

Smaller projects are not being completed properly

Hasan Himalay, Samakal, 12 November 2022

Kalabagi is the southernmost village in the country. The village belongs to Dacope Upazila of Khulna. The reckless river Shivsa passes through the village like a slithering serpent. There are only dancing waves on the river, as far as the eyes can see. I met Rezaul Gazi at the last border of the coast adjacent to the embankment. His house was next to the dam. He said that it used to take a 20 to 25-minute' walk from his house to the dam. Several houses and arable land were all there. None of that exists now in the midst of cyclones and floods. Shivsa devoured all.

After crossing the Botbunia Kheyaghat in Dacope, there was a new dam. Walking for a short while we found Mahananda Bain. Has passed 60 years of life. He lived with his family in a hut under the dam. He said once he had everything. Cyclone Aila and repeated river erosion had taken all from him. When asked, where was his house, as if the joy in Mahananda's heart was erased once again! He showed us a boat in the middle of the Dhaki River. It was also about 500 meters away from the river bank.

Mahananda Bain told us that there was a small village of Jaliakhali with 80-90 families. On May 25, 2009, Aila hit that village. It broke 30 to 40 feet of the embankment and the Dhaki River and the canal of the village merged into one. After that, the erosion increased with time. Every time the dam was repaired; it broke. At one point in time, the whole village was lost in the riverbed.

Mahananda Bain or Rezaul Gazi are not the only examples; Cyclones, tidal waves and river erosion have taken away the livelihoods and shelters of thousands of people living along the coast. No government office has a rough estimate of how many people have been displaced by natural disasters. Natural disasters are increasing due to climate change. Cyclones and tidal waves initially hit the coastal towns. Kalabagi and Jaliakhali villages in Dacope are examples of townships bearing the scars of climate change disasters.

The Climate Change Trust Fund (CCTF) was established on October 13, 2010, to build the capacity of local people to deal with the risks of climate change, develop climate-resilient technologies, and help affected people. However, many of the directly affected people do not have happy memories regarding this fund.

According to CCTF documents, since its inception till June 30 last year, 840 projects were under work across the country in the 12 years. The budget allocated for these projects was Tk 35.86 billion. Out of this budget, 16 projects in disaster-prone Khulna were allocated only Tk 710 million. However, the Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change Md. Shahab Uddin disagreed. He claimed that Khulna was allocated the most as a disaster-affected area.

Out of 840 projects, 452 have been completed so far. The expenditure was Tk 26.10 billion. Seven projects were completed in disaster-prone Khulna. Allocation for those seven projects was only Tk 340 million. At present, nine trust projects worth Tk 260

million are going on. However, questions remain about the extent to which the projects undertaken in constructing parks, solar lights, and roads are related to climate change.

Four government agencies implemented various projects in Khulna with money from CCTF. These were Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), Khulna Zilla Parishad, Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) and Forest Department. Samakal tried to investigate the status of the projects for the last three months.

After investigating we found out that there were a lot of irregularities in the work that has been done in the coastal township in the past 12 years. There were also many complaints of embezzling money without work. Even though the climate-tolerant homes were built with the money of the trust, they were grabbed by the local government representatives. The concerned departments spent money from the climate fund on general projects after failing to receive money allocated from their own funds. In the adoption and implementation of the seven projects in the first phase, the focus was more on getting money quickly than on tackling the effects of climate change.

Less allocation in disaster-prone areas: In the last 15 years, eight cyclones have hit the coast, including the catastrophic Aila and Sidr. Last year on the night of October 24, Cyclone Sitrang destroyed 1,600 homes in Khulna and numerous trees were uprooted. Sidr claimed 953 lives in three districts in Khulna Division. 76 people died in Aila. All six of the seven unions of Koira were submerged under water when the dam broke. Almost all unions in Dacope were submerged for two years. The CCTF was formed the year after Cyclone Aila. Surprisingly, only 16 projects were allocated to Khulna in 12 years.

