



Culture and Climate Change: an exploration of Bangladesh and the United Kingdom

Introduction

Scientists and environmentalists are telling us that climate change will dramatically change the world we live in within the next 50 years. While it is a global problem, it is predicted that not all humans will be affected by climate change equally. Much depends on where you live and those in dry areas, or close to rising seas, will likely feel the brunt of the effects. Money also makes a difference, as wealthier individuals and nations will have the ability to make quick changes to cope with climate change.

When looking at how countries might be affected by climate change, Bangladesh and the United Kingdom (UK) seem to stand at opposite ends of the continuum. Rising seas and flooding in Bangladesh are likely to displace millions in a country barely able to meet its current needs (Jahan 2000). Yet in the UK, a warming climate is likely to actually increase yields of agricultural lands, and a robust economy is poised to take advantage of a booming demand for “green” products that combat climate change (King 2004). To make this contrast more ironic, the UK is a prime example of the kind of carbon-intensive culture that has been blamed for climate change, while Bangladesh makes a relatively tiny impact on global climate change.

It would seem that the stage is set for conflict between Bangladesh and the UK, yet this is not what is happening. The UK is Bangladesh’s largest donor, which means something when Bangladesh is one of the world’s largest aid recipients (Jahan 2000). In addition, there is solid evidence that the UK is doing more than just looking out for itself when it comes to climate change by being an active member of agreements like the Kyoto accord. While it would be far more cost effective for the UK to attempt to cope with climate change rather than prevent it; they are taking serious steps to change their behavior in ways that might even be meaningful to places like Bangladesh (King 2004). In short, the UK and Bangladesh are indicative of a world that is showing signs of working together to act on climate change rather than standing at odds.

To explain this change, I will explore the evidence that global climate change is forcing cultures around the world to break down boundaries and cooperate to an unprecedented degree. I will also look at Bangladesh and the United Kingdom as case studies for how both cultures are dealing with the onset of climate change and viewing each other in this context. In particular, I will show some examples of how cultural change and conflict in these countries is already showing signs of breaking down historic boundaries that might keep them from dealing with climate change.

Experience

The threat of climate change is perceived differently by people around the world. This perception is also in flux and is also in the process of being formed in many places. In order to understand how cultures are being forced to expand their boundaries, it's important to first look at how people perceive the threat. In Bangladesh, the understanding of climate change starts with a connection to the natural world.

With the majority of Bangladesh's population living in rural areas and two-thirds of Bangladesh's entire land mass under cultivation - more than any other country - the majority of Bangladeshis are quite familiar with historical weather patterns (Toufique 2001). While many are not necessarily aware of the scientific discussion around climate change, locals have observed how the monsoon season is becoming shorter, more intense, and the land is increasingly drying out during the remainder of the year (Orford 2003).

In the UK, perception of climate change is just the opposite. Instead of memory and long-standing relationships with the land, the gradual rise in awareness of climate change can be chronicled more easily through the media and political statements. Carvalho and Burgess (2005) summarized the coverage of climate change in three UK newspapers from 1985 to 2003 and found that the subject first gained popularity when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher supported the scientific predictions of climate change in a 1988 speech.

The different ways that these two countries have initially experienced climate change significantly affects their ability to find solutions. Dessai et al. (2004)

helps explain the differences between local experiences in Bangladesh and the UK by defining the differences between 'external' and 'internal' definitions of danger from climate change - where external definitions might come from scientists making predictions, while internal definitions come from one's first-hand observations. Using the notion of internal and external definitions, Bangladesh is currently experiencing considerable amounts of inputs that would inform people's internal definitions of danger regarding climate change. Yet there are very few forces currently informing the 'external' definitions of danger that would contextualize Bangladesh's troubles within global climate change.

In order to combat this lack of an external definition of climate change, groups such as *Working for Coastal People* have led traveling theatre troupes that dramatize the effects of climate change in terms of rural life in Bangladesh (LOE 2006). One of the main challenges in communicating the science behind climate change to rural villagers, is that many of the concepts are foreign and rely on English words (such as things like 'greenhouse gas' and 'automobile emissions') (LOE 2006). One of the workarounds used by *Working for Coastal People* to contextualize foreign concepts onto local experiences has been to create illustrations that clearly depict future scenarios and put the concept of pollution into locally understood concepts like emissions from brick kilns (LOE 2006).

