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Co-Operation in the Bay of Bengal to Address Climate-Induced Migration

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Global discourse on climate change has come a long way: from its credibility being hotly contested to becoming a priority in international cooperation for states, primarily under the umbrella of United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC). The recently concluded Conference of the Parties (CoP) 21 meeting in Paris in November-December 2015 is reflective of international willingness to cooperate on climate change.

In its landmark 2007 report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) cautioned about the intense and varied impact of climate change on human migration.[1] Approximately, 20 million people are being displaced every year due to climate change[2] — including displacement triggered by natural disasters as well as through the effects of slow onset processes.[3] Despite such statistics, remedial efforts remain below par. While the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention) provides asylum rights to those affected by political persecution, there is no international legal or institutional provision to address people displaced by climate change.

One major determinant in the inaction is the non-traditional and non-military nature of the problem, as the effects are not directly visible. Rather, they become evident over a period of time. Hence, in the absence of visible trends, there is a general lack of interest from policymakers on this issue. The existing narrative discusses tackling this along two broad categories: on the one hand, many scholars argue for adding provisions in the existing Refugee Convention for those displaced due to climate change, as it is an external stimuli, compelling people to emigrate; on the other, there is also a push for accommodating 'climate refugees' and climate change induced migration to existing frameworks on climate change for a cooperative response.[4] Further, the CoP 21 in Paris reveals the relative disinterest among states to place climate change induced migration as a priority agenda item for discussion.

Rising sea levels render coastal populations extremely vulnerable.[5] Many factors directly affect their livelihoods that compel them to either adapt or migrate. The 2014 IPCC Working Group II report states:

> Important direct effects of climate change on coastal settlements include dry-land loss due to erosion and submergence, damage of extreme events (such as wind storms, storm surges, floods, heat extremes, and droughts) on built environments, effects on health (food- and water-borne disease), effects on energy use, effects on water availability and resources, and loss of cultural heritage.[6]

The coastal areas of states surrounding the Bay of Bengal are densely populated. Added to that, there is also an overlay of economic, social and political stressors.[7] Large coastal metropolises as well as small subsistence communities are all prone to sea-borne natural disasters and to rising sea levels. The impact of climate change and natural disasters varies due to a range of social, political and economic factors. For instance, the responses are primarily dedicated to urban areas; and added to that are the existing rural-urban migration patterns that are exacerbated during natural disasters. Low-lying coastal states are at threat across the world. The impact is also underlined by the varying ability of developed and developing states to cope with its effects. Pacific island states such as Tuvalu and Kiribati are trying to garner attention towards the existential impact of climate change on small island

states through the UNFCCC CoP forum.[8] The threat of submergence and the scarcity of resources results in further economic stagnation and create stimuli for migration towards economically attractive and politically stable places.[9]

Climate Change in Bay of Bengal and its Impact on Migration

While global solutions and international legal frameworks form the backbone of policy responses, many effects of climate change are also manifested regionally. These are determined largely by geographical conditions, spilling across man-made national boundaries.

