Citizen's Agenda 2023

Towards a Different Bangladesh

Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh
এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে নাগরিক প্ল্যাটফর্ম, বাংলাদেশ

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Dealing with the Manifestation of Localised Vulnerabilities of Climate Change

The Initiative

Preparation of the Policy Briefs builds on a wide range of activities undertaken over the past two years (2022-2023) by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh. These activities sought to capture the views of the country's left-behind stakeholders at the subnational level as regards Bangladesh's dominant development narrative. Citizen's Platform's engagements in this connection included stakeholder dialogues, town hall meetings, focus group discussions, perception surveys and consultation with the media. Also, a Public Hearing was organised at the national level to create opportunities for the disadvantaged people to voice their concerns and aspirations in the presence of high-level policymakers and opinion builders.

It emerged from this exercise that a significantly large number of citizens and certain communities in Bangladesh have continued to remain vulnerable to various risks, which relegated them to the "left behind" situation in the revealed process of economic development. However, the *Leave No One Behind* spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) requires that all citizens, without exception, are ensured an equitable share in the country's development outcomes. Consequently, appropriate actions are needed to address these overarching national concerns to advance the interests of the country's vulnerable citizens and communities.

Accordingly, through country-wide interactions with spokespersons of key stakeholder groups, Citizen's Platform identified 11 themes requiring urgent attention for immediate action. As a follow up, now a series of Policy Briefs has been prepared with a set of concrete recommendations in each of the identified areas, underpinned by the specific context and contestations concerning the articulated theme. In each of these cases, the concerns and interests of the vulnerable groups have informed the suggestions for reforms and policy uptakes.

Each of the Policy Briefs in the series has been prepared by a dedicated team of experts of high national and international repute. Each Policy Brief Team had an eminent personality as the Chair to lead the process, with a recognised professional as the Penholder Expert to prepare and finalise the successive drafts with input from the team members. Each team got together several times, reviewed the notes of the sub-national discussions and the FGDs, and consulted relevant resource materials. A 22-member Advisory Committee, which included eminent professionals and leading personalities, provided guidance to the Policy Brief initiative.

The initiative was led by *Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya* and *Professor Mustafizur Rahman*, Distinguished Fellows at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). CPD, as the Secretariat of the Citizen's Platform, provided all necessary support for the smooth implementation of the initiative.

Disclaimer
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1. Background and Context

Geographical location at the approach of the Bay of Bengal, land structure involving low-lying terrains, great rivers, and the socioeconomic dynamics of coastal, riverine, and remote communities, have all combined to make Bangladesh the 7th most climate-vulnerable country in the world. The impacts are being manifested in various forms. Frequent changes in climate parameters have meant that the days are becoming increasingly hotter in summer compared to the historical average. Also, the number of warmer days is on the rise. The late onset of a shortened rainy season is, at present, a common phenomenon. Frequency of storm surges and wind pressure have also increased. Such erratic variations of climatological parameters are causing more frequent and more intense natural disasters, i.e., flash floods, regular floods and riverbank erosion in the northern districts; flash floods and thunderstorms in the north-eastern Haor districts; drought in the north-western districts; waterlogging in the south-west coast; cyclones and storms in the south-east coast; and salinity intrusion in the southern belt of Bangladesh.

While the abovementioned rapid-onset (flood, riverbank erosion, cyclones, etc.) and slow-onset (sea level rise, salinity intrusion) climate change events are adversely affecting local communities in a variety of ways, in all such cases, it is the marginalised groups within the affected population who tend to be impacted the most. More particularly, this includes the women, children, young people, river-dependent communities and coastal farmers. Among these left-behind people, persons with disabilities and transgender identities, ethnic minorities, Dalits and Harijans suffer relatively more because of their specific difficulties and low coping capacities. The adverse consequences are exacerbated because of insufficient resources, weak support measures and limited funds available to address adaptation challenges for mitigation of negative impacts.

The persistence of slow-onset events such as sea level rise and salinity intrusion is forcing farmers in southern districts of Bangladesh to change cropping patterns from more profitable but somewhat risky cropping practices to subsistence ones. Indeed, this is causing significant changes in agricultural practices in these regions that involve hard choices and difficult trade-offs. For instance, farmers could go for adopting crop varieties that are more saline-tolerant, but these tend to have lower yields. A number of marginal farmers in the coastal belt in the south have been compelled to sell their croplands to commercial farmers, with themselves ending up as workers in shrimp farms. People living in southern districts, close to the Sundarbans and its surroundings, lack access to saline-free, safe drinking water. The rights and sexual and reproductive health of women, girls and young women are adversely impacted because of high salinity.