Brittle dams, funds embezzled: BWDB implemented four of the seven projects in Khulna in the first phase. Among them, the biggest project was in Dighlia. Tk 128.1 million was spent on the ‘Embankment repair and river bank conservation project of Barakpur-Dighlia of Khulna district’. Under the project, BWDB worked to prevent river erosion at three places in the upazila. The issue of irregularities in the tender process of this project came up in a research report by TIB.

We visited those three areas on September 3. We saw 410 meters of dam construction and slope protection work has been done on the side of the Atai River in Mominpur of the upazila. In some places, the dam has been broken. Kabir Hossain, a resident, said that six-seven years ago, the block work was done on the dam. The quality of work was not good. As a result, blocks have collapsed in some areas.

‘Project to protect Rupsa market and other important structures from the erosion of the Rupsa river due to climate change’ started in the fiscal year of 2013-14. The project was completed on June 30, 2019. Tk 15 million has been spent on the project. After visiting the project area, we saw that only 80 meters of the riverbank have been protected near Bir Shreshtha Ruhul Amin’s tomb on the east side of the Rupsa Ferry Ghat. Only the section from the ghat to the tomb has been blocked. The work that was done was of poor quality and done hastily.

As a result, many riverside blocks have been sunk. Abdul Wahab, the caretaker of the tomb, said that a few years ago, people from BWDB came and threw some blocks. Nothing

more was done. Locals said that since no organization allocated money, the work of preserving the tomb has been done with the allocation from Climate Trust.

Traders of Rupsa Bazar complained that before the blocks were given, in 2013, KCC constructed a protective wall next to the tomb to prevent erosion. Later, with the money of CCTF, BWDB put a block there. Residents complained of embezzlement of money as there was nominal work in the name of guarding the tomb.

The director of the project was Piyush Krishna Kundu, the then-executive engineer of BWDB Khulna-II. He is now the Superintending Engineer of Jessore Circle. He said that the project was undertaken due to demands from various quarters to save the tomb.

BWDB started a project worth Tk 30 million titled 'Infrastructure Rehabilitation of Polder No. 31 of Khulna Dacope Upazila'. Work started in July 2013 and was completed on December 30, 2016. 690 meters of embankment slope protection and 800 meters of alternate embankment were constructed out of project funds.

Pankhali Kheyaghat of Dacope and a few places in Chalan Municipality lost much of the protection as they were nominally done. After visiting the alternative dam sites of Khana and Aadhaar Manik of the upazila we found no evidence of protection work. Residents alleged that a large part of the project money has been embezzled. Local Sirajul Alam said, a long time ago, BWDB worked on this. After a while, they disappeared into the river.

The director of the project was Bajlur Rashid, the then Superintending Engineer of BWDB of Khulna Region. He retired four years ago. He said, 'I do not remember any project with this name.'

In the 2012-13 fiscal year, the 'Dam Reconstruction and River Bank Conservation Project in the Ramnagar-Rahimnagar area of Rupsa Upazila' project was undertaken. Under the project, 1 km of the river bank was preserved with Tk 122.2 million. There was a lot of criticism about the quality of work from the beginning. After visiting, we saw blocks moved from many places of the dam.

Bajlur Rashid was also the director of this project. He said, 'It was completed properly. CCTF officials expressed satisfaction with the quality of work.'

Houses built for the homeless were allocated to government representatives:

Khulna Zilla Parishad was responsible for the construction of homes under the 'House Construction as a Shelter for the Rehabilitation of the Homeless affected by natural disasters due to climate change in the coastal region' project. In the fiscal year 2013-14, 55 homes were constructed in Dacope and 70 in Koira at a cost of Tk 30 million. The construction cost of each of the homes was Tk 330,000.

Local Awami League leaders and government representatives were allocated houses built for the homeless. UP members and chairmen are voters of Zilla Parishad. The houses were allotted before the Zila Parishad elections in 2016. That was why in most places UP members got them.

Jayanthi Rani Sardar, a former member of Zila Parishad, was allotted a house in Dacope. She is the vice president of the Upazila Awami League. After visiting her home in Kaminibasaria in Tildanga Union, we did not see any such house. She said, during the construction of the house, river erosion occurred. Then Zila Parishad spoke to the chairman and added some money to the allocated money and built a house in her widowed sister's home.

