

Older people on the frontline: ensuring inclusive climate action in Bangladesh



Jannatul Mawa/Resource Integration Centre/11n6by2030

Contents

- 2 Introduction
- 3 Ageing in climate adversity
- 5 Older people's engagement in climate action
- 8 Conclusion

Key messages

- Bangladesh has seen an increasingly ageing population over recent years, with the number of people aged 60 and over now standing at around 15.3 million.
- Older people are particularly at risk of climate change impacts and often depend on younger adult family members for help, including during disasters.
- The present research shows that older people have adopted various coping strategies to deal with the impacts of hazards and disasters. The most widely used coping strategies included staying at home or taking a loan.
- Older people's knowledge and appreciation of the environment and natural resources contributes to the wellbeing of their households and communities.
- The Government of Bangladesh must recognise older people's vulnerability to extreme weather events while acknowledging their capacity, knowledge, and agency to support and/or lead locally led adaptation.



Introduction

The proportion of the population aged 60 and over has been increasing in Bangladesh in recent years. In 1991, over 6.04 million people were aged 60 and over (5.42 per cent of the overall population) and in 2022 the number was 15.3 million (9.26 per cent).¹ This is expected to more than double to 36 million or 20 per cent of the population by 2050.²

While the pace of population ageing in Bangladesh is accelerating, poverty in old age remains a critical challenge for society. Recent HelpAge research shows that poverty amongst older people is higher compared to the national average. Based on the poverty threshold used in the Bangladeshi National Social Security Strategy (NSSS), 57 per cent of older people were found to be economically vulnerable, with more women being at risk of poverty compared to men.³

Bangladesh's climate change related policies need to take into account older people's needs, resilience and empowerment. For instance, policies on disaster preparedness and response systems overlook the unique risk factors affecting older people, such as mobility challenges and chronic health conditions. The Bangladesh National Plan for Disaster Management treats older people as part of a larger vulnerable group, ignoring their unique challenges (HelpAge International, 2020). Social protection policies and measures, such as the NSSS, provide little assistance to older people in adjusting to climate impacts. While there is an Old Age Allowance, it does not include climate-sensitive adjustments to safeguard older people from poverty during climate-related shocks.⁴

In the health sector, age-, gender- and disability-appropriate interventions to address climate-related health risks are also lacking. The Climate Change and Health Promotion Unit has made progress in addressing climate-related health concerns, but older people's specific needs remain unmet, particularly in terms of managing mobility obstacles, non-communicable diseases, and mental health issues.⁵ In addition, older people are often not consulted about their needs or invited to input despite their valuable knowledge and experience.

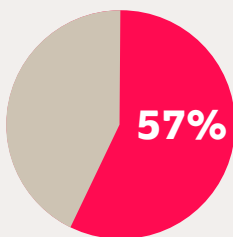
Older people are excluded from climate change decision-making. Key initiatives, such as the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, prioritise the inclusion of women and youth while frequently overlooking the participation of older people. This exclusion inhibits older people from participating in community adaptation methods, reducing their empowerment and resilience.⁶

Over the last two decades, Bangladesh has experienced 185 extreme weather events, making it the seventh most vulnerable country to climate change.⁷ These recurring extreme weather events include floods and flash floods, tropical cyclones, sea-level rise, and destabilise livelihoods, infrastructure, economic growth, ecosystems.

Older people are particularly at risk from these impacts. The Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) also reasserts that the South Asian region (particularly Bangladesh) faces more intense and frequent heavy precipitation and heat extremes.⁸ According to the World Bank, climate variability and extreme events might lead to the loss of one-third of agricultural gross domestic product (GDP) in central and north-western Bangladesh by 2050. In April 2024, an unprecedented heatwave shattered a 76-year record for most consecutive days.⁹ In addition, in May 2024, Cyclone Remal affected 3.75 million people and was regarded as the most devastating cyclone for several years.¹⁰

A new report by the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) on 'Climate Change Impacts in Bangladesh' highlights that the country's current national policies, plans, and adaptation strategies will not be enough to safeguard its people, infrastructure and ecosystems. It concludes that Bangladesh has limited ability and preparedness to adapt to extreme weather.

In Bangladesh, more than half of older people were found to be economically vulnerable.



Over the last two decades, Bangladesh has experienced



185
extreme
weather
events.

