

Towards inclusive governance for resilient agri-food systems in Bangladesh

Key messages

- Bangladesh is making strategic policy shifts towards more climate-resilient agri-food systems.
- Policies and interventions related to food, water and environment systems vary considerably in their recognition of socio-ecological interrelations, and in the consideration of representation and participation of marginalized communities.
- Key gaps in effective implementation of policies are the disconnect between local experiences of food insecurity, climate risks and resilience and expert-led innovations; institutional capacity for enabling inclusive governance and appropriate fiscal checks and balances.
- A key recommendation is to improve synergy between relevant agriculture-water-environment and other economic growth sectors, and ensure greater uniformity in the consideration of inclusive governance in policies, interventions and financial plans.

Context

Bangladesh's steady economic growth is increasingly considered to be at risk from climate change impacts on the environment, ecosystem services and agri-food systems (El Bilali et al. 2021). Considered to be the seventh most vulnerable country to both immediate and long-term climate risks (Eckstein et al. 2021), Bangladesh faces considerable challenges that will impact the country's success to date on meeting food production targets, particularly the cultivation of rice, which is the staple food and a key contributor to the national agri-economy.

Agri-food systems are a complex web of various sectors, activities and actors. Making it sustainable necessitates actions on multiple fronts. While the final outcome must be food and nutrition security for all, interventions need to be economically viable, socially beneficial (particularly to marginalized groups including poor women and men), and environmentally neutral or at the very least, combined with actions to reduce and not aggravate adverse socio-environmental impacts.



Irrigation of rice fields with groundwater in a flood-prone village of Sirajganj district, Bangladesh (photo: Haseeb Md. Irfanullah).

To achieve sustainable food and agricultural systems, Bangladesh needs to better explore and address climate constraints, and identify opportunities for marginalized groups, including poor women and ethnic minorities. This also includes taking a deeper look at persisting social exclusions in the governance of and decision-making in agri-food systems. Such an understanding can help identify actionable, inclusive pathways to transform Bangladesh's agri-food systems to mitigate the potential impacts of climate change.

As part of this study, an extensive review was carried out of relevant policies (23) related to agriculture, food systems, climate change, conservation and natural resource management, as well as related innovations and interventions. The analysis highlights the relative inattention to the complexities of interlinked social, economic or political inequalities in most agri-food system policies. The challenge of translating policy to practice is long standing (Dewan et al. 2014).

Achieving resilient food systems requires systems thinking that recognizes the complexity of food systems, the ecosystems that underpin food systems, as well as social and environmental injustices and broader equity concerns in relation to water and food needs (Matthews et al. 2022). Inclusive governance of food systems will require agility among key institutions to respond to increasing uncertainties and complexities. This calls for well-defined responsibilities and good communication that enable a connection across sectors and socio-ecological systems, continual co-learning and feedback mechanisms, and most importantly, the inclusion of women, youth and marginalized people, which is vital to building resilience (Matthews et al. 2022).

Research conducted by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) shows that traditional participatory approaches

through decentralization and community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) have been promoted in Bangladesh since the mid-1980s. These approaches have, however, not promoted inclusive participation. Instead of the stated aims of equitable, efficient and sustainable management of natural resources, these approaches have resulted in the duplication of institutional roles and responsibilities (Dewan et al. 2014). The objective of this study was to analyze key criteria that are fundamental to transforming agri-food systems in Bangladesh towards achieving greater social inclusion and gender equity.

Method

Through a detailed review of literature focused on Bangladesh, including relevant policies and climate interventions and initiatives, an analytical framework that considers seven criteria related to inclusive governance was developed. These seven criteria – representation, participation, capacity and skills, accessibility, financial resources, knowledge systems, and innovation – were identified after analyzing various governance frameworks and approaches, and seem to be the most relevant to local contexts of a challenging ecological environment, a growing economy, persisting patriarchy in society and culture, and a changing policy context. The aim of the analysis was to address the research question: how are gender equality and social inclusion considered in relevant agri-food systems, and climate policies and interventions? From the data analyzed, five key pathways for achieving transformative change towards greater gender equality and social inclusion are discussed.



Bangladeshi farmers at work (photo: Neil Palmer, IWMI).



