

Does public participation work in climate change adaptation? Evidence from coastal Bangladesh

Abstract

Public participation is a key to the success of climate change adaptation. However, participation practice often falls short of its promises, particularly in vulnerable regions. This study critically examines five adaptation projects, assessing how participation is practised and contributes to adaptation success, using a qualitative approach for data collection (KII and group discussion) and analysis (thematic analysis). Drawing on eight indicators, the study explores the challenges that hinder meaningful participation in climate change adaptation (CCA) and identifies root causes. The study finds that although participation is commonly included in CCA, it rarely influences adaptation design and key decision-making processes in coastal Bangladesh. Participation is predominantly externally driven and fundamentally shaped by various existing deep-rooted power dynamics and inequalities. While women and marginalised groups are nominally included, they have little influence over adaptation decisions. Inadequate task definition, inadequate early involvement, ineffective feedback mechanism and limited resources result in poor participation. On a positive note, participation in CCA enhances community awareness, increases stakeholder engagement, contributes to achieving cost-effectiveness and ensure good governance. In this context, without rethinking the design and implementation of public participation in CCA, public participation is at risk of becoming a procedural formality rather than a transformative tool for climate adaptation.

Keywords

public participation, climate change adaptation, Bangladesh, coastal adaptation, community-based adaptation, adaptation governance