

Climate Change and Neoliberal Policies: the Case of Bangladesh

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Located in the largest delta at the world, where two Himalayan rivers, the Brahmaputra and the Ganges, converge and flow into the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh is used to climatic catastrophes. Half of the land area of Bangladesh is less than 10 metres above sea level. It consists mainly of silt deposited by the rivers which flow down from the Himalayan glaciers. When the snow melts it regularly causes large-scale floods. The coast is at the mercy of cyclones and giant waves which submerge the coastal areas.

Subjected to extreme geographical and climatic conditions, Bangladesh has established over the centuries an equilibrium which has made it possible for its dense population to live there. Global warming, reinforced by the application of neoliberal policies, has broken this fragile equilibrium. Undoubtedly, no country in the world is more vulnerable today and the population of Bangladesh is confronted by immense challenges...

Unprecedented climate change

No region of Bangladesh has been spared by climate change. In the north of the country, the summer, which previously lasted two to three months, can now last for five or six months, with a substantial rise in temperature. Consequently, fertile land becomes arid and crops burn. The rivers dry up and the farmers depend on systems of expensive irrigation which pump subterranean water and gradually exhaust it. Since the 1990s, the peasants have also been confronted with the problem of the contamination of water from wells by arsenic, which is present naturally in the earth but which rises to the surface because of the pumping of subterranean water.

Cold and fog are becoming more severe during winter, destroying many harvests of vegetables and seasonal crops.

In the south too temperatures are rising regularly in summer and cold weather is more common in winter. The coast is subject to increasingly frequent cyclones and they are becoming more and more violent. The giant waves which invade the fertile land of the coastal areas increase the salinity of the land and the rivers, making the land durably unsuitable for agriculture.

The country now has only three seasons, summer, winter and a rainy season, whereas it had six seasons previously. During these periods, the climate seems to have gone mad: the summers are increasingly hot and dry, the winters increasingly harsh and the rainy seasons increasingly wet. The floods and cyclones which Bangladesh has always had to face now come more and more frequently, and especially outside the expected periods. Climate change is unquestionably responsible for these disorders, at least partly. The warming of the atmosphere accelerates the melting of the glaciers of the North and South Poles, leading to a rise in the sea level. The coastal parts of Bangladesh are gradually being submerged by salt water. The third report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that the country could lose 10.9 per cent of its land surface if the sea level rose by 45 centimetres.

In the north, the streams and rivers which cross Bangladesh are replenished by the melting of the

Himalayan glaciers. With global warming, the melting of these glaciers is faster than the reconstitution of the ice. Thus, the rivers are decreasing gradually and if the phenomenon is accentuated, the rivers could soon be dry, which would lead to the north of Bangladesh turning into a desert.

But for the time being, the increase in rainfall during the monsoon, coupled with an acceleration of the melting of the glaciers, increases the quantity of water to be evacuated. The flowing of this water into the sea is itself made difficult by the rise in the sea level. The combination of these two factors makes floods more frequent and more extensive.

With the rise in the sea level, the dykes built in the 1960s, which are five metres high, are no longer sufficient to protect coastal villages from high tides. The combination of a rise in the sea level and a diminution of the billions of tons of silt carried by the rivers of the north no longer prevents the penetration of salt water into the lowlands. And the dykes retain rainwater on the landward side, thus accentuating the floods.

Neoliberal policies have worsened the situation

Changes in the climate are not the only factors responsible for the degradation of the environment, of which the Bangladeshi peasants are the first victims. In the 1980s, public authorities developed an economic policy that was oriented towards both exports and an increase in food production. This policy was impelled and supported by international agencies such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Asian Development Bank, the United States Agency for International Development and the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom.

As elsewhere, structural adjustment policies favoured in Bangladesh the privatization of large public companies and the opening-up of the energy sector to foreign capital. It was the same for the mining sector in the 1990s. The withdrawal of the state precipitated a crisis in the sectors of education and health, opening the way to private services.

In the name of development, these economic reforms opened the way to the large-scale buying-up of land and to the dispossession of a million people. They created a cycle of dependence from which the Bangladeshi peasants have great difficulty in escaping.

