous or inadequate understanding of LLA between stakeholders:*** There is no clear or universally accepted definition of LLA, either within the community members or the external bodies. The community members see it as a lived practice of self-reliance, associating it with activities such as repairing a damaged road through their collective effort, but for them, it doesn't exist within a formal or structural framework. On the other hand, NGOs and GOBs also have a limited understanding of the concept, often equating it with CBA.
- ***Low levels of meaningful community participation lead to non-contextual approaches:*** The adaptation projects primarily rely on a top-down approach, meaning that the vast majority of the community members have little to no involvement in the design phases of the projects. Consequently, the projects are not catered to the specific needs and requirements of the community members, but rather they have a blanket approach to most problems. This is compounded by a gender rift, where women are even more excluded from opportunities to provide any sort of meaningful contribution or input.

- ***Inadequate or absent Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems make it difficult to track progress:*** When it comes to project management, NGOs generally have some form of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems in place, but governmental organisations and projects often lack formal M&E systems entirely. This sheds light on one of the factors that deters proper transparency, further adding to the dissonance between project objectives and local needs and realities.
- ***Lack of transparency regarding budget allocation undermines trust and accountability:*** The political influence and a lack of transparency contributed heavily to extremely low levels of trust from the community members. Local leaders are often vague or not transparent regarding project information or resources, which is compounded by the lack of accountability frameworks in government-led initiatives. NGOs were found to be more open about sharing financial information, but cited worries about conflicts arising within the communities if they shared detailed budgets, the same as GOBs. Therefore, even though both sides shared budget allocations, it is difficult to ascertain whether the numbers are fully accurate and transparent.

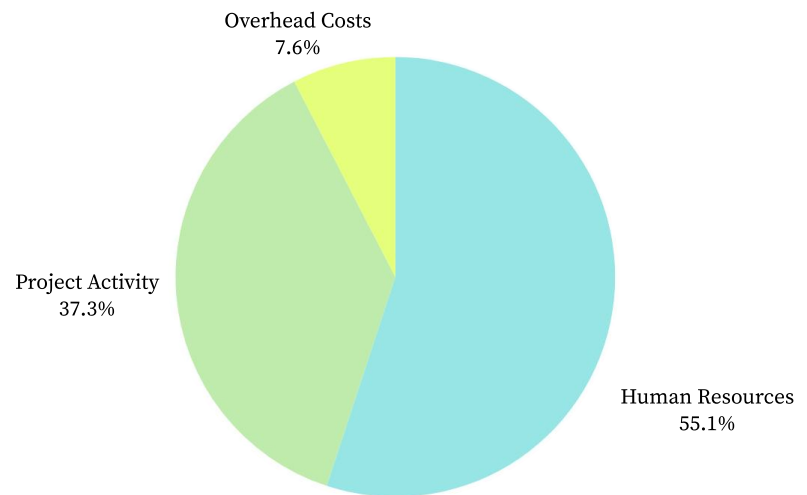


Figure 2: Average budget allocation of three NGOs in study area

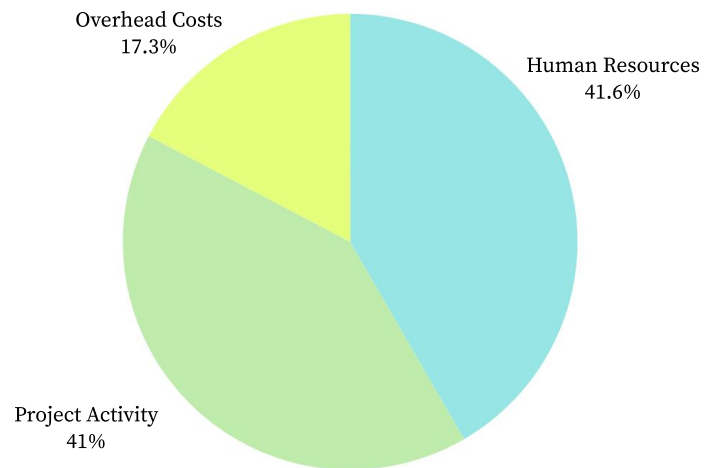


Figure 3: Average budget allocation of three GOBs in study area

- ***Systemic barriers to effective collaboration between institutions result in fragmented LLA efforts:*** Due to the limited collaboration between governmental projects and NGOs, a rift is created rather than an integrated system when it comes to sustainable adaptation, especially since both sides offer varied strengths in different areas. While NGOs may experience greater success rates when working with

community-based organisations (CBOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs), these crucial community platforms often collapse after project funding ends because of a “lack of ownership.” Since government projects often have no formal requirement to partner with or support these community organisations, this ultimately results in a missed opportunity for building long-term, locally-owned resilience systems.

Policy Recommendations

- ***Establish a clear national framework for LLA:*** Government initiatives, as well as NGOs, should develop and implement a nationally accepted framework for LLA. The framework must clearly define LLA, especially ensuring its distinction from CBA, and use the eight principles of LLA (Soanes et al., 2021) to provide a template for prioritising local agency, decision-making power, and control over resources.
- ***Mandate Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) processes for all adaptation projects:*** Currently, there is a complete absence of M&E systems in government initiatives, as well as less than optimal accountability systems in NGOs. Therefore, all adaptation projects should incorporate a mandatory M&E system that must, by design, include a community feedback mechanism to ensure projects are genuinely responsive to local needs.
- ***Amend project guidelines to ensure women’s participation:*** A large portion of community members, especially women, are routinely excluded from the decision-making and project design of climate adaptation projects, leading to significant gaps between the project objectives and the reality of what they actually achieve. It can be addressed by revising each project’s guidelines to include a mandatory, specified percentage of women, especially from local leadership roles, on project planning, implementation, and oversight committees.
- ***Fund collaboration platforms to ensure project sustainability:*** Local climate adaptation coordination platforms at the Upazila or district levels should be established, which would mandate all government-led adaptation projects to partner with active CSOs and CBOs in the region. Co-financing mechanisms should also be enacted, which would aid in joint GO-NGO-CBO collaborative projects to formalise and enhance the sustainability of adaptation investments.

NOTE:

*This policy brief is based on CCD 2022-23 COLOCAL Fellow M Manjurul Islam's thesis titled, ***"The State of Locally-led Adaptation (LLA) in Climate Vulnerable Communities in Selected Coastal Districts of 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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