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Poor are already paying the cost of adapting to climate shifts - expert

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[Source: Alertnet // Laurie-Goering](#)



Aimon, a survivor of Cyclone Aila, takes part in a demonstration on the first anniversary of the cyclone in Dhaka in May. Hundreds of survivors gathered at the University of Dhaka to demand that the government make their rehabilitation a top priority. REUTERS/Andrew Biraj

CANCUN, Mexico (AlertNet) – Adaptation to the effects of climate change is already well underway around the world, with many of the world's poorest and most vulnerable digging into their own shallow pockets to pay for it, according to a leading Bangladesh development and environmental specialist.

In Bangladesh, for instance, families facing worsening problems with storm surges, intense rainfall and flooding are busy raising the level of their homes, toilets and animal shelters to keep them above water, said Atiq Rahman, executive director of the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies.

That is happening even as climate negotiators at this week's UN talks in Cancun continue struggling towards a deal on how to raise and channel an agreed \$100 billion a year in international climate assistance funding to the world's most vulnerable nations by 2020.

Already, "the poor across the world are paying much more than the money that is being talked about in the corridors," Rahman said, estimating that the price being paid by families today to deal with climate change surpasses \$100 billion if labour costs are included.

"The poor are not waiting for these crazy governments," he said, during a panel discussion on climate adaptation. "In the real world, they are already

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contributing. They are paying with their own lives, their own resources, their own efforts. They cannot wait. It is not a question of choice.”

The difficulty with that surge into adaptation, he said, is that local communities trying to figure out how to cope with worsening climate-related problems often lack key information, or resources to opt for the most effective changes.

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE BECOMING INACCURATE

Traditional knowledge about when to plant and harvest crops, for instance, is quickly becoming inaccurate, but farmers lack access to effective local weather forecasting to help them determine the right planting dates, or to judge whether expected drought or floods mean certain key crops won't grow.

Similarly, many know to plant more tolerant crops in hard years, but lack the drought-tolerant or salt-resistant seeds now needed to deal with worsening conditions.

“The farmers of today across the world, half are non-literate (but) they are very clever. They are very wise, they have knowledge and wisdom they have got from their parents and grandparents over the years,” Rahman said.

“Unfortunately the rate at which climate change is happening is much faster now. What has happened in the future will not be indicated by what has happened in the past. There is a new knowledge challenge,” he said.

Getting people the information they need is a huge challenge, he said. Much adaptation is specific to local contexts and what works in one region may not work in another because of differing geography, soils, water availability, land ownership or traditional rules and beliefs. Baseline information is lacking.

Making sure effective adaptation measures – from insurance to site-specific weather forecasts to modified farm equipment – get into the hands of farmers can be expensive and frustrating, particularly in isolated regions with poor communications and roads.

“We are just scratching the surface of this enormous problem,” Rahman said.

ADAPTATION HAS LIMITS

What is particularly worrying as climate pressures continue to mount on some of the world's poorest is that many people have little margin for failure in experimenting with new ways to do things.

The world's poverty line, judged in calories eaten per day, sits at about 2,200, Rahman said. But already many very poor people in the world are scraping by on about 1,800 calories a day, he said.

Add on the stresses of having to relocate or raise houses, build new dikes and deal with more frequent crop failures, he said, and the risks are obvious.

What is increasingly becoming clear, he said, is that “adaptation is not the solution to the climate problem,” which can be effectively dealt with only by curbing emissions.

“Adaptation has limits,” he said. “What is the limit? When people cannot eke out a living anymore.”

At that point, the only remaining effective means of adaptation is migration, he said – a huge problem in a nation like Bangladesh that is both already densely populated and so low-lying that large parts of the country could be made uninhabitable by the one-metre worldwide sea level rise many scientists believe will happen by the end of the century.

Migration comes with its own issues, he said, and not just those focused on potential conflicts with new neighbours, increased pressure on already strained resources and legal concerns.

Almost everywhere in the world, “people don't want to leave home,” he said. “They have identity around it, a sense of history and belonging.”

Leaders of the Maldives, a cluster of low-lying Indian Ocean islands, are now searching for new land to relocate their entire population – and have the money to buy it, Rahman said.

But, as one official there noted, “My father's grave is in the Maldivian atolls. If I cannot go to the grave of my father, I am half the person I am.”

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A mudslide in a poor region of the Bolivian capital leaves thousands homeless.

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Relocating populations "has serious psychological and anthropological issues built in," Rahman warned.

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