Bangladeshi woman crossing Tanguar Haor, a freshwater wetland in Sunamganj district, Bangladesh (photo: Haseeb Md. Irfanullah).

1. Intentional and consistent representation and participation of marginalized communities in agri-food system policies

Bangladesh's agriculture-related policies developed over the past 10 years recognizes, to varying extents, the marginality and vulnerability of certain groups of the agrarian community. Approved in October 2022, the *National Adaptation Plan of Bangladesh (2023-2050)* (NAP) (GoB 2022a), which will guide the country's adaptation actions over the next three decades, is the most progressive step towards achieving gender equality and social inclusion. The formulation of this plan involved significant consultations and knowledge co-creation with local communities. In various other agri-food system interventions and initiatives, local communities are also routinely engaged. For example, female landless laborers are increasingly involved in nature-based solutions, such as the production of organic fertilizer, biofertilizer and vermicompost, seed production, and home garden activities (GoB 2022b). However, there is still significant variability in the consideration of gender equality and social inclusion in policies, and in the participation of women and marginalized groups in climate-smart agriculture and technological innovation projects implemented by public agencies (World Bank n.d.), civil society organizations (World Vision Bangladesh – Nobo Jatra 2019) and private actors. Some evidence points to an increased community voice, e.g., citizen action (Long and Panday 2020), in interventions led by civil society organizations. However, as identified from research conducted by IWMI in the past (Dewan et al. 2014), these interventions do not scale up and duplicate institutional roles and responsibilities as there is little cross-learning across different initiatives.

Most policies tend to aggregate women and youth and stereotype the engagement of women in selected activities. In addition, existing legislation does not always support women. Cross-learning between policies, institutions and best practices is limited in agri-food system interventions.

Bangladesh has been a pioneer in promoting micro-financing for marginalized women with limited resources and investment opportunities (e.g., the absence of collateral for obtaining loans), and financial literacy. However, despite policy commitments, efforts to finance gender-specific interventions vary significantly across different ministries. For example, 48.6% of the revenue expenditure of the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) budget for 2021 related to women-centric interventions, compared to only 15.5% for the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock in the same year. The lack of cross-sectoral synergy on gender equality and social inclusion among various fiscal plans is also a key barrier to the design of inclusive financial plans.

2. There is a need for systematic change in institutions to address structural barriers that exclude women and marginalized groups in agri-food systems

Numerous projects led by public agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have trained women in crop production technologies, integrated pest management (IPM), post-harvest techniques, marketing, entrepreneurial literacy and enterprise development, climate-smart agriculture, and as Local Service Providers (LSPs) (GoB 2022b; World Vision Bangladesh - Nobo Jatra 2019). In projects disbursing loans to cultivate high-yielding crop varieties or to develop agribusinesses, there is a large number of women taking loans. Digital services in the agriculture sector are also increasingly designed to reduce gender gaps in accessing financial services, thus contributing to financial inclusion (Aziz and Naima 2021) as well as enabling women access remote services and technical support (Gregg et al. 2019; Khan Tithi et al. 2021). However, baseline research (CNRS Forthcoming) indicates that these interventions are often technocratic and obscure power differences and elite capture, which is prevalent within local communities. Elite grab of public resources, services and finances is common, regardless of policy directions for targeted access for marginalized groups

and ethnic minorities. In highly politicized local contexts, there is a lack of space and scope for women and marginalized groups to raise their voices. The lack of consistent institutional capacity and monitoring processes of participation lower the potential for intentional inclusion of women and marginalized groups in food system planning and decision-making.

In addition to experiencing limited mobility, access to information, training, technical support, agricultural services and equipment, and inequity in wages, women are also impacted by persisting cultural hegemony, social norms, values and practices, and male dominance in decision-making in production, extension services and marketplaces. Similarly, marginalized groups are impacted by social, political and economic inequalities. Unless these structural barriers are addressed, women's inclusion in food systems is limited.



Harvested rice in Habiganj district, Bangladesh (photo: Haseeb Md. Irfanullah).



Raising of rice seedlings in a dried out haor (wetland) during winter, Baniachang, Habiganj district, Bangladesh (photo: Haseeb Md. Irfanullah).

