

# Why South Asia Is Among the Hardest Hit Regions by Climate Change

As India and Bangladesh emerge from devastating floods, one expert explains why South Asia is so vulnerable to climate change-related disasters

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South Asia has faced the brunt of extreme weather this summer – with the recent [floods](#) in Bangladesh and [heat waves](#) in India and Pakistan jointly impacting the region in the span of a month.

This bout with hostile climate conditions is not new for the region. In fact, more than half of all South Asians – or 750 million people across Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – were impacted by one or more climate-related disasters in the last 20 years, according to the [World Bank](#). This number is only set to grow as temperatures continue to increase.

Research suggests that the Global South will suffer the most from climate change, and that South Asia will be one of the [hardest-hit](#) regions. Climate change is predicted to displace [62 million](#) South Asian people by 2050, according to research from ActionAid International and Climate Action Network South Asia.

In late June, U.S. News sat down with Saleemul Huq, a climate change scientist from Bangladesh and the director of the country's [International Center for Climate Change and Development](#), to discuss why South Asia is so vulnerable to climate change and how extreme weather in the region has sparked innovative solutions to climate-related displacement. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**We've seen multiple natural disasters happen in South Asia in the span of the past month – from deadly heatwaves in India and Pakistan to the recent floods in Bangladesh. What is it about South Asia that makes the region particularly vulnerable to extreme weather as global temperatures rise?**

It's a combination of climate and geography. And in particular, for Bangladesh, we are a highly populous country with [over] 160 million people living in less than 150,000 square kilometers (about 58,000 square miles) on the delta of two of the world's biggest rivers – the Ganges and the Brahmaputra – which regularly flood. In fact, we have floods in Bangladesh right now as we speak. It's a combination of weather patterns changing, plus the geography of our country itself. And that's true of other parts of South Asia as well.

**Of course, South Asia's infrastructure plays a major role in the region's ability to respond to climate change. Can you talk about how infrastructure issues in South Asia make its populations particularly vulnerable to extreme weather?**

I'm not sure if infrastructure itself is the cause of vulnerability. I would say lack of appropriate infrastructure is more appropriate. We don't have air conditioning for heat waves. We don't have houses in the coastal area to survive cyclones. It is lack of appropriate or sufficient infrastructure to protect the people that is the cause rather than infrastructure causing the impacts.

**Despite monetary and infrastructural challenges, some really innovative solutions to climate change are coming out of South Asia – like Bangladesh's cyclone warning and shelter [program](#), which sends out warnings regarding impending cyclones and connects people with shelters. What do you think Western countries can do to support these efforts both in South Asia and across the Global South?**

I've noted and written about the moves that Bangladesh in particular, but others in South Asia have also made, in being better prepared for climatic hazards like cyclones and floods. And that has indeed improved. One metric that we use to measure is the number of people who die from climate change. It used to be big cyclones – the deaths were in the hundreds of thousands. Nowadays, they've been brought down to [a] few dozen. In fact, we have a 1 in a 100-year flood going on right now, but the deaths have been a few dozen. We've been able to evacuate most people. It's still a lot of damage and people are affected. But we don't lose lives as much as we used to. That is a great improvement. Now what we need countries to do to help us with support, with funding, with technology. We are a poor country. We can't afford to do everything ourselves.

**Are there any support systems or solutions that have been developed in South Asia to natural disasters that you think other countries should take note of?**

Absolutely, I'd say there are two [solutions]. One [is] more of a top-down technology one, which is improving warning systems through satellite communications. We have a much better early warning system now in South Asia for cyclones and floods and events like that so that people can take precautions and be better prepared and, particularly, not lose their lives because they know it's coming. They can evacuate and move their things. They still are affected but they don't have to lose their lives.

The second [solution] is much more of a bottom-up one where the population in general is empowered and enabled and educated to know what to do. We have regular school runs in schools on what happens in a cyclone, what happens in a flood. School kids are assigned houses to go to evacuate elderly people and take them to shelters. We have a near-perfect evacuation system that [allows] people look after each other and their neighbors ... And again, as I said, the impact still happens, but they don't kill people anymore as they used to in the past.

**That's really interesting to hear about how climate change education is implemented into school curriculums. On a global perspective, is there anything you would change about the way that climate change is taught about or discussed?**

Absolutely. I think that school kids around the world need to be learning about climate change, both at a global level but also at the local level, depending on where they happen to be – including in the United States and in rich countries. Because rich country people are not

necessarily aware of the impacts that they will face as well and are facing nowadays. So everybody needs to be made aware of what the impacts are going to be, what they are likely to be, what you do when they happen, how you prepare yourself. People living in the hurricane belt in the U.S. – they know about hurricanes, they know when they get the warning they prepare themselves, but other people who don't get hurricanes don't know. And so that's something that everybody needs to be learning.

**There's a significant disparity in carbon emissions between countries in the Global South versus in the West. How does this disparity play a role in deciding who the responsibility falls on for finding climate change solutions?**

I think it's very clearly the responsibility of the big emitting countries to help the poorer countries. The good news is that they acknowledge that and they have promised to help. But the help they're giving is nowhere near what they promised. So the rich countries [promised](#) to give \$100 billion a year to poorer countries to tackle climate change [by] 2020 – which was two years ago – and they haven't done it. They haven't reached \$100 billion a year yet. So that's something we expect them to do.

**What will the future look like for South Asia if we don't slow global temperature rise? And what will it look like for the Global South as a whole?**

The future looks very grim for the whole world, particularly South Asia because it's very vulnerable. If we continue to raise global temperatures well above 1.5 degrees [Celsius] – we've agreed to keep it below 1.5 degrees, but we are not on track to do that – so we need to be raising our ambitions very, very rapidly and quickly to stay below 1.5. That's the threshold which we feel is manageable. But if it goes above 1.5 degrees, then it isn't only South Asia that is going to suffer. It's going to be the whole world that suffers the impacts of climate change. And we haven't seen anything yet. It's going to get a hell of a lot worse.