

Elite Capture and Unequal Climate Resilience in Coastal Bangladesh

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Abstract

Bangladesh is widely recognised for its achievements in climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction, particularly in areas such as cyclone preparedness, community-based adaptation and coastal planning for resilience. However, resilience benefits are unevenly distributed across coastal Bangladesh. This article analyses how elite capture in local climate governance affects access to adaptation resources, resulting in differentiated resilience outcomes. Drawing on resilience research, climate governance, political ecology, and climate justice scholarship, this paper conceptualises resilience as a political distributional outcome, rather than a neutral community attribute. Using a qualitative comparative case-study analysis of data from climate-vulnerable districts in coastal Bangladesh, this research examines how patronage networks, beneficiary selection, participatory procedures, information asymmetry, administrative gatekeeping, and infrastructure management influence access to relief, housing support, livelihood assistance, safe water facilities, and embankment protection. The findings reveal that although adaptation programmes can boost aggregate resilience, they can also create local inequalities in the absence of effective accountability mechanisms. The study concludes that transparent and accountable governance, meaningful participation, and stronger safeguards against elite capture in the local governance system are essential for achieving equitable climate adaptation.

Keywords: Climate governance; Elite capture; Climate adaptation; Resilience; Coastal Bangladesh; Political ecology

I. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is at the centre of debates on climate vulnerability, adaptation governance, and disaster resilience in recent times. Coastal areas are increasingly vulnerable to cyclones, storm surges, tidal inundation, salinity intrusion, embankment failure, riverbank erosion, inadequate access to drinking water, and livelihood opportunities due to climate change. However, these risks do not only result from climatic hazards. Instead, they are all the result of environmental exposures, social vulnerabilities, institutional capacity, and unequal access to resources. Climate risk is often defined as the interaction among hazards, exposure, vulnerability, and adaptive capacity, thereby making Bangladesh one of the most important countries to explore how climate change is mediated by political and social systems (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023). Likewise, the World Bank (2021) has identified Bangladesh as one of the most climate-vulnerable countries and highlighted adaptation and resilience building as the main development priorities. Bangladesh is also considered a successful case of adaptation. In recent decades, investments in cyclone shelters, early-warning systems, local disaster preparedness, volunteer mobilisation and community-based adaptation have decreased cyclone-driven mortality and improved emergency response capacity (Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, 2019; Kelman, 2015). National policy documents, such as the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 and the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, institutionalised long-term adaptation planning at various levels of state (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 2018; Ministry of Environment and Forests, 2009). Bangladesh is increasingly showcased as a model of climate adaptation innovation and locally led resilience-building by international development agencies (United Nations Development Programme, 2025; World Bank, 2022). Yet, progress in adaptation and continued vulnerability suggest a more fundamental political question: resilience gains are not shared equally among people in coastal areas.

Findings from coastal Bangladesh indicate that families exposed to similar environments often have contrasting experiences in adaptation. Some households are offered opportunities for repeated access to relief, housing systems, livelihood grants, embankment protection, safe water, adaptation training, and NGO project benefits. Meanwhile, others are not included on beneficiary lists, inadequately represented in local institutions, poorly informed about available programmes, or are often left vulnerable even within the same climate-affected areas. Climatic exposure is insufficient to account for these differences. Rather, they point to the role of governance, social hierarchy, and institutional mediation in determining adaptation outcomes. Therefore, climate resilience emerges both as a technical or environmental condition and as a political and distributive outcome. The article examines how access to climate adaptation resources is affected by the elite capture of local climate governance, shaping resilience outcomes in coastal Bangladesh. The article suggests that adaptation resources are channeled through patron-client dynamics, committee power, political brokering, institutional gatekeeping, and unequal institutional recognition within the local context. Such adaptation interventions can consequently improve aggregate resilience. However, simultaneously, they can also increase inequality at the local level in the absence of robust accountability institutions. Elite capture is seen in this context as the capacity of social, economic, and political elites to shape decision-making, to select recipients, to disseminate information, influence committee processes, and to determine resource allocation in their favour and to serve their networks better (Bardhan, 2002; Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Platteau, 2004). These actors in coastal Bangladesh include elected Union Parishad representatives, local party brokers, landowners, contractors, shrimp-farming interests, NGO intermediaries, and socially influential community leaders.

The article engages in a multi-perspective discussion of resilience and climate-governance scholarship. First, resilience scholarship tends to focus on the collective capacity to recover from shocks and adjust to environmental change (Adger, 2000; Folke, 2006). This literature is

significant for conceptualising adaptation capacity, and critical scholars address resilience discourses as depoliticised, envisioning communities as internally resilient at the expense of class, gender, land ownership, political affiliation, and institutional access (Cote & Nightingale, 2012; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013). This article builds on that criticism, claiming that community resilience is not a singular property but is unevenly distributed within the community. Second, climate-governance scholarship highlights multi-level, polycentric, and participatory governance as a means of addressing climate risks (Bulkeley & Newell, 2010; Jordan et al., 2018; Ostrom, 2010). This institutional diversity in Bangladesh's adaptation landscape is reflected in external institutions such as ministries, district administration, Union Parishad, NGOs, donor agencies, disaster-management committees, and community organisations. However, institutional density cannot necessarily ensure and generate equitable outcomes. Inequality can be reproduced when participation and decentralisation processes lack accountability and local power structures are prevalent in decision-making (Eriksen et al., 2015; Nightingale, 2017). Consequently, the article focuses on reorienting the discourse from the presence of adaptation institutions to the politics of access within adaptation institutions.