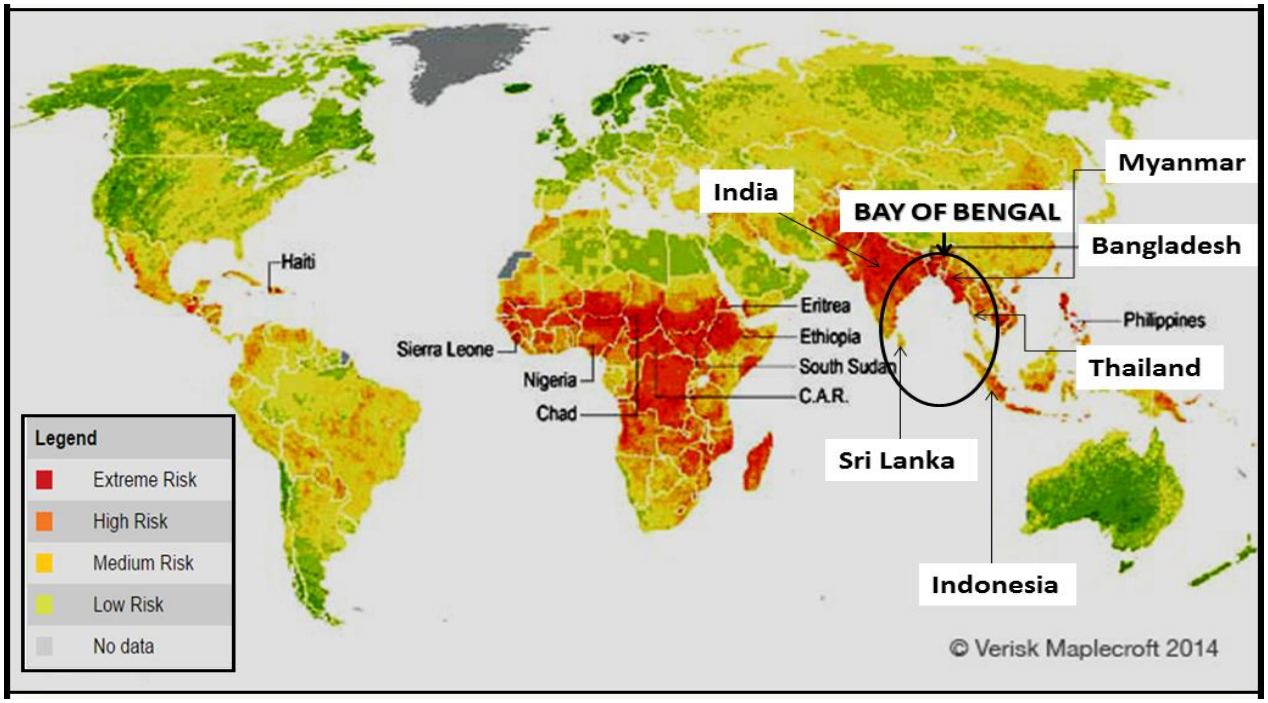

Figure: Bay of Bengal's High Vulnerability: Climate Change Vulnerability Index 2015
Source: Verisk Maplecroft[10]

The Bay of Bengal is one region where the effects of climate change, both slow and sudden, can be observed at great cost to life and the environment.[11] "Globally, eight of the ten countries with the greatest number of people living in low-elevation coastal zones are located in South and South East Asia,"[12] making it the most vulnerable zone.[13] Climate Change Vulnerability Index 2015 showed that Bangladesh

is ‘most at risk,’ while states like India and Myanmar feature in the ‘extreme risk’ category.

States like Bangladesh and parts of Myanmar, India, Vietnam and Indonesia are inherently volatile and prone to natural disasters such as flooding, drought, cyclones, which severely handicap the primarily agro-based economies. These, combined with socio-political structures that are not well-adapted for providing immediate relief and security, compel internal and cross border migration as a survival strategy. These effects are compounded by climate change: both slow onset processes as well as due to the increase in the frequency and intensity of natural disasters.[14]

Additionally, states tend to focus on large projects, and analyse success on the basis of narrow indices such as economic growth instead of economic and sustainable development[15]. For instance, the lure of profits in the palm oil industry in Indonesia has led big corporations as well as smaller farmers to burn forests and natural vegetation, particularly in parts of Sumatra and Kalimantan. This has both immediate as well as long term consequences, affecting air quality, threatening the natural habitat of flora and fauna, as well as gravely disturbing the ecological balance.[16] Resultantly, environmental concerns are side-lined, and ecologically sustainable livelihoods of indigenous and coastal communities are disrupted.

The densely populated littorals experience frequent cyclones and flooding which, coupled with dearth of economic opportunities and lack of effective infrastructure in disaster management (preventive and response) along with the backdrop of political instability and conflict, provide conducive push factors for migration.[17] Citing the example of Bangladesh, one analyst makes an interesting link, where it is stated:

> Underdeveloped societies are at high risk… …particularly if they depend on the environment for livelihood……..Such societies are relatively more likely than developed societies to exit the affected area, particularly when their loyalty is low.[18]

This is particularly important in an Asian context as migration patterns are often significantly determined by existing socio-cultural similarities and kinship networks, apart from economic determinants.[19]

Bangladesh, a lower riparian state, experiences frequent flooding. "Migration, both internal and international labour migration of unskilled workers, has increasingly become a coping mechanism in the face of environmental and economic challenges."[20]

Furthermore, rising sea levels and slow and sudden impacts of climate change are also intricately linked to food security. People living in coastal areas of the Bay of Bengal littoral are heavily dependent on natural monsoon patterns. Sudden and seasonal natural disasters cripple the food security of the respective economies, further triggering the need to look for alternative options. Myanmar, with a vulnerable coast, experienced one of the world's most devastating cyclones in the recent past: in 2008, Cyclone Nargis killed more than 100,000 people and severely impacted food security.

Adding to the environmental stressors are political and economic factors. The region is home to some of world's poorest people, and is marked by rapid urbanization. These factors tend to overlap and steer climate change induced migration, hence accelerating human mobility towards pockets of development. The region produces a large number of international migrants to neighbouring states as well as to developed economies, (both skilled and unskilled), especially through linkages of diaspora. South Asia has one of the largest global diaspora, and India is both a source and destination for migration.[21] In South East Asia, Thailand is one of the immigrant states while Indonesia produces emigrants, due to its large population.

