

Food security and flooding in Bangladesh

Participants at the Second European Conference on the Bangladesh Flood Action Plan (FAP), held in the European Parliament in December 1996 on the topic of "Food Security, FAP and Bangladesh", re-endorsed a demand for a moratorium on all construction activities scheduled under the embankment scheme until they are endorsed by the people affected.

One of the major objectives of the scheme is to raise agricultural productivity through a combination of flood control measures and further application of Green Revolution technologies. Yet the World Bank's representative at the Conference admitted that the Plan cannot lead to food security for the undernourished people of Bangladesh.

The construction of massive embankments at a cost of \$10 billion was first proposed after the particularly devastating floods of 1987 and 1988. The Flood Action Plan, initiated by the World Bank and other international donors in 1989, scaled down these proposals to 26 components, including studies and pilot projects, at a cost of \$150 million for FAP's first phase.

After much controversy and strong opposition to the Plan from landless peasant women and men, grassroots organizations, political organizations and others, the United Nations Development Programme sent an independent mission to review the FAP in 1995. The mission was highly critical of the Plan and called for broad public debate, including wide dissemination of the information already gathered through FAP projects and studies.

The FAP and its components have since been reformatted and renamed the "Flood and Water Management Strategy" with the objective of formulating a National Water Management Plan (NWMP) for the twenty-first century. A second five-year phase (1995-2000) of the Plan is now underway to complete old, new and "second generation" FAP projects.

As a result of the UNDP review, *inter alia*, the need for people's participation and environmental impact assessments has been recognized as crucial and integral for project planning and implementation. To date, however, efforts have been limited to consultations rather than

ensuring that those affected by the scheme have any real power or say in the decision-making processes.

The most controversial of the pilot projects is the Compartmentalization Pilot Project (FAP 20) funded by The Netherlands and Germany. The project aims to increase grain production (mainly rice) during the monsoon season by expanding irrigation and using agrochemical inputs.

Another set of FAP components are "priority" constructions, the most critical of which is the Jamalpur Priority Project (FAP 3.1), funded by the European Union and France. These embankments would cause higher levels of flooding and threaten people living on adjacent *char* areas.

The FAP threatens food security in Bangladesh in several ways. Natural wetlands — rivers, *khals*, *beels*, lakes and, most importantly, the floodplain — which are important sources of plant and animal foods will become less accessible to poor women and men.

The building of embankments and other water control structures will hamper the free migration, feeding and breeding of numerous fish and other aquatic species which require access to the floodplain ecosystem to thrive. Floodplain fish provide vital nutrients (calcium, iron, zinc, vitamin A and protein), particularly for poor women and children.

Green Revolution agriculture in Bangladesh has focused until now primarily on extracting groundwater for irrigation during the dry winter season. The expansion of agriculture under the FAP is aimed at growing high-yielding varieties during the monsoon season; such crops would rely primarily on surface water irrigation derived from FAP's various flood and water control structures.

If such agriculture goes ahead, traditional seeds specifically developed by local peasants for the monsoon season — for instance, varieties which are resistant to flooding and grow quickly under rising flood waters — are likely to be replaced by hybrid varieties which require strict regulation of water levels, leading to a potential loss of biodiversity.

The Green Revolution agriculture promoted in Bangladesh so far has caused

the familiar problems of soil degradation, water pollution and health problems such as skin diseases. It has also exacerbated inequalities of income and accelerated the processes of landlessness.

The Conference at the European Parliament issued a declaration containing seven recommendations:

- All agencies and organizations concerned with implementing FAP and its successor projects and plans (eg. NWMP) must put foremost the interests of the people of Bangladesh, especially poor women, men and children.
- Genuine public debate to assess people's wishes regarding water management in relation to their priorities must take place.
- A moratorium must be imposed on all construction activities under the FAP, including FAP 20 and FAP 3.1, and its successor projects and plans until and unless they have been endorsed through the process of genuine people's participation (except for those projects which are clearly non-structural and non-controversial).
- Comprehensive environmental and social analyses must precede project planning and design.
- The potential of the wetland resources must be utilized to improve the livelihoods of the people of Bangladesh.
- Further expansion of Green Revolution technologies under the FAP must be reconsidered and replaced with more appropriate and equitable technologies based on local knowledge and conservation of biodiversity.
- Food security must be ensured for Bangladesh's entire population, including for those producing the country's agricultural wealth.

The declaration concluded that "in the final analysis, the critical issues related to food security, the 'Green Revolution' and the Flood Action Plan raise essentially political questions which need to be resolved through a genuinely democratic and participatory process".

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