Third, the article makes a valuable contribution to the field of political ecology and climate-justice scholarship by examining adaptation through the lenses of power, recognition, and distribution. Political ecology scholars argue that environmental vulnerability is the aggregate result of both ecological exposures and unequal social relations, institutional arrangements, and political-economic structures (Blaikie et al., 1994; Ribot, 2014; Robbins, 2012). Climate-justice scholarship also highlights the need to consider adaptation in relation to distributive justice, procedural participation, and a consideration of disadvantaged groups (Fraser, 2009; Schlosberg, 2007). Coastal Bangladesh experiences adaptation resources within socially unequal environments, determined by patron-client relationships, landholding structures, political brokerage, and institutional visibility. However, such adaptation interventions can both reduce aggregate risk and simultaneously generate socially differential resilience outcomes.

While this article portrays Bangladesh as a successful case in adaptation, it also emphasises the distributive inequality in the climate adaptation process. Such a paradoxical reality is particularly relevant as Bangladesh leads in the global climate resilience arena. However, recent climate change effects have elevated vulnerabilities. In 2024, Cyclone Remal damaged 173,000 homes, destroyed water facilities, severely affected livelihoods, and overall impacted 4.6 million people across 19 districts in coastal Bangladesh (United Nations Bangladesh, 2024). Moreover, this event also demonstrates the gender disparities in climate vulnerability, as over half of those affected were women (United Nations Bangladesh, 2024). Such evidence highlights that adaptation mechanisms alone are insufficient to eliminate vulnerability and underscores the significance of governance mechanisms for achieving equitable distribution of adaptation resources. This paper comprises five sections. The introduction is followed by a methodology section that presents the qualitative case study design, the fieldwork process, the analytical approach, and ethical considerations. The theoretical framework combines studies on resilience, climate governance, climate justice, political ecology, and elite capture to construct a relational analytical framework. The results and discussion section elaborates on how factors such as beneficiary selection, patronage, procedural participation, information asymmetry, administrative gatekeeping, embankment governance, livelihood adaptation, and climate finance distribution impact differentiated levels of resilience across coastal areas in Bangladesh. The concluding sections synthesise the findings and highlight the implications for climate governance, adaptation policy, and resilience planning grounded in the climate justice agenda.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article provides an understanding of climate resilience as a politically produced and unevenly distributed result. Resilience generally refers to the ability of a social or ecological

system to withstand shock, rebound from disturbances, and adapt to change (Adger, 2000; Folke, 2006; Berkes & Ross, 2013). In climate adaptation studies, resilience is also linked to the reduction of vulnerability (Adger, 2006; Cutter et al., 2008), adaptive capacity, livelihood security, and disaster recovery. This literature is relevant as it outlines the institutional and social competencies needed to address environmental shocks. Yet resilience discourse can be depoliticised by discussing community as the coherent unit, rather than recognising inequalities by class, gender, land access, political party, or access to institutions (Cote & Nightingale, 2012; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013; Pelling, 2011). However, households that face the same climate hazards may have very different recoveries due to unevenly distributed adaptive capacity in practice. Moreover, political and institutional arrangements that influence access to adaptation resources impact resilience in coastal Bangladesh.