Over the past two decades, communities near Bangladesh's south-east and south-west coastlines have experienced an increase in the frequency of powerful cyclones and storms. People inhabiting south-east and south-west coastal areas have experienced the loss of family members and relatives, as well as homes and farmlands, due to natural calamities such as Aila, Sidr and Amphan. Among these people, many still live in hardship and stuck in a long-term debt trap. Having lost homes and homesteads, these people had to take refuge in various chars and surrounding forest lands. This made these communities even more susceptible and exposed to subsequent climate calamities and natural disasters. Communities in the interior coastal districts of south-west Bangladesh have been suffering because of considerable damage to infrastructure and other structures, including homesteads. Other manifestations of climate impact can be seen in decreased plant growth, production losses during crop harvesting and chronic health (skin-related) diseases as a result of the rising waterlogging and salinity.

In a similar vein, people living in Haor areas of the north-eastern districts of Bangladesh have, in recent times, experienced the onslaught of more frequent and intense flash floods. These have caused them to not only lose harvest, income and business earnings but have also compelled many of them to go for distress selling of their livestock and other assets to cope with income erosion. Safe drinking water sources in coastal areas is largely contaminated, often leading to outbreaks of water-borne diseases, particularly among children and women. In these regions, students suffer from loss of educational hours. The river-dependent communities in Bangladesh's northern regions have suffered similar consequences due to flooding. People in northern Bangladesh incur significant economic losses in the form of shrinkage of croplands, damage to, and loss of, dwellings, and loss incurred to businesses, shops and properties as the direct result of river erosion. This commonly happens following monsoon floods. Communities dependent on transboundary rivers for agricultural practices and navigational purposes, for example, living in the catchment areas of Teesta and its tributaries, suffer significantly as a result of the irregular flow of water. In summer, these communities are faced with a shortage of water, while during the monsoon, an abundance of water frequently causes flash floods.

In contrast, farming communities in Bangladesh's northwestern districts of Barind region often experience severe drought. They face significantly high costs for purposes of irrigation and in dealing with pest attacks. Inadequate access to safe drinking water is another issue for those living in at-risk neighbourhoods in north-west Bangladesh. Intense heat in summer leads to dehydration; indeed, heat-related deaths have been on the rise in recent times. Overall, the strain of losing access to water, watching crops die, losing livelihood opportunities and seeing family members suffer from diseases results in stress within households and communities and sometimes causes violence and conflicts. The relatively disadvantaged people suffer the most, as they don't have the means to mitigate adverse consequences, are not able to migrate to cities or other places and have to live and deal with the attendant challenges on an ongoing basis.

Persistence of slow-onset events such as the sea level rise and salinity intrusion is threatening the lives and livelihoods of over 13 million coastal people in Bangladesh. Many are being compelled to migrate to cities and peri-urban areas or encroach on nearby forest lands. This results in congestion in cities and leads to growth of unplanned urbanisation. The rate of urban poverty and malnutrition rises.

The above could potentially trigger disruptions in social cohesion and lead to conflicts involving marginalised communities in urban slums and the newly-migrated climate refugees. Studies show that climate migrants also frequently experience widespread human trafficking.

On the other hand, rising instances of encroachment on forest lands for human settlement is further exacerbating the ecological balance. This is more of a problem for Bangladesh where only

10.7 per cent of the country's area is at present under forest. Although Bangladesh only contributes to less than 0.48 per cent of global emissions, it is one of the most impacted by climate change. For instance, over the 2015-2020 period, Bangladesh's annual economic loss and damage due to natural disasters was equivalent to 1.32 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). Despite being a minor source of global emissions, Bangladesh has made commitments unconditionally reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 6.73 per cent below the business-as-usual level in the energy, industrial, agriculture, forestry, and waste sectors, and conditionally by 15.12 per cent below business-as-usual levels by 2030 under the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC). In view of these, investment in renewable energy has emerged as a critically important issue in the Bangladesh context, in terms of meeting its NDC commitments as also from the perspective of attaining a number of targets under the SDGs.

