

CENTRE FOR SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT

MAIN OFFICE: 41, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi-110 062 INDIA
Tel: 2995 5124, 2995 6110, 2995 6394, 2995 6399 **Fax:** 91-11-2995 5879 **Email:** cse@cseindia.org **Website:** www.cseindia.org
BRANCH OFFICE: Core 6A, Fourth Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110 003
Tel: 2464 5334, 2464 5335



LEAVES
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PRESS RELEASE

Climate impacts in Indian Sundarbans more severe because of the region's development deficit, says new study by Indian NGO

Is Bangladesh facing the same problem? Experts and panelists from the two countries try to find out in a workshop

Dhaka, December 28, 2011: It is well known that Sundarbans, one of the most biodiversity-rich habitats in the world, is getting severely pummeled by changing climate. What is now becoming apparent – at least in the Indian part of Sundarbans – is that the impacts of climate change have all the more worsened because of official apathy and complete lack of development planning in this region.

This conclusion has come from a new study and a report thereon, done in Indian Sundarbans, by the New Delhi-based research and advocacy organisation Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). CSE released the study titled '*Living with changing climate: Impact, vulnerability and adaptation challenges in Indian Sunderbans*', here today in a function organised in partnership with the Bangladesh-based Coastal Development Partnership (CDP).

The release of the study report was followed by presentations and a panel discussion involving some key Bangladeshi experts and commentators on the Sundarbans. The aim behind these sessions was to collate experiences and viewpoints from both sides of the border and arrive at a common understanding of how to shape action to confront a climate vulnerable future.

Climate impacts and the development deficit: what the report finds

Climate change is affecting Indian Sundarbans in a major way. The statistics are revealing:

- Sea surface temperature (SST) in the Sundarbans is increasing at the rate of 0.5°C per decade; globally, the rate is 0.06°C per decade. Higher SST is leading to sea level rise and adverse impact on the fish stocks.
- Sea level is rising in this region at a rate higher than the global average. In the past 25 years, sea level has risen at a rate of 8 mm/year – more than double the global average. This is leading to land loss as well as increasing soil salinity. The Indian part of

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Sundarbans has been losing land at 5.5 sq km/year over the past 10 years.

- The frequency of severe cyclone in the region has increased by 26 per cent over the past century.

These natural calamities and changes are playing havoc with the people's lives, but what is worsening the situation is the 'development deficit' in the region. Sundarbans has remained largely neglected and isolated over the years, and 'development' has passed it by – finds the report.

"Socio-economic pressures are changing the environment in the Sundarbans. This has resulted in multiplied impact on lives and livelihood of people and other biological phenomenon," says Mojaffar Ahmed, president, Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (BAPA).

On one hand, the region is experiencing rapid increases in population, while on the other it is witnessing extreme mismanagement of its fragile and limited land resources, leading to lower agricultural productivity and growing disenchantment of the rural poor. A rising sea level has been eroding and eating away the land, while sea water ingress has been leading to high salinity, laying waste vast tracts of land.

Says Chandra Bhushan, CSE's deputy director general and the head of its climate change programme: "Development planning in Indian Sundarbans has never included climate change or its impacts within its purview of things – and this is quite evident in the way everything from electrification to land management is being done here. In the case of electrification, despite the vulnerability (due to the fragile topography and frequency of extreme weather events) and skewed cost of the grid, a decentralised distribution network for renewable energy has not been promoted."

Development planning must cover climate impacts

The report and the meeting that followed called for a new plan for the Sundarbans, in which development policy would include climate change and its impacts. Says Aditya Ghosh, lead researcher of the report: "What Sundarbans needs is a development plan that will not only bridge the development deficit of the region but will tackle the impacts of the changing climate. In this context, a new land and embankment policy is must."

According to CSE researchers, what would be critical in all this planning is to decide who will bear the cost of this development. Says Bhushan: "There is an incremental cost of development. Climate change has, in fact, increased the cost of development, and this cost has to be paid for by an international mechanism like the Green Climate Fund. However, we must remember that it does not absolve the governments of India and Bangladesh of their roles and responsibilities in Sundarbans."

The meeting called for a close collaboration between the research institutions and NGOs of both countries to undertake joint research on impacts of climate change and adaptation strategy. Speaking on the occasion, S Jahangir Hasan Masum, executive director, CDP said: "Climate

change does not respect political boundaries. So, regional eco-solidarity should be the utmost priority for Sundarbans.”

In this context, the recent Memorandum of Understanding signed between the governments of India and Bangladesh on conservation of the Sunderbans was found to be highly inadequate in advancing joint action by various actors of both countries.

For more on this, please contact either of the following:

- **Jyotirmoy Chaudhuri**, CSE, jyotirmoy.chaudhuri@gmail.com , +91 99100 93243 (India number), 880 1960 683842 (Bangla number)
- **M M Mahbub Hasan**, CDP, cdpmahbub@yahoo.com, +880-2-8181391, +880-1716-569212