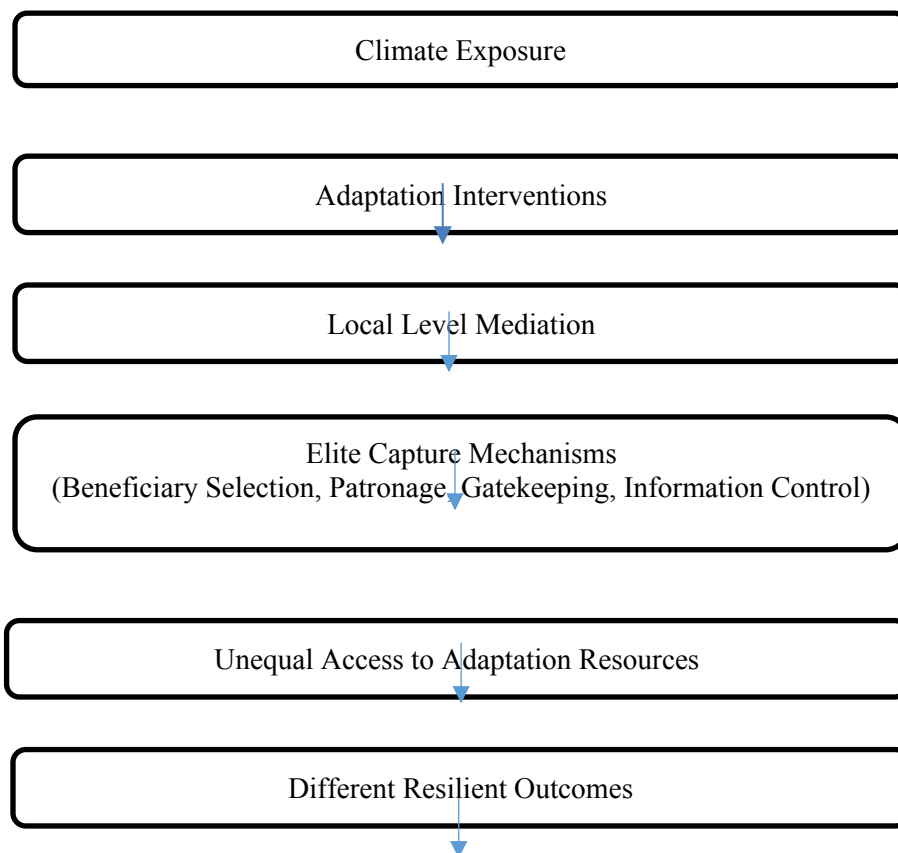


Figure 1. The author's conceptual framework, based on existing political ecology and climate governance literature, illustrates linkages between elite capture and unequal resilience in coastal Bangladesh.

Climate governance literature is useful for understanding the institutional arena in which resilience is produced and distributed. Multi-level and polycentric governance mechanisms are more common for adapting to climate change, featuring collaborations among state governments, local governments, community groups, informal actors, and donor organisations (Bulkeley & Newell, 2010; Jordan et al., 2018; Ostrom, 2010). This institutional diversity is manifested in the adaptation context and landscape in Bangladesh with the involvement of the Union Parishads, the implementation of projects through donations, execution of NGO activities, and policy frameworks such as the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 and the Standing Orders on Disaster 2019 (Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, 2019; Bangladesh Planning Commission, 2018). The complexity of the institutions that facilitate governance does not necessarily lead to equitable outcomes for disaster preparedness and adaptation planning. Recent adaptation

scholarship shows that climate interventions can create inequalities if there is a lack of accountability and when climate and adaptation delivery are separated from questions of power, recognition, and justice (Eriksen et al., 2015; Nightingale, 2017; Schipper, 2020). Thus, when marginal groups cannot shape decisions, challenge exclusion, or have access to grievances, participation can be limited to a process rather than become transformative. Political ecology and climate-justice scholarship extend this argument by placing climate vulnerability within the borders of social inequality and institutional power. Environmental vulnerability is socially created, not only arising from ecological exposure but also from unequal access to resources, political-economic structures, and a system of institutional control (Blaikie et al., 1994; Ribot, 2014; Robbins, 2012). The concept of climate-justice adaptation also highlights that the processes of distribution, recognition, and participation are more important in assessing adaptation than aggregate resilience outcomes (Fraser, 2009; Schlosberg, 2007). Coastal adaptation resources, such as relief, housing assistance, embankment protection, livelihood support, and safe-water infrastructure, are brought into socially unequal spaces characterised by patronage, landholding structures, political brokerage, and institutional visibility in coastal Bangladesh. Adaptation interventions can consequently build aggregate resilience and simultaneously re-create socially differentiated vulnerability. But it's not just about the presence of adaptation resources; more importantly, who has access to them, who controls them, and who's still invisible despite being vulnerable?

Elite capture is the core mechanism that leads to different resilience outcomes through governance. Elite capture is defined as the power and influence of the socially, economically, or politically strong actors in decision-making and resource allocation to their own benefit or the benefit of their network (Bardhan, 2002; Platteau, 2004). Previous research on decentralisation and participatory development clearly shows that when accountability is low, local institutions do not automatically access and strengthen the vulnerable groups (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Elites in coastal Bangladesh include elected leaders, party brokers, landowners, contractors, shrimp farmers, NGO functionaries, and individuals privileged to have access to local authorities. Their influence can be exerted on beneficiary selection, committee memberships, recommendation processes, information control, infrastructure location, and administrative gatekeeping. Thus, the resources for adaptation are transformed into political goods instead of socially neutral interventions. The framework described in this article connects four interrelated processes. First, the local elites influence the decision-making process and institutional framework of climate governance. Second, governance institutions influence the availability of adaptation resources, such as relief, housing support, embankment protection, livelihood assistance, and safe water infrastructure. Third, recovery capacity, continuation of livelihoods, and adaptive security are determined by unequal access to adaptation resources. Finally, these disparities manifest as unequal resilience outcomes across class, gender, livelihoods, land ownership, political factions, and others. Figure 1 highlights this causal pathway connecting climate exposure, governance mediation, elite capture, and differentiated resilience outcomes. In this paradigm, resilience is not experienced at the level of coastal communities. Instead, it is exercised through power, negotiated through institutional structures, and is dispersed unequally among social groups.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design to analyse how elite capture in local climate governance results in unequal access to adaptation resources and uneven adaptation outcomes in coastal Bangladesh. A qualitative approach is appropriate as adaptation governance operates through complex networks of social relations, patronage, political brokering, and administrative mediation. Comparative case studies are also used to establish causal mechanisms