Along the coast there was a proliferation of shrimp breeding, aimed at satisfying the rapidly-growing market in the rich countries. Bangladesh is today the fifth-biggest producer of shrimps in the world. Approximately 130 companies share the profits from this industry, which employs nearly a million Bangladeshi workers for less than one euro a day. 190,000 hectares of mangrove and fertile land have been converted into aquicultural farms. Land that was in the beginning reserved for agriculture was bought from small producers at low prices, then transformed into shrimp farms, thus accentuating the salination of the land and making it definitively unsuitable for agriculture.

This industry endangers the means of existence of the peasants, without however providing a sufficient number of jobs. In the Sundarbans, the breeding of shrimps broke the fragile equilibrium which made it possible for the local population to live from the resources of the biggest mangrove in the world. The ecosystem cannot adapt quickly to the salination of water and the increase in temperature. The big trees are disappearing, as well as a large number of animal and vegetable species. The peasants who formerly cultivated rice and who did not find employment in the aquicultural farms have recycled themselves as fishermen in the Sundarbans. But the mangrove cannot withstand the combined pressure of an increasing level of artisanal fishing and the shrimp industry, which leaves behind it pools destroyed by the pollution generated by this industry. That causes an ecological catastrophe and reinforces the effects of climate changes, because the

mangroves are buffers between the land and the sea. They protect from the erosion caused by the cyclones which sweep down on the coastal areas. Further inland, the drive to quickly increase the agricultural productivity of the fields has led to an excessive use of fertilizers. That has reinforced the reduction of biodiversity and the erosion of the land.

Food sovereignty and climatic refugees

The social challenges are immense for the 150 million inhabitants of Bangladesh, and in particular for the poorest among them. A third of the population lives below the poverty line and 70 per cent are landless. Climate changes and neoliberal policies are endangering the way of life of tens of millions of them. Forecasts indicate that nearly 40 million people could become climatic refugees. The capital, Dhaka, will not be able to absorb the massive displacements of population that are foreseeable if part of the country is no longer habitable, because it is submerged by floods or has been turned into a desert. Dhaka already accommodates half a million peasants every year because of the destruction of their traditional environment. Nor can a solution be found in neighbouring India, which shares a 4000-kilometre long common border with Bangladesh, and which has erected a double barbed-wire wall, 2.5 metres high, along more than 2500 kilometres. The Indian government claims to be defending itself against terrorism and smuggling. In reality, it is preventing the flood of migrants on both sides of a particularly complex border. The solutions must be based on co-operation and mutual aid and certainly not on the blocking of borders and on repression.

In a country where agriculture accounts for 20 per cent of the country's GDP and 65 per cent of its labour force, food sovereignty appears as one of the key questions which must enable the peasants to both attenuate and adapt to the effects of climate changes, while feeding a mainly poor population. The paradigm of food sovereignty is opposed to the dominant model of agribusiness, in which the search for profits takes precedence over the food needs of populations and respect for the environment. This paradigm "affirms the right of local peoples to define their own agricultural and food policies, control their own domestic food markets and promote local agriculture by preventing the dumping of surplus products. It encourages diverse and sustainable farming methods that respect the land, and sees international trade as only a complement to local production. Food sovereignty means returning control of natural assets such as land, water and seeds to local communities and fighting against the privatisation of all life" [1].

The failure of the Copenhagen conference is there to remind us of the incapacity of the governments of the great powers to take the measures that are essential. The coming climatic catastrophe will not be avoided without getting out of the capitalist system, which is based on the search for maximum profit and unlimited accumulation, objectives which are in contradiction with the safeguarding of the environment and the satisfaction of social needs.

Peasant organizations like the Bangladesh Krishok Federation (BKF) and the Bangladesh Kisan Sabha (BKS) [2] organize workshops with peasants to evaluate the impact of climate change and to mobilize them on the questions of access to land and on food sovereignty. At the end of the year 2011, these two organizations envisage launching a food sovereignty caravan which would tour the country. The organizers want to inform and mobilize the most vulnerable populations, to share the experiences of rank-and-file peasant movements and to develop international solidarity on the questions of climate change and food sovereignty, in particular in South Asia. The role of these progressive and independent organizations is very important. They are an important part of the building of a radical mass movement for climatic justice on a world scale.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] See Esther Vivas, "Alternatives to the dominant agricultural model" International Viewpoint 434, March 2011

[2] The BKF and the BKS are both peasant organisations representing Via Campesina in Bangladesh.