Though this understanding is only beginning to spread in Bangladesh, nearly 20 years after Margaret Thatcher's speech in 1988, it could quickly gain momentum for local action when combined with the first-hand Bangladeshi experience. According to Dessai et

al. (2004) both internal definitions, like those in Bangladesh, and external definitions, as in the scientific consensus within the UK, are required for effective climate change policy and action.

While the UK has had fewer influences on people's internal definitions of the danger from climate change, widespread flooding in 2000 and a heat-wave in 2003 did spark connections between climate change and increasing natural disasters (Dessai et al. 2004). Still, despite the resulting up-tick in climate change media coverage from these disasters, it's important to note that the UK was already beginning to frame their reaction to climate change within a larger global boundary before the disasters of 2000 and 2003 (Carvalho and Burgess 2005).

The reason behind this lies in a second major influence on the internal perception of climate change in the UK. The news media's coverage of climate change around the world is part of what Linklater (1998) describes as an emerging universal communications community. By using modern technology to share information about people on opposite sides of the world, cultural flow is increasing in ways not previously experienced (Pendergraft 1998). The result is that people in the UK, being exposed to ways of life and challenges from around the world, can expand their internal definitions of danger through this communication community. A recent example of this would be the effects that the news coverage of hurricane Katrina had on the debate over climate change in the US and the world. For many that watched the coverage, this changed their internal definition of climate change danger; providing them with personal information on the effects of climate change in a way much different

to one's reactions to scientific predictions or theory.

Citizenship

A result of people's increased involvement in the plight of global humanity is the development of a post-Westphalian concept of citizenship. Much of the development in the global climate change discourse pushes for a definition of citizenship that values the well being of people around the world equally. This comes into particular focus in Linklater's (1998) definition of 'international harm'. To him, "increasing levels of transnational harm further underline the point that communities should not exercise the power of self-determination without considering their duties to other human beings" (Linklater: 84). The implication here for global warming is that the effects of greenhouse gases produced in one country cannot be contained geographically and have an equal, if not increased, impact on the rest of the world.

The concept of one inter-connected world, which results from an understanding of trans-national harm, is adequately described in Linklater's (1998) discourse on boundaries. Linklater's 'boundaries' are the results of an effort to create social bonds through the practice of exclusion; and while all levels create these boundaries (including nations), these forms of exclusion can eventually be 'unlearned' - especially when international security is at risk (Linklater 1998). It is therefore promising that the threat of climate change points to a recognition of the largest boundary: the earth, which encompasses all cultures and humanity.

This expansion of boundaries and global understanding based on communication has a direct effect on the issue of citi-

zenship; somewhat mirroring similar changes in the Hellenistic era when citizenship began to be granted to people outside of the state - based on a larger sphere of communication and a demand for rights (Linklater: 140). Likewise, changes of attitude in the UK have spread from a "liberal 'no harm' principal that makes it morally unsavory to expose anyone to something without their will, or at least without informing them" (Linklater: 84). The moral pressure to reduce trans-national harm is partly an effort to respect the international rights of those in other countries, effectively expanding the sense of citizenship to the global stage.

However, efforts to address the notion of a single global boundary have been complicated by the diversity of cultures involved. Simply defining the issue of climate change as a global problem implies that a global response is required (Miller 2007). Prior to the late 1980's, the issue of global climate change had instead been treated as a local problem with a multitude of local effects. While such a local problem would fit with a Westphalian state-centered response, the shift of perception to a global problem now requires a post-Westphalian response that is inherently political (Pendergraft 1998). These politics largely have to do with finding a common understanding of global climate change that can work for all parties (Pendergraft 1998).

Pendergraft (1998) has attempted to find some of these similarities through the lens of Cultural Theory. According to Cultural Theory, each culture contains five groups, including individualists, egalitarians, hierarchists, hermits and fatalists (Pendergraft 1998). In terms of climate change, it's difficult to consider building a consensus definition of cli-

mate change among hermits, who have disengaged with society, or fatalists like those in Bangladesh who see floods and cyclones as God's will and are disempowered or disinclined to take action (Pendergraft 1998; Grothmann and Patt 2005).