3. Policy interventions require complementary financial plans

Since 2009, the Government of Bangladesh has been tracking budgets of key ministries to assess targeted allocation and spending on issues related to gender. As of 2018, 43 ministries had prepared gender budgets and 29% of the national budget is allocated for gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) (UN Women n.d.). The financial year 2023-2024 saw a significant increase in gender-related budgets of these ministries, which marks the government's commitment to increase gender equity (GoB 2023). However, these commitments often fail to translate into practice, primarily due to the lack of institutional capacity to mainstream gender across ministries, weak legislation, and a lack of fiscal discipline to budget and monitor gender equality-related results (UN Women n.d.). These GRB interventions are also duplicated by numerous multi-year community development projects, which function independently and often through saving schemes by local communities.

The government also maintains a climate budget for 25 relevant ministries and divisions, including MoA, which has received BDT 1.36 billion (approximately USD 12,335,600)¹ from the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF) since 2010

(GoB 2021). However, there has been little effort to connect these and other international climate funds (Irfanullah 2022) and the GRB interventions.

Bangladesh's adoption of GRB is a demonstration of the political will to ensure effective translation of policies on gender inequality into practice. At a fiscal level, there is robust reporting by ministries and divisions on the impacts of the budgetary allocations through various programs and projects. However, several challenges are reported in the implementation and outcome of this good practice. First, a lack of gender-disaggregated data and a specific benchmark of objectives and targets hinder effective monitoring of impacts and outcomes. This signals the need for more robust gender expertise in the Ministry of Finance, tasked with the overall management and review of GRB. Second, operational budgets vary across ministries and projects. Finally, GRB needs to go beyond technical interventions to address deep-rooted inequalities, social norms and practices (Bidisha et al. 2021).

¹ Approximate exchange rate: USD 1 = BDT 110.25 in October 2023.

4. Tackle issues of co-production of knowledge to better understand climate vulnerabilities and resilience

There has been significant attention to and promotion of participatory processes in food and water policies and initiatives in Bangladesh (Dewan et al. 2014; Hocking et al. 1998). However, these processes often tend to be depoliticized, i.e., engagement does not address crucial aspects of governance, such as representation, power hierarchies and accountability (Apgar et al. 2017). This explains why there is relatively little know-how of climate-vulnerable people's knowledge in the design of solutions and interventions (Masud-All-Kamal and Nursey-Bray 2021).

Bangladesh is a key climate hotspot, where unequal gendered roles in agri-food systems and structural inequalities will increasingly constrain women's equal access to resources and services, and agency (Lecoutere et al. 2023). Climate change will potentially pose the highest risks to women in these geographies. In local contexts of highly heterogeneous communities marked by deep inequalities, relative degrees of elite capture are inevitable, especially where elites are often leaders who embody moral and political authority and can effectively communicate with outsiders (Dewan et al. 2014). This is a particular challenge for women and marginalized groups.

The emphasis here is the need for representation (Hayat 2013), as engagement of all citizens regardless of their diversity and

identity in critical processes of political decision-making in ways that allow them to express their needs, dispute the framing of what is said and done on their behalf, and enable them to construct alternative institutions if existing ones do not allow for effective engagement. In other words, representation requires co-producing policy processes and programs which define and address issues of public relevance (Quick and Feldman 2011). Of the 23 policies reviewed, only seven were explicit on the participation of women in plans, programs and projects under such policies. The call for effective (political) representation in processes of policy framing and key decision-making platforms and bodies was, however, less evident (Asaduzzaman et al. 2023; Irfanullah 2023a, 2023b).

Women's contribution to agriculture is still underreported, and the lack of gender-disaggregated data hinders gender-responsive budgeting of water, food and climate action. However, these are only part of the problem. Women are at a particular disadvantage, not only due to their lack of access to resources and services, but also because these inequalities persist through deep-rooted values, beliefs, and structural barriers. These disparities in Bangladesh will impact the co-production of climate resilience knowledge as well as inclusive governance in agri-food systems.



Rice cultivation in a dried out haor (wetland) during winter, Baniachang, Habiganj district, Bangladesh (photo: Haseeb Md. Irfanullah).