To meet the NDC commitments, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) needs to pursue a bottom-up approach. This is particularly so as there is a significant lack of indepth knowledge about the attendant local level vulnerabilities and needs of concerned communities, and more so, the needs of the marginalised communities. Indeed, weak integration of policies and programmes has been identified as a key challenge in view of both climate change adaptation and mitigation in the Bangladesh context. On the other hand, as may be recalled, in view of addressing climate change-induced vulnerabilities, the locally led adaptation (LLA) approach, based on eight principles, has gained traction in relevant global discourse. Localised climate governance, aligned with LLA, offers a new opportunity to identify and deal with the localised vulnerabilities of climate change in a collaborative and participatory manner. On a welcome note, the government of Bangladesh has recognised the importance of LLA; indeed, this gets mentioned throughout the 'National Adaptation Plan (NAP) 2023-50', in connection with the various interventions from the perspective of ensuring meaningful social inclusion.

In view of the aforesaid emergent challenges and the urgency of addressing those, the objective of the present Policy Brief is to put forward a set of recommendations to effectively deal with the manifestations of localised climate change vulnerabilities impacting Bangladesh, keeping the concerns of disadvantaged groups at the centre of attention.

2. Recommendations

Implement all interventions mentioned in the National Adaptation Plan (2023–50) and ensure that national Five-Year Development Plans are aligned with those.

In dealing with climate change adaptation, the NAP is to serve as Bangladesh's primary planning and investment framework for the next 28 years (2023-2050). NAP aims to achieve six specific goals: i) ensure protection against climate change variability and climate-induced natural disasters; ii) develop climate-resilient agriculture for food, nutrition, and livelihood security; iii) develop climate-smart cities for improved urban environment and well-being; iv) promote nature-based solutions for conservation of forestry, biodiversity, and well-being of communities; v) impart good governance through integration of adaptation into the planning process; and vi) ensure transformative capacity building and innovation for CCA. The NAP has identified 113 interventions to be implemented in 11 climate-stressed regions across Bangladesh. About BDT 20 trillion (or equivalent to over USD 200 billion) will be required to implement these interventions; approximately 75 per cent of this amount is expected to be needed by 2040.

Identify community-led adaptation techniques, based on local knowledge, to assess whether these could potentially be scaled up to address the challenges posed by global warming.

A number of community-led adaptation methods are found in different parts of rural Bangladesh. For instance, communities in northern Bangladesh frequently construct 'Bandals', an indigenous bamboo structure, to lower river erosion in small river basins and to reclaim agricultural fields. 'Baira' or floating agriculture is a traditional agricultural method where floating beds are prepared with water hyacinth and other plant components. This provides opportunities for income generation and helps people in southern Bangladesh to strengthen their resilience against water logging. In an effort to identify a feasible bandalling structure which will maintain physical characteristics of the river, the Bangladesh River Research Institute (RRI) is at present conducting three pilot projects. One of these projects is in the Brahmaputra basin. On the other hand, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has recognised floating agriculture as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS). It is important to deploy a developmental approach that takes into cognisance regional variations in climate impacts and draws on locally driven small-scale adaptation solutions based on indigenous knowledge and home-grown techniques.

Introduce a special social safety net transfer programme in support of marginalised groups living in Haor areas.

The Haor ecosystem is diverse, and its nature changes significantly with seasonal variations. In the dry season, people in the water retention area cultivate the land, whereas in the wet season, this land remains submerged and becomes a spawning ground for fish. In majority of the hoar areas of Bangladesh commercial leasing for fishing is allowed under a legal framework. As a result, communities within the retention area are not able to go for fishing during certain times of the year. This has severe negative consequences for their livelihoods. In view of this, the government should introduce a special social safety net transfer programme during the lean period in support of the marginalised groups living in Haor areas.

Develop more water retention grounds/systems to ensure access to clean and safe drinking water for people living in saline and drought prone areas.