and explain how government arrangements influence various adaptation outcomes in similar environments (George and Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018). Rather than viewing climate vulnerability as a purely environmental phenomenon, the paper explores how local institutional processes facilitate access to adaptation resources and influence differentiated recovery trajectories. Data were collected between June 2024 and January 2025 across the three coastal districts of Satkhira, Khulna, and Barguna. These districts are highly vulnerable to cyclones, tidal flooding, salinity intrusion, embankment failure, water scarcity, and socio-economic instability. These locations were chosen because, among the most climate-vulnerable areas in Bangladesh, they host a significant number of adaptation programmes carried out by the government, NGOs, donor agencies, and development organisations. A 'similar exposure, different governance' approach was used for case selection to investigate the influence of local institutional variations, NGO presence, political competition, and accountability arrangements on adaptation outcomes.

Forty-one semi-structured interviews, five focus-group discussions, and eleven key informant interviews were conducted to collect primary data. The participants were Union Parishad officials, disaster management committee members, NGO personnel, fishers, farmers, shrimp farmers, landless workers, women-headed households, local activists, and residents affected by climate change. Respondents described experiences of exclusion, patronage, beneficiary selection, and adaptation access through semi-structured interviews. Meanwhile, focus group discussions captured collective perceptions regarding local governance, disaster response, and social inequality. On the other hand, key informant interviews with administrators, journalists, engineers, and development practitioners provided institutional perceptions regarding adaptation governance and accountability. To mitigate the dominance of elites, separate discussions were held at multiple sites for women and landless households. This study also integrated documentary and secondary sources to contextualise local findings in climate-governance discourses. To develop the wider picture of climate vulnerability and adaptation governance, information from the IPCC (2023) and World Bank (2021) reports was used, whilst national policy documents like the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (2009), Bangladesh Planning Commission (2018), and the Standing Orders on Disaster (2019) were used to map Bangladesh's formal adaptation architecture. To contextualise governance gaps, climate financing and adaptation practices in coastal Bangladesh, additional materials were utilised from Transparency International Bangladesh, ICCCAD, and BRAC.

Thematic coding and process tracing methods were used in data analysis. A deductive-inductive coding strategy was employed. Interview transcripts, focus group discussions, field notes, and documentary materials were coded to elicit key findings on beneficiary selection, patronage, informational disparity, administrative gatekeeping, domination of committees, embankment governance, and differential recovery processes. Afterwards, these themes were linked to the article's main causal claim: the disproportionate influence of local elites on governance processes, the effect of governance processes on access to adaptation resources, and the differing resilience impacts of unequal access to adaptation resources. The triangulation method across the interview, institutional report, policy document, and field observation enhanced analytical reliability and identified variation across the cases. The findings also show that not all adaptation programmes are captured by local elites. Some locally led activities increased inclusion, including the involvement of women and the implementation of community monitoring mechanisms. Ethical considerations were significant because the study involves political topics such as patronage, exclusion, and local power relations. To ensure the security of the participants, anonymity was maintained. Participation in the discussions and interviews was voluntary, and consent was obtained from each individual. Moreover, this study involves some limitations. The qualitative design focuses on a nuanced understanding of participants' experience, rather than broad statistical generalisations, and politically sensitive topics may encourage some participants to hide their true experiences. Triangulation across interviews,

focus-group discussions, documentary sources, and institutional reports enhanced the credibility of the results and the confidence in causal interpretations of the present study.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Governance Area	Mechanism of Capture	Resilience Outcome	Most Affected Groups
Beneficiary Selection	Political recommendation, Selective listing	Unequal access to relief and support	Landless and politically marginal households
Relief and livelihood distribution	Patronage and local brokerage	Faster recovery for connected households	Poor households and informal workers
Participation Processes	Elite-dominated committees and consultations	Procedural inclusion without real influence	Women and low-income groups
Information Access	Unequal circulation of program information	Delayed access to adaptation	Periphery and low-income households
Administrative Verification	Documentation and certification barriers	Exclusion from formal support systems	Migrants, widows, and displaced households
Safe-water Adaptation	Unequal placement of infrastructure and control	Continued water insecurity	Women and poorer settlements
Embankment Governance	Influence of landowners and contractors	Uneven flood and salinity protection	Fishers and small farmers
Housing Assistance	Land tenure-based recognition	Unequal reconstruction and recovery	Informal settlers and renters
Climate Finance Implementation	Weak transparency and accountability	Uneven adaptation outcomes	Marginalised communities

Table 1, prepared by the authors, elaborates the linkages among elite capture, governance mechanisms, and unequal resilience in coastal Bangladesh based on a synthesis of primary and secondary evidence.