Given this worrying context, this policy brief aims to generate awareness and dialogue at local and national levels on climate change and the impact on older people in Bangladesh. It draws primarily on recent national statistics, a review of the literature and policies for older people and climate change in Bangladesh, as well as quantitative and qualitative data generated by the UK Research and Innovation's Global Challenges Research Fund (UKRI/GCRF)-funded Living Deltas Hub research. The latter has provided details on the lived experiences and risks of older people residing in the south-western region of Bangladesh, on the coastal belt of the Sundarbans amid the devastating impacts of climate change. The Living Deltas Hub's household survey was conducted with a total of 1822 respondents, out of which 164 were aged 61 years.

Qualitative research was carried out by the Resource Integration Centre (RIC) in Bangladesh. Oral testimonies were collected by the Oral History Collective as part of the Living Deltas Hub's intergenerational research.¹¹ The Collective took an ageing perspective to this work that included trying to better understand the accumulation of advantage and disadvantage, physical and cultural capital and experience, over individual lifetimes.



Ageing in climate adversity

It is widely accepted that older people are particularly at risk of poverty, ill health, injury, and even death as a result of climate change impacts from both extreme weather events and slow onset events.¹² Existing evidence shows that older people are much more likely to suffer from ill health, injury, and death in the aftermath of a disaster.¹³ Older community members residing in climate change hotspots are particularly vulnerable to cyclones and other hazards and disasters because of their limited resources and dependency on others. They are also more susceptible to the effects of extreme heat waves and cold spells, sea level rise, and salinity intrusion which all negatively affect their physical and mental health through prolonged sickness and increased comorbidity.¹⁴

As part of the qualitative intergenerational research on environmental change carried out through the Living Deltas Hub's project by the Oral History Collective, older people in Horinkhola village of Koyra Union provided accounts of the extensive loss of land, fields, trees, and even graveyards. One older man explained:

“River erosion has been more prevalent in our area since the '90s. As a result, houses have disappeared one by one in the riverbed. Hundreds of acres of land have been washed away by the river. The graveyards of our ancestors have gone under the river.”

Male, 64 years, Horinkhola village, Koyra Union interviewed as part of the Living Deltas Hub

Some older women interviewed expressed their frustration at the repeated cycles of loss, damage, and repair they have experienced and the difficulties in recovering from their losses and rebuilding their lives. For example, one older woman stated:

“If we had built a house once before, we could have lived there for many years, but everything has changed since 1988... Now every year there is a disaster, and the houses are all destroyed... new houses have to be built again from scratch. It costs a lot to build a house, it costs a lot of money, and we have to work hard to make money and then build a house. How many more can be made?”

Woman, over 60 years, Horinkhola village, Koyra Union interviewed as part of the Living Deltas Hub



Despite countless hurdles, an older woman is attempting to regain her footing.

Resource Integration Centre



Some interviewees also felt disempowered and voiceless.

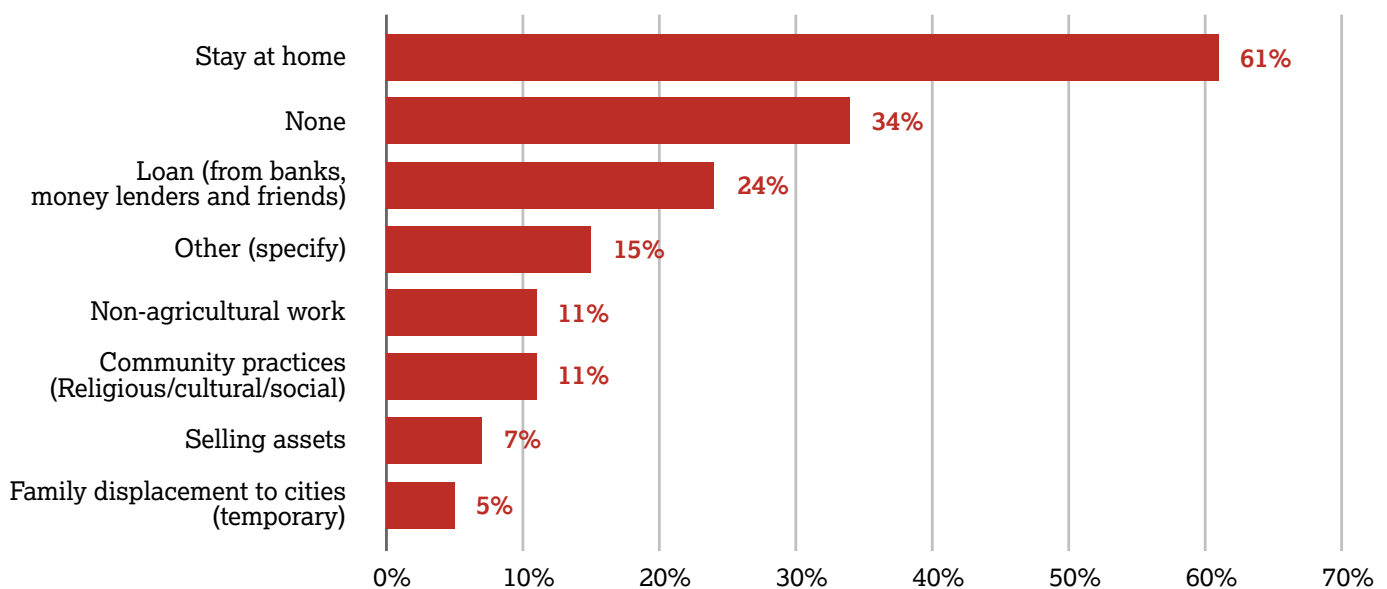
An older woman from Saronkhola highlighted in her oral history:

“I don’t know if the government is thinking about people like us. It feels like they may not recognise the deprivation and suffering we endure from the recent climate changes and disasters.”

Woman, 59 years, Shariktala union, Sundarbans regions interviewed as part of the RIC’s research

Survey results showed that older people have adopted various coping strategies to deal with the impacts of a hazard or disaster (Fig 1). The most widely used strategies included staying at home (61%) or taking out a loan (24%). Other ways of coping involved taking non-agricultural work, community practices, and selling assets, which can have several implications. First, staying at home may have negative effects on mental health as it implies a lack of social interactions. Second, taking loans and selling assets are likely to lead to further impoverishment, for those who already have insecure incomes.

Figure 1: Coping strategies of older people following a natural hazard or a disaster



Data source: UKRI/GCRF Living Deltas Hub

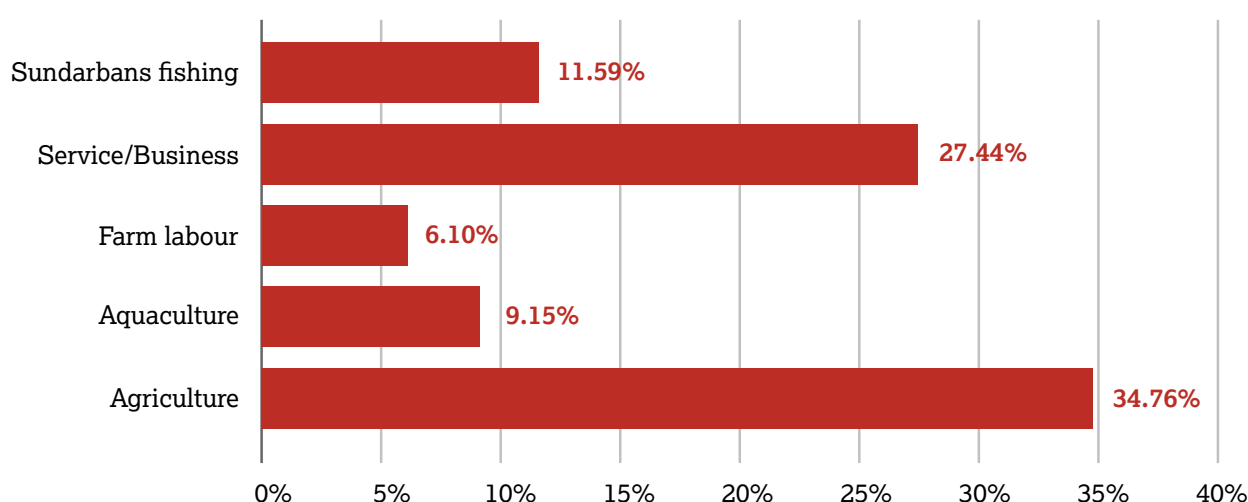
Older people’s engagement in climate action

The literature and discourse often focus on the ‘vulnerability’ of older people who are widely perceived as a burden on society instead of recognised for their productive capacities and positive contributions to society. In the context of both mitigating climate change impacts and adapting to them, many older people remain active in nature-based livelihood activities. By engaging in nature-based livelihoods and often nature-based solutions older people contribute significantly to nature conservation and biodiversity protection, as highlighted in recent HelpAge research in the context of Indonesia.¹⁵

Older people are also key to putting into practice what is known as locally led adaptation. This is about “local people having individual and collective agency over defining, prioritising, designing, monitoring and evaluating adaptation actions, and working with higher levels to implement and deliver adaptation solutions for climate action.”¹⁶ Therefore, locally led adaptation can be an effective medium through which older people’s local and traditional knowledge of their environment and decades of lived experience of environmental change can be integrated into adaptation interventions.