68.3 million people in Bangladesh (41 per cent of the total population) lack access to properly managed drinking water, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) - UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) report. Due to climate change-induced salinity intrusion and increased shrimp aquaculture along the coast, freshwater supplies are becoming increasingly scarce. Additionally, in many areas, the groundwater table has gone further down, drying up shallow and deep tube wells; this leaves only rainfall and pond water as viable alternatives as sources of water. Local solutions such as rainwater harvesting and seawater reverse osmosis systems to filter saltwater, at the community and household levels, are examples of technologies that could address this issue. However, this needs to be done at policy and regulatory levels through strictly imposed specific laws and guidelines concerning management of natural resources. The actions should be targeted to address deforestation and extraction of

resources such as sand and rocks from and near water bodies. These measures should guide Bangladesh's agricultural policies as well.

Initiate an impact assessment study to understand the effectiveness and sustainability of projects led by the Climate Change Trust Fund which, going forward, should help policymakers to take evidence-based decisions in designing projects. There is a need to showcase the lessons learned in view of the experience gained.

Since the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF) was set up in 2009, a total of Tk 3,955 crore has been allocated from this fund till December 2022. Of this, Tk. 1,447 crore was retained as a reserve, while Tk. 2,507 crore was allocated for implementing 851 projects as of December 2022. Among the thematic areas, infrastructure development received the most funding, receiving 59 per cent of the total budget. This was followed by mitigation and low-carbon development (23 per cent), food security, social protection, and health (13 per cent), research, capacity building, and institutional development (6 per cent), and comprehensive disaster management (1 per cent). In spite of the fund being operational for over a decade, no comprehensive assessment has been carried out which delves into such issues as efficacy of funds used, sustainability of the projects undertaken and state of accountability in fund use. It is high time to make a comprehensive assessment of the projects implemented under BCCTF and their outcomes. These should be measured against the concrete objectives set out for the projects. The impact on the lives and livelihoods of disadvantaged communities should be at the heart of such an exercise.

Initiate a comprehensive study on 'Valuation of Forest Ecosystem', by types of forests, to better prepare for global negotiations on carbon sequestration, as also to assess socio-economic benefits originating from the forest resources.

In recent years, Bangladesh's forest coverage has declined to as low as 10.7 per cent, despite the fact that 17.5 per cent of the country's land was designated as forest land (which also includes land under social afforestation). Forest-based ecosystem services play a crucial role in contributing to livelihoods, generating employment and ensuring the well-being of many marginalised groups dependent on forest resources. As is known, forests serve as invaluable natural resources, at the same time providing protection from the impact of natural disasters and carbon sequestration. All of these have economic implications that need to be calculated and factored into the policies. Preservation of the invaluable and rich biodiversity and maintenance of delicate ecological balance should also be considered in this exercise. Economic valuation of forest ecosystem services can inform policymakers about the ecological and socio-economic benefits of conserving forests, thereby incentivising appropriate policymaking to secure a sustainable future for the next generations.

Initiate a study to determine national "loss and damage" consequent to climate change.

Compensation for loss and damage has attracted renewed interest and attention in recent climate negotiations. The UNFCCC eventually took the decision, in November 2022, at the 27th annual UN Climate Change Conference (COP27), to create and operationalise a new fund to support developing countries which are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. The fund is geared to respond to climate change impacts and recover from climate-induced damages. The terms of payment and modality of operation of this fund are yet to be chalked out, though. A 24-member transitional committee has recommended to operationalise the Loss and Damage fund at the COP28. COP28 has principally agreed to materialise the fund. More concrete decisions and details are expected to be agreed in the upcoming COP29. In this backdrop, the GoB should initiate a comprehensive study to estimate the value of national 'loss and damage' due to climate change so that Bangladesh has the information to successfully negotiate for compensation based on data and evidence on the ground.

Initiate, prepare and enact a Watershed Strategy Plan.

An integrated use of land, vegetation and water in a geographically distinct drainage area for the benefit of people inhabiting the area is known as watershed management (WM). This is particularly vital for communities living in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracks and coastal regions. Perhaps because the country is a predominantly deltaic plain, Bangladesh doesn't have a watershed policy, strategy, or plan which is appropriate for the upland regions of the CHT. Currently, communities which rely on these watersheds for their livelihoods and access to water remain highly vulnerable as a result of continued degradation of watersheds. In this backdrop, with a view to prioritising community-based watershed management, the GoB should initiate, prepare, and enact a Watershed Strategy Plan on an urgent basis. This is critically important, more specifically for the disadvantaged groups.

Maintain, review and improve data collection quality as regards hydro-meteorological variables.