Traditional floating agriculture in Nesarabad (formerly Swarupkathi), Pirojpur district, Bangladesh (photo: Haseeb Md. Irfanullah).

5. Make gender equality and social inclusion central in the design of resilient agri-food system innovations

A recent report from CGIAR, a global research partnership for a food-secure future (Mukherji et al. 2023), highlights that the agri-food sector requires transformative breakthroughs to ensure food and nutrition security without depleting natural resources while also making smallholder producers more climate resilient. In Bangladesh, women became primary beneficiaries of floating agricultural technologies promoted by NGOs and the government as an endogenous innovation to adapt to climate change. In the past decade, integrated floating agriculture combining vegetable, fish and poultry farming and non-water hyacinth production have been achieved with the robust participation of women. This is an important lesson on why breakthrough innovations will need to build on the co-production of participatory knowledge (Irfanullah 2023a).

While there is increasing policy intent in Bangladesh to make agri-food systems climate resilient, not all innovation processes address the challenges of unequal gender-power relations, and the top-down, corporate-driven nature of technological innovations (Irfanullah 2023a). In Bangladesh, the private sector has been a powerful entity in building the resilience of smallholder farmers in relation to climate-smart agriculture in environmentally challenging conditions (Abed and

Bathanti 2022). When these innovations do not address power hierarchies, there is varied performance and impact (Brown et al. 2022). In practice, top-down technological innovations tend to further disadvantage smallholders, and disable social movements, such as agroecology, sovereignty of local food systems and the self-determination of participants (Mukherji et al. 2023).

Gender-equitable adoption of innovation suffers from multiple challenges which are both systemic and structural. For example, there is increasing emphasis on digitalization of agri-food systems in Bangladesh. However, there is also evidence that the digital gap is widest in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Extending digital advisory services to women is particularly challenging because of consistent patterns of inequality, which include ownership of data and hardware, digital literacy and problem-solving capacities. Further research is recommended to understand how the local dynamics of gender exclusion and inclusion, social differences, social identity and other socioeconomic characteristics intersect with innovations in agri-food systems.

Opportunities and actions for inclusive governance in agri-food systems

To scale up key initiatives and best practices while overcoming prevailing challenges, it is crucial to capitalize on the current policy opportunities and enable a shift towards more systemic and structural changes. This can be done by promoting and facilitating institutional transformation, developing capacities of marginalized actors, and encouraging partnerships and collaborations across the sectors to ensure knowledge co-creation and inclusive innovation.

We recommend specific, strategic actions that can create tangible impacts in complementary ways:

- 1) Considering agri-food systems as complex, interlinked **socio-ecological systems**, actions should promote co-produced nature-based solutions and interventions which would also consider the food and water needs of marginalized communities, and biodiversity benefits to ecosystems that underpin agri-food systems.

- 2) Bangladesh's NAP is relatively progressive in the consideration of gender, disability, youth, and social inclusion in relation to agri-food systems and offers an umbrella opportunity to work towards a **climate-resilient agri-food system**.
- 3) A robust, gender-focused **fiscal system** is needed to support and sustain interlinked food-climate innovations that are informed by geographical vulnerability, including local experiences of climate-induced economic and non-economic losses and damages.

All the issues discussed in this policy brief align with the eight principles of locally led adaptation which form the basis of the 2030 Strategy for Locally led Action on Poverty, Climate and Nature (LLA Consortium of Partners 2022). Fundamental to these principles is the need for an urgent shift from top-down, expert-led innovations to processes that enable and empower communities to lead sustainable and effective adaptation to climate change at local levels.



Areca palm grove, Teknaf sub-district, Cox's Bazar district, Bangladesh (photo: Haseeb Md. Irfanullah).

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Cultivation of pumpkin on sandbars during winter, Rangpur, Bangladesh (*photo: Haseeb Md. Irfanullah*).

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CGIAR Initiative on Asian Mega-Deltas

The CGIAR Initiative on Asian Mega-Deltas aims to create resilient, inclusive and productive deltas, which maintain socio-ecological integrity, adapt to climatic and other stressors, and support human prosperity and wellbeing, by removing systemic barriers to the scaling of transformative technologies and practices at community, national and regional levels.

<https://www.cgiar.org/initiative/asian-mega-deltas/>

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