

Patterns of Psychosocial Coping and Adaptation Among Riverbank Erosion-Induced Displacees in Bangladesh: Implications for Development Programming

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The primary purpose of this study was to identify psychosocial aspects of riverbank erosion-induced displacement in the flood plains of Bangladesh. Although considerable research has examined the social and economic impacts of such disasters in Bangladesh, there has been a general neglect of associated psychosocial implications. The specific objectives of the study were to: 1) assess hazard awareness in relation to riverbank erosion; 2) determine the magnitude of psychological distress associated with displacement; 3) examine patterns and predictors of economic and social adaptation among displacees; and 4) identify patterns of psychosocial coping and adaptation common to displaced and non-displaced poor in Bangladesh. The field survey for the study was conducted in Bangladesh during the 1998 flood season. Over 200 displacees living in urban squatter settlements in the district of Serajganj were sampled; a comparison group of 200 non-displacees was drawn from Shariakhandi district.

The results indicate that the constant threat of riverbank erosion has contributed to a substantial disaster subculture in the riverine zones of Bangladesh. Although frequent displacement was common among the floodplain residents, only 17% had perceived riverbank erosion to be a serious problem, and just 10% believed that they eventually would be displaced permanently. In most cases, displacees cope with erosion and land loss by relocating to nearby lands; the impacts of displacement become acute only when land scarcity forces displacees into urban areas, where they are both removed from their traditional rural way of life and marginalized both economically and politically.

Although displacees were found to have a significantly higher level of distress than did non-displacees, this was related primarily to socio-economic deprivation, rather than to displacement *per se*. The commonly hypothesized factors, such as loss of land and frequency and duration of displacement, were not found to have significant association with distress levels. Among both displacees and non-displacees, chronic survival concerns, daily hunger, and marginal living conditions were predictive factors of psychological distress. Vulnerability to economic strain and associated psychological distress was particularly high among women and the elderly.

The need to integrate disaster education and development projects within a social, cultural and psychological context is reviewed. The capacity of people to respond to environmental threats is a function not only of the physical forces that affect them, but of the way people see themselves in relation to these forces. It is important to recognize that Western conceptualizations of poverty do not always take into account social and psychological subtleties of coping and adaptation. Popular development theory usually associates low personal control with maladaptive passivity

and dependency. In this study, however, displacees more often responded to their difficulties with active problem-solving efforts, with fatalism being among the least utilized forms of coping. It may be reasoned that low aspirations and self-efficacy generated by poverty may be psychologically adaptive, reducing levels of frustration and distress, but not determination and perseverance.

Rehabilitation programming may be most effective when it takes into account the psychosocial aspects of disasters, both because psychological distress impacts the capacity of people to achieve livelihoods, but also because important social and psychological processes determine the way people perceive and adapt to natural hazards. Research has shown that displacees in Bangladesh usually survive poverty and marginalization because of mutual kinfolk obligations of assistance. Rehabilitation programming in this context may have the most benefit when it assumes a socio-centric rather egocentric Western perspective, assisting communities to maintain and develop natural social coping mechanisms that enhance adaptive functioning and promote self-determination.

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