Where Pendergraft (1998) sees potential is in building consensus among the egalitarians, individualists and hierarchists - expecting these groups to find out where their views overlap as well as where they disagree. In some ways, a multi-cultural society like the UK that has already established some norms of acceptance may give it an advantage in finding consensus. The alternative to finding a consensus approach to dealing with climate change, where all parties are involved, is the all-powerful Leviathan government proposed by Hobbes. This is of particular danger in Bangladesh where current institutions seem unprepared for the projected impacts of climate change and a precedent exists of the military taking over power in times of crisis (Jahan 2000).

One body working to come to a consensus definition of climate change is the Inter-government Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The IPCC is different from other international processes, such as the Kyoto accord, because of its operation through the United Nations (UN) where it has produced a scientific consensus with no dissenting opinion and based solely on thousands of scientists from around the world - instead of the usual political elites (Adger et al. 2003).

While critics of the IPCC have derided the process for not including enough members from developing countries or indigenous cultures, it seems clear that it has helped to build a consensus-opinion on climate change, which, when

combined with the internal experiences of a country like Bangladesh, can produce effective legislation (Miller 2007). The government of Bangladesh, at the 2007 UN General Assembly, decided to break its long silence on climate change when Fakhruddin Ahmed made an appeal for unified action:

I speak for Bangladesh and many others who are on the threshold of a climatic Armageddon. Climate change is fundamentally altering our lives. By some estimates, a one-meter sea level rise will submerge one third of the total area of Bangladesh, thereby uprooting 25 to 30 million people. We cannot afford to remain idle until this misfortune actually unfolds. Waiting any longer will be at our own peril. (LOE, 2006)

While it's healthy to see the government of Bangladesh making a plea for assistance, one of the worrying developments is the casting of a place like Bangladesh as the poster-child for climate change. While it seems logical that the first areas to be impacted would create the first stirring of action, it also casts the inhabitants of these countries in the role of victims. For an already victimized populace like Bangladesh, it leaves them with little sense of being able to chart their own course (Jahan 2000).

Clearly there is little the people of Bangladesh can do alone, but the open debate on citizenship and moral responsibility for pollution leaves open the question of whether Bangladesh needs new recourses to compel other nations to act. Historically, international agreements have stuck most of the cost for mitigation with the richest countries that can both afford to pay and suffer the least disruption (Rayner 1991). How-

ever, there is yet to be an agreement involving all responsible nations and some of the progress made in developing a more unified approach to climate change may be in jeopardy if Bangladeshis start experiencing major effects. An environmental consultant to the Bangladeshi government voices his fears that Bangladesh will ultimately have to pay the price, "Maybe it will be helpful and better [for] adaptation if the international community that was responsible, [said] they will come forward. If not then maybe some percentage of my people will die. Maybe they have to pay. I mean, we have overcome always, but we paid for that" (LOE 2006).

Challenges

There are of course numerous doubts as to whether the world can come together to address climate change, and there are even those who challenge the notion that a unified approach is the way to go. For the UK, most climate models seem to indicate that adaptation to climate change would be far cheaper than efforts to prevent any further effects (Niemeyer, Petts and Hobson 2005). From an individualist perspective, there is also little reason for someone in the UK to support efforts to combat climate change, as there seems to be no direct benefit to them individually (Niemeyer, Petts and Hobson 2005). Yet the fact that the UK has wholeheartedly backed the Kyoto protocol to reduce greenhouse gases seems to disprove some of this logic (King 2004).

For Bangladesh, there is the worry that sudden intense impacts could hinder the country's ability to adapt. Niemeyer, Petts and Hobson (2005) lay out the case for 'maladaptation', where disasters may produce a backlash against the institutions that would normally assist in

the ability to cope or adapt. Such maladaptation in Bangladesh has strong precedence in the unrest following the floods of 1987 and 1988, as well as the subsequent Flood Action Plan (Jahan 2000). However, in looking at this period of unrest, there is evidence that the maladaptive behavior may have ultimately left Bangladesh better able to deal with subsequent disasters. The reaction eventually resulted in a series of independent groups, backed by popular support, that are now serving as watchdogs over any government response to disasters (Jahan, 2000).