There is a growing concern in Bangladesh as regards the quality of data relating to various hydro-meteorological variables. On the other hand, this is of heightened importance from the perspective of making informed policy decisions and addressing the anticipated climate change-related challenges. Collecting and monitoring of surface water and groundwater quality and salinity data, on a continuing basis, have now become essential for undertaking interventions to reduce the economic and health-related vulnerabilities of local communities. In this context, the GoB should take advantage of artificial intelligence in identifying climate change solutions when and where applicable. This particularly concerns data generation, analysis, and data integration in policymaking.

Encourage public private partnership (PPP) projects in renewable energy and energy transmission, housing, transport and climate-smart agriculture solutions.

Public-private partnership opportunities could be highly effective in view of green transition, including energy generation from renewable sources. Such a transition should create more green jobs, especially for young people. Thus, the government and private sector should undertake joint initiatives towards green transition and develop the necessary skills. To attain the national commitment of generating 40 per cent of electricity from renewable sources by 2041, about USD 19.2 to USD 37.2 billion investment will be needed only to develop the required installed capacity. Greater private sector involvement will be needed to mobilise both domestic and foreign investment. Such collaboration is also necessary to initiate and implement the required reforms, encourage innovation and promote efficiency in view of sector-specific climate-smart solutions.

Declare renewable energy-based projects under SREDA as fast track projects.

The energy industry in Bangladesh is highly reliant on sources that use fossil fuels. Only 3.5 per cent of the 26 GW installed capacity originates from renewable sources. The GoB has set an optimistic goal of producing 40 per cent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2041. This, however, comes in the backdrop of the past failure to achieve 10 per cent of electricity generation from renewable sources by 2021. To avoid repeating the past experience, it is critically important to categorise the ongoing solar park and wind projects under SREDA as fast-track projects. This will revitalise the renewable energy-based power sector and help address a number of climate change mitigation challenges facing the country. In addition, the launching of 'Net meter' based projects should receive high policy priority, which will call for the availability of the required technical and financial support to scale up operations and strengthen human resource capacities. GoB needs to be mindful that all renewable energy projects should have proper waste disposal and management plans and systems in place, particularly for dealing with hazardous waste.

Illegal sand mining must be immediately stopped. Legal permits for sand mining sites may be allowed only after conducting an appropriate feasibility study and environmental assessment.

Given the 8 per cent growth in the construction sector and a similar pace of growth in the real estate industry, the demand for sand in Bangladesh is expected to continue to rise in future. In this backdrop, the issue of river erosion may, over time, become more acute in view of the ongoing illegal sand mining activities. The adverse environmental implications and negative impact on the livelihood of such practices are becoming increasingly visible. Hence, illegal sand mining should be banned without delay through appropriate legal measures. The government should issue legal permits for sand mining only after proper feasibility study and environmental assessment. The revenue the government expects to make from such legal permits should be deployed to undertake adaptation and mitigation measures in favour of the local riverine communities.

Introduce 'Polluters-pay' principle for pollution management in Bangladesh.

For the first time in history, Bangladesh has decided to impose a carbon tax in the National Budget for FY2023-24. Even though the tax structure, provisions and specifications remain somewhat ambiguous, limited, and even contradictory in scope, it is encouraging to see that the GoB is serious about penalising the polluters. To note, the country's air and water pollution level has increased considerably in recent years. Consequently, the adoption of stringent measures to implement the "Polluter Pays" principle, in view of the country's pollution management, has emerged as an urgency. This will help Bangladesh to protect its environment from air and water pollution. While imposing the penalty tax for pollution, it should be seen that the payment should cover the cost of environmental harm as well. Improving the quality of air and water will no doubt benefit the health of all citizens, but most notably that of children, women and the elderly.

Provide highest priority to transboundary water sharing agreements with neighbouring countries to address complex climate change consequences.

Bangladesh shares three transboundary rivers with Myanmar and 54 transboundary rivers with India. With the exception of the three largest rivers, the country as a whole—especially the southwest region—experiences significant water shortages during the dry season. The problems are most acute in the case of agricultural cultivation and for smooth navigation of the concerned transboundary rivers. Additionally, salt intrusion and environmental degradation are worsening because of reduced stream flow, which also reduces the productivity of natural aquifers. In this backdrop, the GoB should give highest priority to signing transboundary water sharing agreements with India. Delays in negotiations will further worsen and accentuate pre-existing vulnerabilities of communities whose livelihoods depend on these rivers. Many people will likely experience forced displacement from their lands. Their struggle against different forms of climate adversity may be further exacerbated if the issue is not given the importance it deserves.

