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Book Review Misreading the Bengal Delta: Climate Change, Development, and Livelihoods in Coastal Bangladesh

Indrawan Prasetyo
Asia Research Centre, Universitas Indonesia

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Book Review

Camelia Dewan, *Misreading the Bengal Delta: Climate Change, Development, and Livelihoods in Coastal Bangladesh*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022, 245 pp., US\$30 (paperback), ISBN: 9780295749617.

Indrawan Prasetyo

Asia Research Centre, Universitas Indonesia.

With more and more funds directed to change-related projects, climate change adaptation has since emerged as one of the most powerful development buzzwords, shaping the landscape of development funding and international donors' priority. Against this backdrop, Camelia Dewan's book "*Misreading the Bengal Delta: Climate Change, Development, and Livelihoods in Coastal Bangladesh*" poses a fundamental argument that the "reductive climate translation" perpetuated by international donors and development projects marginalizes local voices and exacerbates environmental and societal problems in the Bengal Delta. The narrative of the climate adaptation project in Bangladesh centers on the grim prediction that rising sea levels, attributed to global warming, could submerge the country (p. 14). Consequently, international donors aid Bangladesh to build polders and dike—resembling Dutch coastal development—thereby continuing colonial practices of manipulating sediment and water flows. This narrative-focused book highlights the urgent need for a more nuanced, locally informed, and equitable approach that takes into account the intertwining connections between climate change and development.

The book is thoughtfully structured into five eloquent chapters, masterfully written by Dewan for an enjoyable and accessible reading experience. It begins with an introduction of the central argument concerning climate reductive translation, then delves deep into environmental history. Chapter two focuses on the contested setting of reductive translation and development brokerage in Bangladesh. The subsequent three chapters offer environmental ethnography, shedding light on the complex realities of the Bengal Delta. They also portray the challenges faced by local populations due to the often dismal outcomes of climate adaptation and development projects that, ironically, also burden the Bangladeshi government with a crushing debt structure.

The book commences by tracing an evolving array of actors that have shaped narratives surrounding the coastal development in the Bengal Delta: from the period of jungle reclamation of the Turkic and Mughal Sultanate to the British Raj with its capitalist-driven infrastructural interests, and culminating in the contemporary involvement of international donors and development elites advancing their capital-intensive initiatives. As Dewan illustrates, this sequence formed a multifaceted narrative and material tapestry that has positioned Bangladesh as a "Modern-day Malthusia" (see p. 99). In this portrayal, Bangladesh is viewed as a region requiring evermore complex Western solutions. Yet, this approach often overlooks the tangible impacts of climate change and the daily challenges faced by the residents of Khulna, the largest district in the Bengal Delta. These challenges ranged from food security and entrenched patriarchal norms to

saline intrusion, all compounded by financial and aid strategies that exploit and exacerbate prevailing inequalities.

The book builds on the literature of aidnography and environmental ethnography while criticizing Marxist theories of accumulation for their land-centric theorizing and climate ethnography, viewed by the book as one practice of simplification. The book is also critical to James Scott's (1998) analyses on state simplification. Dewan argues that far from being merely a convulsion between state simplification and capital interest, the ongoing climate reductive translations and state inability to see complexity represent a patchy contestation of different, and often competing, elites and actors which feeds on the global narratives built to justify the flows of international capitals (p. 45-46). It reminds me of Andreas Malm's (2016) arguments on the success of fossil capital over hydropower-landscape as coal allows capital to be more flexible and tap cheap labor in many dispossessed areas. In the book, the global development regime similarly favors reductive translations while blacklisting critics from its own pool of development experts (see p. 67) to promote capital intensive projects.

Eventually, the book raises more questions than answers, asserting that environmental narratives should be deeply anchored in actual lived experiences rather than being entwined with the past and existing colonial knowledge structures linked to capital-intensive technologies reliant on foreign debt. It could be more convincing, nonetheless, if Dewan could show how environmental ethnography can shape and counter such reductive translations. Further, the book would be more enriching if it can walk us through on how adding certain complexities into the narratives can help us to reshape the conversations surrounding climate change and the political landscape of coastal development in times of climate change, especially considering the influential global institutions at play.

The role of Infrastructure politics is also crucial in shaping narratives and material possibilities. This is supported by other studies on coastline infrastructures and the way they structured development to be more reliant on the illusion of progress they carried (Ley 2021) and the political will that emerged with certain actors' configurations and ideologies constructing what was possible in political terms (Amir 2012). I would then recommend that the book be read along with books on the various interplays of infrastructural politics in coastal settings, such as Lukas Ley's *Building on Borrowed Times* (2021) and climate change discursive and decolonial politics, such as Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021) as they offer complementary views on both discursive politics and coastal development in the era of climate change.

Overall, the book serves as a critical reading that shows how climate adaptation has become another development mantra that possesses material risk with its capacity to exacerbate both poverty and environmental problems. The book stands as an essential read for critical development scholars and development specialists, engaged anthropologists, and activists interested with politics of climate change and infrastructure, sustainable development, and those interested with deep ethnography of coastal communities. It is particularly relevant for those aiming to gain insight into the complexity of development projects and the intricate social, historical, and political tapestries in development as persistent contested projects.

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