Formal Adaptation Governance and Unequal Institutional Access

The results highlight that the Bangladesh coastal adaptation system is extensively and unevenly institutionalised. There is a high concentration of adaptation architecture, including policy and institutional frameworks at the national scale, such as the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100, and Standing Orders on Disaster 2019, as well as donor-supported resilience initiatives, including ministries, Union Parishads, Disaster Management Committees, NGOs, and Development agencies (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 2018; Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, 2019; World Bank, 2021). Recent initiatives regarding local adaptation plans of action, supported by UNDP, aim to foster locally led adaptation through local-level planning and participation (United Nations Development Programme, 2025). Field experiences, however, suggest that institutional growth is inadequate for equitable adaptation outcomes. Respondents from three districts, namely Satkhira, Khulna, and Barguna, repeatedly said that adaptation

governance relies on local influence, proximity of institutions, and political connections.

One respondent from Shyamnagar shared, “Those who have close connections to the representatives will be the first to get information about any relief opportunities or project openings” (Interview, Shyamnagar, July 2024). Similar responses were echoed by a respondent in Barguna, who said, “Those who have political contacts with local representatives are prioritised during distribution” (Interview, Barguna, September 2024). Many participants identified informal connections among Union Parishad officials, civic and political circles, NGO brokers, and influential local households as the most significant channels through which resources flow. According to this evidence, vulnerability alone is not the only factor affecting access to adaptation; institutional visibility and social connection are predominant factors for accessing adaptation resources.

Comparative analysis across the study sites also revealed a consistent causal sequence. Climate shocks trigger institutional intervention, which leads to the distribution of resources; the local governance mechanism then identifies beneficiaries, and finally, existing power relations determine access to those resources. Therefore, adaptation outcomes are not purely environmental consequences; they are also the results of the governance process. This fits within a broader research agenda in the field of climate governance, suggesting that under conditions of weak accountability, institutional density may facilitate and maintain coordination, or exacerbate inequality (Eriksen et al., 2015; Nightingale, 2017). These governance dynamics are becoming more critical with recent climate events. In 2024, Cyclone Remal affected nearly 4.6 million individuals across 19 districts of the country, destroyed over 173,000 households, and caused substantial damage to embankments, fisheries, sanitation, water systems, and farms (United Nations Bangladesh, 2024). In such circumstances, relief distribution, housing support, embankment security, and livelihood assistance become political issues because demand exceeds what can be provided.

Beneficiary Selection and the Institutional Production of Exclusion

Elite capture had the greatest impact on adaptation through the beneficiary selection mechanism. Most relief activities, including livelihood grants, housing, safe-water initiatives, training, and cash-for-work, were based on beneficiary lists drawn or established by local committees, representatives, or implementing agencies. These lists were supposed to be prepared to prioritise the most vulnerable households. However, respondents, in practice, described the selection processes as highly political and biased. In Satkhira and Khulna, several respondents noted that they were not provided with adaptation support despite repeated losses incurred from climate change. One respondent stated that “if people have affiliations with the members or the local leaders, it becomes easier for their name to be listed” (Interview, Khulna, August 2024). A widowed respondent from Barguna also mentioned, “It is difficult to include the name without recommendations from the locals” (Interview, Barguna, September 2024). Another landless participant pointed out that “sometimes names are picked even before the meetings start” (Interview, Khulna, August 2024). This evidence resembles the reality that vulnerability was not the only factor affecting access to adaptation. Instead, access was mediated by local governance capacity and the obtaining of institutional recognition.

The findings suggest a clear causal mechanism interconnecting beneficiary selection to uneven adaptation outcomes. Targeting is a prerequisite for adaptation programmes. Targeting follows local verification, and local verification is influenced by social embeddedness as a form of authoritative structures. This allows local elites to play a role in determining who will be institutionally recognised as eligible or deserving. Exclusion is not always due to overt corruption, but it may result from delayed information, selective communication, incomplete verification, informal recommendations, or the silent omission of politically marginalised households. This leads to a growing inequality of resilience. The repeated exclusion from relief, housing assistance, livelihood recovery, and water infrastructure increases the vulnerability of

any household. In contrast, households continuously enrolled in adaptation programmes recover rapidly, incur lower rates of distress borrowing, and also enhance future adaptive capacity. This strengthens Mansuri and Rao's (2013) claim that participatory and decentralised governance at the local level can reinforce inequalities in the absence of effective accountability mechanisms. The concept of adaptation resources thus not only involves welfare goods, but also describes institutional processes that contribute to the reproduction of local inequality.