Existing Mechanisms for Co-Operation

The Bay of Bengal littoral states straddle the South Asian Association for Regional Corporation (SAARC) on one side and the Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) on the other. There have been efforts to create a regional consciousness towards co-operation in the Bay of Bengal, especially through the

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). While there are provisions for co-operation in climate change and disaster management, no concrete steps have been taken towards addressing climate-induced migration, despite 18 years since its establishment. Additionally, BIMSTEC is yet to fulfil its existing potential of its economic-centric mandate.

SAARC has a Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) in New Delhi, which has "never been considered a particularly effective institution," and is subject to lukewarm progress.[22] SDMC has not played any significant role in mitigating or managing the many disasters hitting the region in the recent past.

On the other hand, focused international initiatives backed by non-resident institutions have proven to be more successful. Initiatives to achieve food security and sustainable development in the Bay of Bengal can help reduce drivers for migration in the long term. Adaptation is also a key long term measure, to avoid flight altogether.[23] A notable example is the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) project that focuses on the sustainable use of marine resources for development, involving various stakeholders including local communities. This is backed by key international organizations such as Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO); Global Environment Facility (GEF) Norway; the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDCA) as also from participating governments and the National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration (NOAA).[24] This initiative includes Thailand, Malaysia and Myanmar apart from India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka It has achieved success in fostering co-operation at the regional, sub-regional and national levels to leverage resources, and reaching food security and sustainable development while empowering a range of stakeholders, including vulnerable coastal communities that are worst hit by the impacts of climate change.[25] Another key initiative is the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP), funded by the UN Environmental Program that addresses a range of issues such as adaptation and awareness, and has an environment and natural resources information centre.

The Way Ahead

An international framework on climate change induced migration may take some time, since it remains a background issue, as is evident from the recent CoP Summit in Paris. Effective regional co-operation could provide a model and impetus towards outlining a global framework. Globally, there are both regional (in Latin America and Africa) and national (such as Temporary Protection Status in USA, and the national laws of Sweden and Finland) structures that provide short term protection to environmental migrants. This is a useful legal provision to accommodate those affected by unpredictable effects of climate change, to provide relief temporarily till they can return to a stable homeland.[26]

Despite the slow progress and poor public awareness, there have been some international efforts in this direction. The Government of Norway convened the Nansen Conference in 2011 to explore possible responses to linkages between climate change and mobility, and came out with a "set of ten overarching principles designed to shape and inform further action on addressing the linkages between climate change and mobility, both normatively and practically."[27]

These principles focused on addressing the potential concerns of those most vulnerable to "climate change and environmental hazards," and emphasized the building of local and national capacities, and the need to engage with "local governments and communities, civil society and private sector". It also directed states to look for regional and international solutions, pertaining to development and displacement, particularly if "national capacity [was] limited."

Given the significant impact of climate change on the large populations in this region, the absence of a regional initiative or framework to address climate change induced migration is considered a critical imperative. As discussed earlier, it is not the availability of institutions or frameworks but more a question of developing a holistic outlook on this issue. This is a challenge that demands urgent attention from policymakers on two counts: firstly, there are visible effects and credible challenges due to the impact of climate change on human populations; and secondly, climate-induced migration feeds into the existing overlaying patterns of economic migration in the region, including rural-urban

migration networks, and kinship. The existing migration networks such as Bangladesh to India or emigrants from Indonesia and Myanmar to Thailand, Malaysia and other economically better-off states may be fed intensely by climate change induced displacement, and it can often be difficult to segregate the two.

According to an ADB report, climate change migrants also need to be studied in sync with existing channels of migration, to better understand patterns. "The sending of remittances by migrants should also be facilitated, as it can greatly reduce the vulnerability of families and communities living in regions at risk." Further, "addressing this phenomenon today will minimize forced displacement and make the most of migration for development."[28]

Thus, a multidimensional response mechanism addressing different sectors—such as food security, fisheries, and livelihoods—can not only facilitate co-operation but also mitigate potential areas of interstate discord on aspects of human mobility and resource sharing. Instead of remedial responses, proactive long term policies are better suited to address this issue. It is imperative to foster bonhomie, and avoid geo-political discord in the region. The international nature of climate change gives states immense scope for co-operation, particularly over common challenges such as rising sea levels, increase in flooding, droughts and cyclones.

The foremost step towards addressing this issue, therefore, is generating a comprehensive dialogue as climate change induced migration and the contentious terminology of 'climate refugees' still do not figure in most of bilateral and regional Track 1 agendas. Despite the presence of several mechanisms for cooperation in the region, there is a need for publicity and awareness, particularly among those coastal communities as also the states as a whole that will be affected the most by these challenges. Finally, existing mechanisms for co-operation such as SDMC and BIMSTEC, must be strengthened through more robust interactions, and by formulating implementation protocols.

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