For instance, many older women and men across Bangladesh are **active in nature-based livelihood activities such as farming and fishing**. Quantitative and qualitative evidence from the Living Deltas Hub suggests that a high proportion of older people are actively involved in nature-based livelihoods. The survey findings show that across all three rural regions, 55.5 percent of older people have a nature-based primary livelihood (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Top five sources of primary livelihood for older people



Data source: UKRI/GCRF Living Deltas Hub

In addition to a lifetime of adaptive skills and experience from responding to various changes, crises, and challenges, some older people will also have positions of traditional authority within their communities due to their age and status. It is critical that older people are included in climate action initiatives at local and national levels so they can contribute these skills, knowledge, and leadership qualities to ensure more effective actions and context-specific solutions.

Older people’s knowledge and appreciation of the environment and natural resources also translate into a strong concern for their children’s and grandchildren’s health and nutrition. One man interviewed as part of the Living Deltas Hub oral history research explained:

“We had a lot of trees - mango trees, blackberries, jackfruits, coconut trees, betel trees! Now there is no vegetation, there is no joy. Even if we plant trees, every year river erosion destroys these trees! That is why we cannot give such fruits to our children. They are not getting adequate amounts of vitamins. We feel bad.”

Male, 60 years, Koyra Union interviewed as part of the Living Deltas Hub

Older women who participated in the Living Deltas Hub Intergenerational research and took part in a focus group were able to name 40 different species of trees (and their uses and values) that were previously found in the area. This was twice as many as a group of older men could name in the same village. Older people are also active participants in local restoration activities to rebuild their communities following natural hazards and/or disasters. A study participant recalled:

“If the elders of the area call for people they will come and cooperate. When the roads are destroyed by the floods, we work with everyone voluntarily. If we need to build a dam in an emergency, we call for them and arrange light snacks for them, but we don’t offer them any money. If any helpless poor in the area falls ill, they will collect donations and help in the treatment process. On Friday, the Imam in the mosque tells everyone to help.”

Male, 64 years, Koyra Union, interviewed as part of the Living Deltas Hub research

The collection of oral histories showed that older people's storytelling and recollections often impart subjective information about the past significance of the environment and climate to younger generations. One study participant, who continues to fish for his livelihood, reflected on the changes he has witnessed:

“I can feel how the temperature, rain, cold, and even the harshness of the river and sea have changed drastically over the years. As an older person, I have to keep fishing to support myself, but the extreme weather conditions are wearing me out.”

Male, 79-year-old, Shariktala union, interviewed as part of the RIC's research



Resource Integration Centre

Conclusion

While it is important to protect older people from the risks and impacts of climate change, it is critical that we also recognise, value, and harness their environmental stewardship and local knowledge for effective climate action. We must work to avoid ageist stereotypes which can reduce all older people to the status of ‘vulnerable’ and, in doing so, ignore their wisdom, leadership, knowledge and capacities to contribute positively to society. Many older people have a deep understanding of sustainable management of natural resources as well as coping strategies learnt over generations of adaptation. In many communities they also have the political and social influence to bring about change. Therefore, it is important to create inclusive and safe spaces for older people to participate meaningfully and have opportunities to express their views to contribute meaningfully to local climate action.

Bangladesh’s **National Adaptation Plan (NAP) 2022**, can support the safeguarding of older people from the disproportionate impacts of climate change. During the formulation of the NAP, older people’s views were sought through consultation in order to identify and prioritise the local climate adaptation needs. The interventions put forward included establishing inclusive and accessible early warning systems and cyclone shelters; building capacity in older people on climate change risks and vulnerabilities; and providing healthcare facilities in urban areas. In the implementation strategy, the NAP aims to utilise the existing District Development Coordination Committees (DDCC) in each district of Bangladesh and ensure that their mandates are revised to include older people in the implementation of the NAP at local level.

It will be imperative to strengthen monitoring and evaluation for tracking the engagement of older people in making NAP a success. This can be a vital way to safeguard older people from the disproportionate impacts of climate change.