Golam Mawla, a small-time trader from Jayanagar village of Kamarkhola union, got a house. After visiting his allocated house, we found that it was abandoned. There were big cracks all over the house.

UP member of Nalian village of Sutarkhali Union Khadija Akhtar was also allotted a house. She was the incumbent Vice Chairman of Dacope Upazila and the President of the Women's Awami League. After visiting her house, we saw that the design of her house does not match the design of other areas. Khadija Akhtar said that with the fund of the Zila Parishad, they built a bigger house by adding more money. Most of the house visits showed the same picture.

Hafizul Islam was the assistant engineer of the district council during the implementation of the project. Currently, he is currently working in the Paikgacha Upazila Office of the Local Government Engineering Department. He said, 'The project was completed a long time back. Nothing can be said without checking the documents. I am in another office now, can't even check the documents right now.'

The work of LGED does not even exist: In the 2013-14 fiscal year, dam renovation was completed at a cost of Tk 8.9 million under the initiative of LGED. The name of the project was 'Construction of Climate Change Resilient Rural Communication Infrastructure-cum-Dam in Dacope upazila of Khulna District'. Under the project, a total of 2.284 km of soil was dumped from Khona R&H to Botbunia Bazar, Chalan Gachtala to Lakshmikhola and Mozamnagar areas. Work started on May 2, 2017, and was completed on October 30, 2018.

After visiting the area, we saw, LGED was working on carpeting the road from Botbunia Bazar to Tetultala Bazar. There was no way to determine whether the soil has been dumped at that place. After that, the road from Mozamnagar Bazar to Jhalbunia has been repaired several times. The road from Nishankhali Sluitgate to Tetultala Bazar was destroyed due to erosion.

Locals said that some soil was dumped on the road five-six years ago. There was some work a few times after that. No one knew what work was going on under what project.

At that time, Masud Azizur Rahman was the upazila engineer of LGED. He is currently the Assistant Engineer of Khulna Zila Parishad. He said it 'It was completed properly. People from the Ministry of Environment expressed their satisfaction. But later some parts broke.'

Also, in April 2017, 'Smart Patrolling in Sundarbans Reserved Forest' was initiated. The project was completed in March 2019. The total cost of the project was Tk 20.9 million. Under the project, money was spent on the formation of smart patrol teams, the purchase of their watercraft and equipment, training and ancillary works to fight crime. Smart team activities have reduced forest-based crime to a certain extent. However, environmental

activists raised objections about irregularities in the purchase of machinery and climate-related issues at that time.

The discontent of environmentalists: The non-governmental development organization Coastal Livelihood and Environmental Action Network (CLEAN) has been working on the effects of climate change in the region for a long time. CLEAN's chief executive Hasan Mehedi said that this fund could not play a significant role in the construction of climate-resistant infrastructure in the Khulna region. The fund had no oversight in project selection, approval and implementation. Many locals do not know that there is any work going on.

He said, 'If the trust is to be implemented, project approval should be done through transparent scrutiny. There are various sectors of government including ADP to implement regular projects. Regular development projects cannot be allocated from this fund. Money from here only should be allocated to a particular project, research or specific sectors.'

What the authority said: Iqbal Abdullah Haroon, Additional Secretary of the Ministry of Forests and Environment, is currently the Managing Director (MD) of the Climate Change Trust Fund. He joined the post last week. He told Samakal, 'I am not yet aware of the project of the trust. I can find out the details and talk to you about this later.'

Before him, the additional secretary of the same ministry, Mizanul Haque Chowdhury, was MD. Samakal tried for a month to talk to him about the issues. The CCTF and concerned Ministries were contacted separately for the timing of his meeting. However, he did not agree to talk to

CCTF Secretary Nasir-Ud-Daulla was also contacted several times. We asked permission to meet or talk to him on the phone referring to the matter. On October 16, through the information officer, he said that if the report prepared to be published is sent to him, he will read and comment.

Environment, Forest and Climate Change Minister Md. Shahab Uddin told Samakal that Climate Trust is playing an important role in disaster mitigation. Disaster-prone Khulna has been allocated the most.

When asked about previous projects, he said, 'I will not comment on what happened before.'