Patronage, Political Brokerage, and Adaptation Resources

The results also highlight that adaptation efforts often get integrated into local patronage systems. Access to relief and cash assistance, housing assistance, embankment repairs, and livelihood programmes was often linked to political proximity and personal recommendation, thereby reinforcing the power of local intermediaries. Adaptation is regarded as something that comes through people, but not as a transparent institutional procedure. A participant in a focus group in Khulna observed that the nature of relief distribution is often more relational than principled (Focus Group Discussion, Khulna, August 2024). Another similar participant noted, "People are afraid to criticise unjust distribution since they will need help again during the next cyclone (Focus Group Discussion, Barguna, September 2024). This dynamic became vivid after Cyclone Remal, as the respondents reported severe competition for relief distribution, shelter, and livelihood assistance. While not everyone reported direct corruption, many respondents indicated that the process of accessing adaptation was not about rights, but more about relationships. In this situation, the causal process is a political conversion of adaptation resources. Climate disasters require immediate action, while adaptation interventions provide vital and limited resources; local actors manage access to the resources, and patron-client dynamics provide a platform for strengthening relations. This, in turn, makes adaptation resources politically useful since they provide political loyalty, social influence, and institutional dependence. It reinforces Bardhan's (2002) notion that decentralisation can be an empowering tool for local elites when there is a lack of accountability downwards. These also mirror the widespread dynamics of patron-client relationships and local governance patterns which persist across the countryside in Bangladesh (Lewis & Hossain, 2017).

Beneficiaries may not address inequitable distribution practices. After all, they may fear loss of future privileges. On the other hand, the non-beneficiaries may ignore criticising local elites because they rely on them for their livelihoods, access to land, loans, or political protection. Thus, climate adaptation is not merely a socially apolitical approach to curb vulnerability but is linked with a wider network of rural power, political interconnectedness, and institutional dependence. This is a severe governance issue that is exacerbated by recent climate-finance-related concerns in Bangladesh. Transparency International Bangladesh (2025) noted an accountability gap and transparency problems in the climate finance governance systems. Irregularities at the national level differ from those at the village level, but both point to an uneven distribution of climate resources that makes them vulnerable to those responsible for carrying them out.

Participation Without Substantive Influence

Formal participation was common throughout adaptation action, but results showed that wider participation was often not transformative. Typical adaptation strategies included community meetings, consultation sessions, local committees, and disaster preparedness. But a significant number of participants said that marginalised populations lacked opportunities to give input on actual decision-making processes. Barriers cited by the women respondents often included access and travel issues, domestic responsibilities, and lack of confidence in places of assembly. A female participant from Satkhira said, "There are meetings, but decisions are usually made beforehand without ever talking with women" (Focus Group Discussion, Satkhira, July 2024). Another respondent also reported that "community meetings are used more for informing people

about decisions than giving them the opportunity to influence them” (Interview, Satkhira, July 2024). Landless labourers and fishers also reported fears of challenging local elites due to their economic dependence and future access opportunities to support programmes. The problem is that invited participation does not necessarily lead to a redistribution of authority. In some cases, meetings can only take place after decisions have been made, and committees can have community representatives when local elites or implementing agencies set the agenda. Adaptation interventions can thus be legitimised through participation, but not through democratisation of adaptation governance. Cornwall's (2008) concept of procedural and meaningful participation is, therefore, very pertinent to coastal adaptation governance.

However, the findings also demonstrated significant differences between the various adaptation initiatives. Several programmes led by NGOs that have clear beneficiary selection criteria, community monitoring, and women's participation have enhanced access for marginalised households. Those who participated in locally-led adaptation activities in Satkhira reported a higher level of transparency in water management and other livelihood support activities, as the lists of beneficiaries were collectively discussed and monitored. While these actions did not end local inequality, they also highlight that more robust institutional accountability systems can minimise opportunities for elite mediation and enhance distributive equity in adaptation governance. Thus, meaningful participation requires transparency, grievance mechanisms, and decision-making power; otherwise, participatory adaptation can create the very inequalities it meant to correct.

Information Asymmetry and Administrative Gatekeeping

Information asymmetry is another significant mechanism, as it reproduces uneven adaptation outcomes across the study areas. To access adaptation resources, certain factors are essential, such as knowledge of project opportunities, eligibility criteria, documentation requirements, and relevant institutional contacts. Moreover, respondents reported that local agencies, representatives, committee members, and family networks are the primary sources of information. In Khulna, a landless respondent exclaimed that they are informed of support only after the distribution is completed (Interview, Khulna, October 2024). A respondent in Barguna also mentioned that information reaches those who maintain close ties with the committee members (Interview, Barguna, September 2024). Another respondent mentioned that it is hard to access relief without the necessary documentation (Interview, Khulna, October 2024). These responses demonstrate that information itself is a resource that not everyone has equal access to.

