



Uncertain Climate Change; Certain Natural Hazards: Perception and Communication of Climate Change Risks in the Coastal Regions of Bangladesh and India

S. Mahmud

Institute of Journalism and Communication Studies/KlimaCampus, University of Hamburg, Germany
(shameem.mahmud@uni-hamburg.de)

While the science of anthropogenic global warming is gaining increasing scientific validity, its effect in the form of 'climate change' is still debated and a matter of 'uncertain science'. The causal relation between climate change and natural hazards is yet to establish, but there are increasing trends linking these two phenomena together in media and policy discourses with possible impacts on public perception. Within this context, HazMan - 'Adaptive Hazard Management and Climate Change Communication' project is concerned with understanding public perception and communication about risks of 'climate change' and 'natural hazards'. This research project considers public risk perception and communication as two integral and important components of hazard management, which can influence policy decisions as well as people's behavioural actions in dealing natural hazards.

HazMan takes two geographically similar coastal regions of India and Bangladesh as the cases, which are considered as highly vulnerable to natural hazards (e.g., storms and storm surges). To add to their constant hazard vulnerabilities, possibility of human-induced climate change has become a new threat to millions of people living in these coastal areas. The regions are considered as most vulnerable because of geographic locations, high dependency on nature for livelihood activities, and low socio-economic resilience against geo-hazards. The two study locations are politically divided and parts of two different media systems, but share common geographic, socio-economic and cultural conditions, and experience similar kinds of climatic risks (e.g., cyclones and tidal surges).

The HazMan project mainly aims at understanding how people construct meanings [through communication] about risks originating from certain climatic conditions (geo-hazards) and how these meanings influence their behavioral actions in specific situational contexts of climate change debate. It also emphasises on the process (communication) of meaning construction and how the people understand (perceive) and act (livelihood behavior) within their constructed realities.

Based on grounded theory method of data collection and analysis, in-depth interviews (n=38) are the main source of data of this study, supplemented by participant observation and field notes. The study cases are two coastal regions – Gosaba in West Bengal of India and Satkhira district of Bangladesh.

As the study result shows respondents in both cases demonstrate an increased level of familiarity with the term 'climate change'. The study also identifies critical roles of media as well as NGO campaigns and local opinion leaders in the communication channels of climate change information when acquired knowledge is re-constructed both individually and socially within the socio-cultural and geographical domains of the respondents. However, such familiarity with the topic does not translate into knowledge about causes and consequences of climate change. Although respondents show an overwhelm tendency to link local weather variances with the issue of climate change, they are largely 'confused' and 'uncertain' about possible impacts of climate change in their respective locality and what solutions are appropriate to adapt with changing climatic conditions.