The State of Knowledge: River Dwellers in Northern Bangladesh

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I carry out fieldwork among those who live on silt islands that form and erode with regularity within the Brahmaputra-Jamuna River in Bangladesh. This community is best described as ethnic Bengalis who are itinerant farmers. In other words, they have to take up and move every time their villages and fields erode and they seek to move to areas close in nature to their own. They have to do this both because they are poor and such land is cheap to rent but also because they know the mode of farming most appropriate for flood plains and soil with alluvial deposits.

In the 7 years I have been working with these people, I have seen quite a lot of input of information on disaster risk management, slowing transitioning into climate change risk management. But the basis of knowledge is still very underdeveloped for this community. One cannot say that they experience a blanket rise in warming and changing seasonalities and intensities of rain because their experience is different as according to the topography that they live on. So those on high ground, experience dryness as the specific quality of the rising temperature. Those on low lands experience water logging as their experience of rising temperature. How do we not only turn our focus from the coastal areas of Bangladesh (a particularly problematic area, without doubt) to northern riverine areas but also how do we attend to the specifics of human experience? These are challenges for researchers and policy makers.