

OCTOBER 2011

## OVERVIEW

### IIED Climate Change Group

**Project name:**

Action Research on Community Adaptation in Bangladesh (ARCAB)

**Project leader:**

Saleemul Huq

**Time frame:**

2010 onwards

**Cost:**

£100,000 for the first year (to develop monitoring, evaluation and baseline design)

**Objective:**

To learn from and support vulnerable communities in Bangladesh adapting to the adverse impacts of human-induced climate change in different ecosystems, and to share this learning with other developing countries.

## PROJECT SUMMARY

Efforts to help the world's poor will face crises in coming decades as climate change radically alters conditions. ARCAB is an action-research programme on responding to climate change impacts through community-based adaptation. Set in Bangladesh at 20 sites that are vulnerable to floods, droughts, cyclones and sea level rise, ARCAB will follow impacts and adaptation as they evolve over half a century or more. National and international 'research partners', collaborating with ten NGO 'action partners' with global reach, seek knowledge and solutions applicable worldwide. After a year setting up ARCAB, we share lessons on the programme's design and move into our first research cycle.

## THEORY OF CHANGE

The adverse impacts of climate change are likely to hit first and hardest among the poorest and most vulnerable communities in the poorest and most vulnerable developing countries. These communities already have difficulty coping with current climate hazards, and these will be compounded by human-induced climate

# Adaptation laboratory

## A global consortium converges on Bangladesh to learn about confronting long-term climate change.

Millions of people live on unstable, low-lying islands in Bangladesh's Brahmaputra river, where floods often destroy crops and homes. A government programme has helped these very poor communities raise their houses above flood levels and provided livestock that can escape when fields are inundated. But as climate change intensifies, will these solutions still work? Officials recently commissioned the first projection of climate impacts on the river, which found that within decades, rising waters will obliterate the islands. Now the programme is educating local kids in preparation for jobs on the mainland.

Despite the successes of many community-based development and disaster risk reduction initiatives, climate change often demands very different thinking. The new approach is known as community-based adaptation, and its practitioners are frustrated by a lack of good examples and evidence as threats gather rapidly.

These needs, affecting people worldwide by the next decade and probably into the next century, are too broad for any one NGO to fill. So IIED has organised Action Research for Community Adaptation in Bangladesh, or ARCAB — an ambitious global consortium to tackle action-research on community-based adaptation over several decades.

### Cutting edge of adaptation

Our laboratory is Bangladesh, known as both a poster child for climate change impacts and a world leader in addressing them. Home to high concentrations of

some of the planet's poorest people, Bangladesh will suffer a variety of worsening problems: floods in some areas and droughts in others, cyclones and sea level rise. And the country has already invested more than US\$100 million of its own money, along with foreign aid, in a national climate change plan, while local work on community-based adaptation has been disseminating lessons for years. As the world climbs the learning curve for confronting climate impacts on communities, Bangladesh will be a step ahead.

To take advantage of this, ARCAB's 'action partners' are top international NGOs — ActionAid, CARE, Caritas, ChristianAid, Concern, Islamic Relief, OXFAM, Plan International, Practical Action and WaterAid — working with local organisations and communities at 20 vulnerable sites around the country. The list of 'research partners' starts at the regional level with Bangladeshi universities attached to each field site; moves through nine national institutions that lead thinking on specific areas such as agriculture or hydrology; and is capped by ten international institutions, including IIED, Imperial College London and Columbia University. These international partners will help design studies to the highest standards and will funnel in graduate students to form the front-line research corps.

Collectively, the ten action partners operate in more than 100 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, so they can spread results across continents. And

change. ARCAB aims to find the communities at risk — starting in Bangladesh — and help build their adaptive capacity. We focus on Bangladesh both because its large poor population faces multiple dangers, and because it has led the world in addressing climate change through community-based adaptation; Bangladesh can teach other developing nations the next steps. To tackle a global crisis, ARCAB combines the expertise, resources and reach of 20 world-leading institutions. Our programme of iterative action-research — learning, applying the lessons, and learning more — is designed to continue over several decades or more, tracking the long and uncertain course of climate change.

## KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

- The ordinary one- to five-year funding cycle doesn't allow an effective response to climate change impacts, which unfold unpredictably over 50 or 100 years. This programme takes the long view, planning activities that set the stage for decades of work.
- Adapting to climate change requires learning by doing — producing both concrete impacts and definitive knowledge. We've gathered an action-research consortium that partners top practitioners such as Oxfam and CARE with world-class researchers as well as local leadership in Bangladesh.
- Reaching the poorest and most vulnerable communities requires strong, trusting relationships that must grow over time. The only shortcut is to work through intermediaries like NGOs who have already built these relationships.

## PARTNERS' VIEW

*We look forward to joining hands with ARCAB as a platform to learn from each other and institute the body of knowledge generated through this collective partnership to critically engage in the community-based adaptation initiatives at both local and global levels.*

A.K.M. Musha  
Country Director, Concern Worldwide

## IIED CLIMATE CHANGE GROUP

Working in collaboration with partner organisations and individuals in developing countries, the Climate Change Group has been leading the field on adaptation to climate change issues.



Photo: Nazmul Huq Russell

ARCAB brings together research and action partners to tackle community-based adaptation challenges and find solutions that can be applied worldwide.

having spent years or decades in Bangladesh, the action partners bring a depth of knowledge that short-term research efforts can't match. They also have strong relationships with poor and vulnerable communities; without these intermediaries, ARCAB would have to spend years building trust from scratch. Thus, a key decision was that ARCAB would spend its first year simply studying what these practitioners already do — learning from their rich experience before embarking on new work.

The complementary strengths of the research partners will come to bear in the second and third years, when ARCAB begins designing new projects to yield high-quality data, communicating results to the research community, and working towards publications in leading science journals.

This three-year plan comprises ARCAB's first funding cycle, but the programme is organised to run much longer — at least 50 years. Climate change impacts will unfold unpredictably over many decades, and just as Bangladesh's strategy for the Brahmaputra needed radical rethinking, what we learn in coming years could later be replaced by a new paradigm. ARCAB's approach will be iterative, applying lessons learnt to new projects, which generate more knowledge, and so on. And we're starting immediately on long-term goals, such as educating a cohort of schoolchildren who we'll then follow throughout their lives.

## Early surprises

IIED has carefully constructed ARCAB's institutional framework over the past year, fine-tuning plans and gathering

input from all partners. It's remarkable for so many top research institutions to team up across disciplines — and likewise huge NGOs, who usually compete for donations rather than cooperate. But the volume of enthusiasm for the programme took organisers by surprise. We're now considering how to engage with the many more groups who want to be involved, while still keeping the core consortium agile and effective.

Another challenge is meeting a high demand for immediate, raw data. Originally we envisioned a traditional research timeline, offering conclusive results after years of painstaking study. But action partners emphasised they badly need the latest findings, even if they are still messy. Other users have distinct needs, so ARCAB should communicate results on different timescales, in different formats, to different audiences. We have, for example, engaged a folk theatre group to present stories of adaptation to climate change for mass audiences around the country. In October 2011 we ran our first 'training of trainers' to help spread adaptation expertise throughout Bangladesh. And with ARCAB's powerful yet flexible design, we are poised to meet further changing needs of researchers, practitioners and vulnerable communities for decades to come.

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