Administrative requirements reinforce exclusion, as identity cards, land records, bank accounts, certificates, photographs, and local verification are required to access housing and other livelihood support and relief. These requirements, which were initially intended to facilitate greater accountability, also negatively affected landless households, displaced populations, the elderly, widows, and families with poor institutional ties. The effect is thus double-edged because information inequality reduces awareness of adaptation, and administrative gatekeeping reduces the efficacy of utilising opportunities due to formal eligibility and entitlement. The implication is that institutional legibility is a critical element of resilience. It has been found that documented, socially recognised, and politically engaged households can manage adaptation systems more effectively than the landless, displaced, mobile, and politically marginalised households. This strongly supports Sen's (1981) argument that vulnerability is not just a matter of the availability of resources but of people's capability to secure access to those resources.

Safe Water, Salinity, and Spatially Unequal Resilience

Access to safe water is one of the most observable cases in which adaptation infrastructure can not only lower overall vulnerability, but also can create local inequality. The problem of salinity intrusion is one of the most acute climate-related issues in coastal Bangladesh, influencing drinking water, agriculture, health, and livelihoods (World Bank, 2021). Many respondents in Satkhira cited drinking water scarcity as one of the most chronic adaptation issues, especially

post-cyclone and in dry months. Adaptation efforts included rainwater harvesting, pond-sand filtering, tubewells, and community water points; however, they still lacked uniformity. Community members living far from adaptation infrastructure often reported longer journeys to collect safe water than those who lived closer. Several women explained that water collection remained a significant daily labour despite the existence of water adaptation projects in their unions. The female respondent in Shyamnagar pointed out that “water projects are generally installed around influential households; therefore, poorer women still walk long distances” (Interview, Satkhira, July 2024). A few women respondents also mentioned the difficulties of spending hours collecting drinking water during the dry season despite having adaptation projects nearby (Focus Group Discussion, Satkhira, July 2024). The accounts demonstrate a more severe political ecology issue involving the distribution, affected by social influence, settlement hierarchy, and institutional control. The causal mechanism is related to infrastructure siting, maintenance, and local governance. The water infrastructure is situated close to socially influential households and administered by dominant committees or based on informal access routes. Thus, an increase in adaptation infrastructure is not sufficient to eradicate unequal access. There are clearly gender-based impacts because women are the primary water collectors and are frequently not influential in decision-making around infrastructure. Recent salinity research also shows that salinity intrusion in coastal Bangladesh is exacerbating water insecurity, especially for the poorest and for women. Adaptation infrastructure is a matter of politics, both in terms of who benefits from water security and who will continue to suffer from it and be left untouched.

Embankment Governance and Unequal Protection

Despite being at the core of Bangladesh's coastal adaptation strategy, field evidence reveals that embankment governance is strongly political. Cyclone Remal left widespread embankment breaches in the coastal districts, resulting in flooding settlements, agricultural lands, fisheries, and shrimp farms. (United Nations Bangladesh, 2024). In the findings, embankment failure was cited as one of the most devastating factors of livelihood and housing loss in Khulna and Barguna. However, embankment protection was not uniform for the community. Several respondents mentioned that priorities for maintenance and repair often depended as much on economic and political influences as on vulnerability. Fishers and landless families in peripheral locations frequently reported experiencing less protection than in other highly valued areas or shrimp farms. A respondent from Satkhira commented that ‘repairs take place faster in the presence of influential landlords’ (Interview, Satkhira, August 2024). Another respondent in Khulna reported that peripheral communities received less protection due to the lack of political influence over the decision-making process (Interview, Khulna, September 2024). A participant from Khulna also mentioned that if influential landowners created pressure on the authorities, repairs would have become prompt (Interview, Khulna, September 2024).

The causal process here is the competition over protection priorities. Engineering considerations, as well as other factors including land ownership, contractors, shrimp-farming interests, and political lobbying, affect embankment governance. In the presence of influential actors in local governance systems, protection can be spatially unequal. Areas with stronger political and economic influence receive timely repairs more than peripheral communities. The result is differentiated protection in the same adaptation system. While some homes are more resilient to saline intrusion and tidal inundation, others still lose their property even though they reside in areas that are beyond the reach of embankments. Embankment governance thus begins to show the social differentiation of the adaptation infrastructure through uneven governance processes.

Livelihood Recovery and Unequal Adaptive Capacity

Similarly, livelihood adaptation programmes led to different recovery paths within coastal communities. The livelihoods of the households in the study areas relied on agriculture, fishing, aquaculture, wage labour, forestry assets, and migration. The results suggest that livelihoods were affected by climate shocks, including salinity, loss of seasonal crops, decrease in fisheries,

damaged boats, failed embankments, and market instability due to cyclones and flood tides. Adaptation programmes offered training, as well as cash-for-work, seeds, livestock and livelihood support, but access to these support tools frequently relied on social recognition, mobility, and institutional access. Fishermen and landless workers often reported receiving generic adaptation support that was not aligned with their livelihood needs. Women also reported similar constraints on participating in livelihood activities due to domestic work and mobility. One respondent in Barguna cited that “training programmes do take place, but many poor fishers are not able to participate due to their inability to cease their fishing activities” (Interview, Barguna, October 2024). Another respondent from Khulna reported that those already involved with NGOs receive relief multiple times (Interview, Khulna, September 2024). The findings indicate that resources largely flow through existing institutional structures. The selective adaptation access emerges as the causal mechanism that shapes outcomes. Better-connected households receive better opportunities for repeated support and relief assistance, while more marginal households depend on debt, temporary migration, or the sale of assets. Moreover, unequal access to adaptation programmes reinforces existing inequalities in resilience.