Recommendations

The following are key recommendations for policy makers and others to ensure that older people in Bangladesh are empowered to become active players in climate action:

- 1. The Ministry of Social Welfare should build climate resilience of older people through** strengthening the social protection system, in particular a **universal social pension** which is gender and disability responsive. The current means-tested Old Age Allowance is inadequate in the face of climate threats and leaves many older people behind, including many women and people with disabilities who tend to be disproportionately affected by climate change impacts.
- 2. The Government of Bangladesh should further invest in strengthening the adaptive and shock-responsive social protection system**, including through increased interdepartmental cooperation.
- 3. Change the prevalent perception of older people as passive and ‘vulnerable’ in relation to climate change.** They should be recognised as key actors and role models of resilience as well as valuable sources of environmental knowledge and expertise. This reflects the approach of right-based programming and working towards the Sustainable Development Goals.
- 4. Encourage older people to participate in** planning, promoting, implementing, and assessing climate adaptation and mitigation efforts at the community level.
- 5. Increase investment in locally led adaptation.** Local authorities should be empowered to develop and implement context-specific adaptation initiatives in their areas. These should be age-, gender- and disability-inclusive and work to ensure representation of older people, including older women and people with disabilities.
- 6. Local governments, NGOs, and other actors should ensure older people have access to information in appropriate formats (keeping in mind gender and disability and context-specific challenges and localities)** and promote capacity-building initiatives to support their resilience and action in relation to the climate change impacts.

7. NGOs should support older people and harness their existing associations/civil society organisations to **monitor government policies and laws in relation to older people and climate change.**

8. The Government of Bangladesh and other stakeholders should **leverage national policies such as the NAP (2023-2050) to ensure the representation of older people** in decision-making and the design of adaptation interventions to achieve locally-led climate action. For NAP to be fully effective, it will be essential to strengthen the monitoring of the implementation progress and track the engagement of older people in various NAP activities.

9. Stakeholders should **engage with older people** in the design and implementation of all government and non-governmental initiatives relating to Disaster Risk Reduction and locally led adaptation to ensure initiatives respond to their needs and capacities.

10. National and local governments should **promote income-generating activities** of older people, including through Older People's Associations. This should involve generating saving and investment mechanisms, such as revolving funds, which will need to be subsidised by local governments. There are existing examples of such revolving funds for vulnerable groups in Bangladesh.

11. The Government of Bangladesh and other stakeholders should **make use of the experience and knowledge of older people to influence climate justice.** The facilitation and/or creation of policies that promote older people's engagement in climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts could be a key step. In this context, consider the creation of a national-level movement further promoting and showcasing older people's contribution to climate justice.

12. Research institutions should further **examine population ageing as a process, the significance of intergenerational dialogues and the transmission of knowledge between generations** that includes the shaping of subjective historical knowledge including the impact of environmental changes on individuals and communities.

13. Donors should **support intergenerational programmes** and projects that bring younger women and men together with older people to define a common action agenda for climate change adaptation, mitigation, and nature conservation. This will require long-term and sustainable climate finance.

14. Research institutions should **integrate ageing into future climate studies**, including scientific research on climate change. Data collection should include sex, age and disability disaggregated data and analysis should highlight any existing inequalities across and within different population groups.



Resource Integration Centre

Endnotes

HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.

HelpAge International
PO Box 78840,
London SE1P 6QR, UK
Tel +44 (0)20 7278 7778
info@helpage.org
www.helpage.org

Registered charity no. 288180

Written by Sylvia Szabo (HelpAge International), Siobhan Warrington, Graham Smith (Newcastle University), Afsara Binte Mirza (ICCCAD), Hari Krishna Nibanupudi (HelpAge International) and Tofazzel Hossain Monju (RIC).

Comments and inputs received from Federica Foiadelli, Jessica Petitprez, Tanvi Patel and Luke Tumelty (HelpAge International) are gratefully acknowledged.

UKRI/GCRF survey data from the Living Deltas Hub was analysed and provided by Md Rajibul Islam and Ahmed Ishtiaque Amin Chowdhury.

Edited by Juliet Heller.

Design by Wajee Ruangphornwisut.

Front page photo by Jannatul Mawa/
Resource Integration Centre/1in6by2030.

This document was funded by Newcastle University as part of the Living Deltas Hub (funded by the UK Research and Innovation/Global Challenges Research Fund) and HelpAge International.