Establish a specialised department within the Economic Relations Division to prepare documents, develop proposals and design project profiles in order to avail of climate change funds created under global initiatives.

There is a widespread concern that developed countries, which are mostly responsible for global warming, could attempt to substitute official development assistance (ODA) for meeting their pledge towards the Global Climate Fund. Bangladesh should take the lead in mobilising global opinion for decoupling climate components from development projects. In the past, Bangladesh was not able to access various climate funds, notably the Global Climate Fund (CGF), on numerous occasions, mostly because it lacked the ability to prepare project proposals by meeting the stringent requirements attached to availing these funds. To avert this in the future, the government should establish a dedicated department within the Economic Relations Division that will be entrusted with preparing documents, developing proposals, and designing project profiles to help access climate change-related funds. Such an outfit will also be able to facilitate climate-related negotiations. For better inter-Ministerial coordination, an official with at least the rank of Joint Secretary status should be designated as the climate change focal person in every Ministry.

Allow non-state actors to effectively participate in climate change-related policymaking process to help address the needs of marginalised communities and likely climate migrants.

Globally, non-state actors play a significant role in climate advocacy in favour of marginalised communities. The GoB should acknowledge the important role that the country's civil society, non-government organisations and other non-state actors could play in promoting and implementing an inclusive climate policy. The government must allow these actors to participate, act, and support the GOB in climate change-related policymaking and advocacy. This is particularly necessary to address the needs of the marginalised communities and potential climate migrants. By building partnerships with the participation of government agencies, development partners and non-state actors, it is possible to advance the cause of environmental sustainability in global platforms and mobilise funds towards climate action in Bangladesh. This is important for strategising and allocating resources in a planned manner to combat the challenges of climate change in a way that is sensitive to the needs of the left-behind groups.

3. Concluding Observations

In order to implement the concrete recommendations presented above, the government should support locally led adaptation practices and promote private sector investment in innovation. The government should create platforms where vulnerable women and young people can highlight local contexts, raise concerns about adverse climate impacts and challenges, and voice suggestions to tackle those. Climate change related challenges are very diverse and are specific to different vulnerable communities and localities– flash floods, regular floods and riverbank erosion in the northern districts; flash floods and thunderstorms in the north-eastern Haor districts; drought in the north-western districts; waterlogging in the south-west coast; cyclones and storms in the south-east coast; and salinity intrusion in the southern belt of Bangladesh. Local solutions will need to be found to address local challenges. There is a need to allocate necessary funds to undertake pre-, during and post-disaster relief and rehabilitation programmes. To make it resilient to climate change, a transition in the Bangladesh agriculture is a must. So is the generation of energy from renewable sources to attain the sustainable development goals. Transformative adaptation will be crucial for the inclusion of marginalised and excluded people in resilience-building efforts. Contextualised and localised skills development programmes will be needed to address local environmental challenges and encourage climate-friendly entrepreneurship. This approach will also help meet the commitment of leaving no one behind (LNOB) in view of the sustainable development of Bangladesh. Localised climate governance should be seen as a new window of opportunity to deal with the emerging spatial vulnerabilities originating from the impact of climate change.

List of Expert Group Members

Chair
Dr Fahmida Khatun
Executive Director
Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)

Penholder
Mr Estiaque Bari
Senior Lecturer
Department of Economics
East West University

Members

Dr A Atiq Rahman
Executive Director
Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies

Ms Farah Kabir
Country Director
ActionAid Bangladesh

Dr Haseeb Irfanullah
Independent Consultant - Environment, Climate Change & Research System
Visiting Research Fellow, ULAB

Dr Md Golam Rabbani
Head, Climate Bridge Fund Secretariat
BRAC Dr

Dr Md Nazmus Sadath
Professor
Forestry and Wood Technology Discipline
Khulna University

Dr Md. Nazmus Sadekin
Associate Professor
Department of Economics
Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University

Professor Mizan R. Khan
Deputy Director
International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD)

Mr Partha Hefaz Shaikh
Director Policy and Advocacy
WaterAid Bangladesh

Mr Sharif Jamil
Executive Director
Blue Planet Initiative (BPI)

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