Indigenous communities’ adaptation to climate change in Bangladesh: heading towards sustainability

Mohammed Abdul Baten, Tareg Hasan

Being one of the most vulnerable countries to the climate change, Bangladesh is experiencing different climate change impacts such as cyclones, floods, resource degradation recurrently. Sustainable natural resource management, which could be otherwise used to increase the resilience to climatic shocks, is absent in mainstream policy as well as in practice that aggravates the situation. Indigenous communities, who are dependant exclusively on natural resources, live in naturally fragile ecosystems for subsistence living, are under threatened condition due to climate change. However, indigenous peoples have developed their own adaptation strategies in confronting different shocks which have been clearly demonstrated through their survival over long periods to many kinds of environmental changes. Their knowledge on local environment and adapting to environmental change may have valuable lessons to offer about successful adaptations which could be vital in the context of climate change. The current paper attempted to examine the vitality of indigenous adaptation strategies in two different geographic regions of Bangladesh such as hilly and coastal regions. Through in-depth interview, focus group discussions and observation studies the study found that indigenous communities in the hilly regions of Bangladesh are managing their territorial forests in a sustainable way. Even though Bangladesh is struggling to conserve its tiny amount of forest, which indeed have significant influence on climate change, due to overwhelming dependency on forest resources and widespread poverty, but the indigenous communities are sustaining their territorial forests keeping a balance between conservation and exploitation. These forests are supplying food, timber and used as a source of pure drinking water while supporting a wide array of biodiversity. On the other hand, Indigenous ‘Rakhain’ community, who is living along the coastal belt for centuries, has developed their perception and prediction strategies for cyclones and, there by adapting to disasters without formal organizational and institutional supports. The study found the evidence of community level indigenous adaptation practices such as special type of housing pattern, prediction of cyclones using the level of the sea-water, wind direction, weather etc, and also their capacity to sustain without external interventions namely government helps after the cyclone hits. Drawing example from the case studies the paper argues that time tested indigenous resource management practices and coping mechanisms have important implications for much needed climate change adaptation that could be used in broader scale through incorporating into national adaptation plan.