Copyright © HelpAge International 2024

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>

Any parts of this publication may be reproduced without permission for non-profit and educational purposes. Please clearly credit HelpAge International and send us a copy or link.

1. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Yearbook Bangladesh 2023, 2024, http://nsds.bbs.gov.bd/storage/files/1/Stat_Yearbook-23.pdf
2. World Bank, Better Primary Health Care for the Older Population in Bangladesh (worldbank.org) and UN Bangladesh, Fulfilling social protection for older persons in Bangladesh, 2023, <https://bangladesh.un.org/en/248154-fulfilling-social-protection-older-persons-bangladesh#:~:text=Bangladesh%20has%20implemented%20a%20wide,Age%20Allowance%2C%20Allowance%20for%20Freedom> (4 October 2023)
3. HelpAge International and Age International, *Income security for all older people in Bangladesh during COVID-19 and beyond*, London, 2020, <https://www.helpage.org/silo/files/income-security-for-all-older-people-in-bangladesh-during-covid19-and-beyond.pdf>
4. Rahman, MA and Islam, KR, 'Social protection for climate resilience in Bangladesh: Gaps and opportunities', *Journal of Social Policy*, 28(4), 567-580, 2019
5. Ahmed, S et al, 'Health risks of older adults in Bangladesh under a changing climate: A public health perspective', *Journal of Environmental Health Research*, 31(2), 45-63, 2021
6. Hossain, MM and Uddin, M 'Climate change adaptation policies and practices in Bangladesh: Focusing on the vulnerable' *Bangladesh Development Studies*, 43(3), 117-138, 2020
7. Germanwatch, 'Global Climate Risk Index 2021' reported in *Climate Change Impacts in Bangladesh*, ICCCAD, 2024
8. IPCC, 'IPCC Summary for Policymakers', in Masson-Delmotte, V et al (eds.) *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2021, pp. 3-32, doi:10.1017/9781009157896.001
9. Down to Earth, Unusual heat scorches Bangladesh, <https://reliefweb.int/disaster/ht-2024-000056-bgd> and <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/climate-change/unusual-heat-scorches-bangladesh-as-april-s-consecutive-heatwave-breaks-76-year-record-96034#:~:text=Bangladesh's%20unprecedented%20heatwave%2C%20which%20scorched,%20consecutive%20days%20of%20scorching%20temperatures>
10. United Nations, Bangladesh: Cyclone Remal 2024 - Situation Report No. 03 (As of 29 May 2024), 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/bangladesh-cyclone-remal-2024-situation-report-no-03-29-may-2024#:~:text=It%20was%20issued%20on%2029,issue%20on%20the%20Cyclone%20Remal.&text=Cyclone%20Remal%20stands%20as%20the,strike%20Bangladesh%20in%20recent%20years>
11. The approach broadly taken by the Oral History Collective is described in the context of Vietnam in Beckwith, L. et al. 'Listening to experiences of environmental change in rural Vietnam: An intergenerational approach', *Progress in Development Studies*, 4 July 2023, 14649934231173849. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14649934231173849> and Warrington, S et al. 'Managing distance when teaching, learning and doing Oral History: A case study from Vietnam' in Nind M (ed) *Handbook of Teaching and Learning Social Research Methods*, 427-42, 2023. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2023. See also: Living Deltas Hub, Voices of the Delta, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800884274.00039>. See also <https://livingdeltas.org/voices-of-the-delta> (19 November 2024)
12. HelpAge International, *Designing adaptive and shock-responsive social protection to guarantee the rights of older people*, HelpAge International, London, 2024 www.helpage.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/ASRSP-report-final.pdf
13. Ahmed, S, et al, Effect of extreme weather events on injury, disability, and death in Bangladesh. *Climate and Development*, 2020, 13(4), 306-317, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2020.1772705>
14. Government of Bangladesh, *National Adaptation Plan of Bangladesh (2023-2050)*, October 2022, https://moef.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/moef.portal.gov.bd/npfblock/903c6d55_3fa3_4d24_a4e1_0611eaa3cb69/National%20Adaptation%20Plan%20of%20Bangladesh%20%282023-2050%29%20%281%29.pdf
15. HelpAge International, *Enhancing decent work among older people engaged in nature-based solutions in Indonesia*, HelpAge International, London, 2024, <https://www.helpage.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Enhancing-Decent-Work-policy-brief-final.pdf>
16. Soanes M, et al, *Principles for locally led adaptation*, IIED issue paper, 2021, <https://pubs.iied.org/10211iied>