Resilience as a Distributional Political Outcome

The findings of this paper substantiate the main argument that inequality in climate resilience across coastal Bangladesh is the consequence of the complex interplay among climate risks, adaptation resources, and local power dynamics. Governance determines access to adaptation resources, while exposure can make people vulnerable. Beneficiary selection, information flow, committee processes, infrastructure location, administrative verification, and access to grievances are highly dependent on local elites. These governance processes determine who benefits from relief, safe water, housing, embankment protection, livelihood and training. The results are socially cumulative. Unequal access results in differences in recovery paths, debt, livelihoods, sustainability, migration stress, water security, and preparedness for the future. Households that are repeatedly included increase adaptive capacity over time; on the other hand, repeated exclusion from the adaptive system makes households structurally vulnerable. This is why communities with similar environmental exposure may have varied resilience outcomes.

More broadly, the term resilience is more complex and cannot be entirely characterised as a community-level factor. Even a coastal locality can have varied unequal resilience outcomes, including cyclone shelters, embankments, NGO programmes, adaptation projects, and water infrastructure. Thus, adaptation indicators at the aggregate level risk of masking distributive inequality within the community. The question of whose resilience is being strengthened, through what governance procedures, and under whose direction is more analytically valuable than the notion of whether a community is robust. The findings also have broader implications for climate governance beyond Bangladesh. Governance quality is an essential component of adaptation finance and resilience planning alongside technical solutions across the Global South. Adaptation programmes that do not consider the dynamics of local power relations, institutional inequalities and distributive justice can be counter-productive. Climate adaptation thus cannot, and should not, be considered as a technical problem involving infrastructure development, planning or finance. It's essentially a political issue that involves recognition, accountability and the distribution of resilience.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that climate exposure alone cannot explain differentiated climate resilience in coastal Bangladesh. Although coastal communities encounter similar risks from cyclones, salinity intrusion, tidal flooding, and embankment failure, adaptation outcomes remain unevenly distributed across vulnerable communities. The primary study topic was how elite capture of local climate governance influences unequal access to adaptation resources and results in varied resilience outcomes. The results show that governance mechanisms in coastal Bangladesh

mediate resilience by influencing processes of identification of the target population, who needs to be protected, who has access to resources for adaptation, and who is left out. The analysis reveals that elite capture operates through interconnected mechanisms, including beneficiary selection, patronage, meaningful participation, information asymmetry, administrative gatekeeping, infrastructure allocation, and uneven institutional recognition. Moreover, the primary goal of adaptation programmes is to mitigate climate-related vulnerabilities, and these programmes include relief, livelihood assistance, housing support, embankment security, safe water facilities, and skill-development programmes. However, these resources become politically mediated services that are distributed through relationships of authority, brokerage, and institutional access once they reach socially unequal local environments. Compared with landless households, women-headed households, migrants, fishermen, and politically marginalised groups, households with higher political ties, land ownership, social visibility, or committee access are frequently better positioned to obtain adaptation benefits. As a result, resilience appears as an unequal outcome rather than a communal state equally shared by all.

The overall conclusion is that climate adaptation is a political issue. Bangladesh has made significant strides in disaster preparedness, adaptation planning, and strengthened resilience through the implementation of cyclone shelters, early warning systems, community mobilisation, and long-term delta planning (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 2018; World Bank, 2021). However, if local adaptation resources are channeled through socially unequal governance, variance in local resilience may persist even after aggregate adaptation successes. Yet, the central issue concerns who controls the adaptation programmes, who has access to them, and whose vulnerabilities remain unnoticed by institutional processes. The results also have several relevant policy implications. To mitigate elite mediation in adaptation governance, it is vital to ensure transparent beneficiary selection, publication of adaptation lists, independent grievance processes, social audits, and increased accountability mechanisms. The role of women needs to be extended from the symbolic to the substantive role in water governance structures, disaster management, and livelihood planning. Institutionally marginalised groups and communities, such as landless households, women and gender minorities, displaced populations, or informal settlements, who tend to have less representation in formal governance systems, should be a priority for adaptation policies. It is also crucial to enhance the transparency of climate financing and community monitoring systems to ensure that adaptation resources are directed to vulnerable communities. Finally, this article proposes that resilience in coastal Bangladesh is not just an infrastructural, project, or policy outcome. It operates based on power, recognition, and institutional relations dynamics. The challenge now is not just to finance and implement resilience but to ensure that adaptation does not create the inequalities it aims to alleviate.

VI. REFERENCES

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