Obviously, all of the potential solutions for dealing with climate change have some sort of cost. This includes the potential costs of cooperating in a state-centric world that is still working on creating a global model more adaptable to dealing with global threats like climate change (Pendergraft, 1998). In order to frame what other catalysts for action might be, beyond simple cost, the analogy of the 'carrot and stick' is often used. While the 'stick' seems obvious given the threat spelled out by the IPCC, it remains unclear what the 'carrot' will be. Adger and Kelly (1999) say that the perceived 'carrot' must include both short-term as well as long-term benefits, while an effective stick could be the proper understanding of the problem.

However, the phrasing of a carrot and stick approach assumes that one will act solely out of fear and the perceived benefit for one's own self. In addition, it presupposes that any reaction to climate change is primarily an individual one. In this case, when the self-interest of the individual is rarely in the interest of the group, it seems necessary that any actions be based on the consensus of the larger culture (Pendergraft 1998; Linklater 1998).

Alternately, looking at groups instead of individuals brings up the subject of social movements. One of the main social movements behind the effort to address climate change is the global environmental movement. According to Honneth (2003) the environmental movement could actually be seen as a type of 'identity politics', where a set of beliefs becomes associated with a lifestyle, values and monikers like 'treehugger'. There is some significance in placing the environmental movement in the role of 'identity politics', in that climate change ceases to be solely about the science, and just as much more about an ideological group trying to change a country's majority culture (Honneth 2003). In the UK, this discourse of 'identity politics' has been used to attack environmentalists in the media and delegitimize them - conveniently disarming unwelcome science or politics at the same time (Carvalho and Burgess 2005). Any attempt to find a common approach to climate change would include the acceptance of minority groups involved, including environmentalists.

Finally, there are questions of the ethical grounding of the UK's seemingly altruistic intention to reduce greenhouse gases for the benefit of other countries, such as Bangladesh. While the UK has recognized a moral obligation to protect and warn the countries likely to be affected by climate change - seemingly treating them as equals with its own citizens - the measures being taken to do this avoid putting the UK under any obligation to accept impacts on their own culture. For example, reducing CO2 emissions through new technology or sending aid money to Bangladesh is vastly different from accepting some of the millions of refugees projected to be on the move once rising seas begin inundating Bangladesh. For the UK, a country al-

ready on edge about the current number of Muslim immigrants, this would be sure to cause a stir. In short, there are ethical issues when a country wants to appear as meeting its obligation to humanity while still preserving the boundary around its own culture (Linklater 1998: 81).

Conclusion

There is a common phrase in Bangladesh, often heard in response to the threat of climate change, "When there is trouble, there is a way" (LOE 2006). Clearly a 'way' is starting to take shape in the societies of Bangladesh and the UK. At this point the case for the validity of the science behind global warming appears to be made and it seems evident that nations are beginning to expand their boundaries in order to either reach out to those in need or seek solutions from other parts of the world.

The main question now is what shape these solutions will take. It should be clear at this point that any unilateral actions, even to help another country, will not be productive. Neither will it be in the interest of the world for countries to pursue their own self-interests without understanding how the dangers of climate change are set within a world where borders have little or no moral significance (Linklater 1998).

For the people of Bangladesh, the challenge will be to maintain some control over their fate. It could be fairly easy to succumb to the role of victim, where donors rush in to apply their own forms of aid. An appropriate global response will require functioning agents capable of influencing the debate from their unique perspective.

For people in the UK, it will be important to develop a view of other countries that values other's rights as equal to their own. We are yet to see if the developing response to Bangladesh's situation from the UK, and the developed world, will be universalistic or not. Will relief plans be adapted to fit cultural realities, or will the UK assist agents within Bangladesh to formulate their own solutions (Rayner 1991)?

While it is clear that cultures around the world will need to expand their boundaries and tolerate a wider range of views in order to build consensus for action, the alternative of a Leviathan state, which only offers pre-approved decisions from the top, has potentially worse implications for cultural integrity. Increasingly it seems the only real solution is a unified approach that in its very process will address many of the issues currently keeping the world apart.

About the Accultured Robot

Started by Brant and Bronwen Arthur in the Spring of 2003 the 'Robot', as it is affectionately known, is a repository for ideas – including papers like this one that address concepts of development and conflict. Visit accultured.com to read more and get in touch.

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