

Review Article

Portrayal of Livelihood, Climate Change and Adaptation of Silt Island Inhabitants of Bangladesh: A Literature Review

S. M. Humayun Kabir

Bangladesh Water Development Board, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Corresponding Author : smhumayunk@gmail.com

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Abstract - According to a study, 5 percent of the total population of Bangladesh lives in the Chars (Silt Islands) areas. They reside on the transient riverine and coastal islands, facing a multitude of socio-economic and environmental challenges. This study tries to find their pattern of suffering through secondary data, reviewing 28 research articles, including a round table. The study also tries to find the major focus of researchers on the inhabitants of the Char Islands of Bangladesh. The 28 articles, however, were reviewed and found to encompass three major themes: livelihood, climate change, and adaptation. Out of 28 articles, 14 articles were on livelihood issues, 9 on climate change issues, and 5 articles were on adaptation-related issues of the Silt Island inhabitants of Bangladesh. Most articles have represented the scenario of char dwellers' livelihood issues, which depend on subsistence agriculture, fishing, daily labor, or seasonal migration. Frequent natural disasters add to their sufferings, leading to repeated displacement and loss of income sources. Additionally, limited access to markets, modern farming technologies, credit, and training further constrains their ability to increase productivity. Moreover, Climate Change hits them initially and acts as a poverty multiplier, deepening their vulnerability. For adaptation, they rely on a combination of traditional knowledge, community-based strategies, and external NGO or government support to adapt to their harsh and changing environment. The research articles concluded by explaining the livelihood, coping techniques with climate change and the adaptation strategies of char dwellers of 14 districts of Bangladesh.

Keywords - Adaptation, Bangladesh, Char Dwellers, Climate Change, Livelihood.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh, the world's largest delta, formed by three great rivers —the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna —is a South Asian country adjacent to India and Myanmar. The country is the seventh most populous country in the world (BBS, 2022).

Besides, more than 1000 people live per square kilometer across the country (UNFPA, n. d.), while in the capital, Dhaka, it ranked the sixth most populous city in the world (Dhaka Tribune, January 14, 2022). The poorer and landless people live in the Char lands as well as on the sand islands in the country. About 6.5 million people (5 percent of the total population of Bangladesh) live in the Chars (Rakibul & Malek, 2018).

Moreover, the country has a long history of colonial suppression. Bangladesh gained its independence from Pakistan in December 1971 after a devastating liberation war that claimed millions of lives. In recent years, the country has shown remarkable economic progress and is recognized for having one of the largest youth labor forces in the world. In

2018, it met the necessary benchmarks to begin the process of graduating from the group of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) (Quarmal, 2020).

Bangladesh is the world's largest delta, surrounded by the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna. The rivers drain an area of about 1.72 million sq km, of which only about 7 percent lies within Bangladesh and finally empties to the Bay of Bengal through the Lower Meghna Estuary. The Meghna estuary is a very robust estuarine and coastal system.

The Lower Meghna River ranks first globally in terms of sediment discharge and third in water discharge, following only the Amazon and Congo rivers (Sokolewicz & van Staveren, 2011).

The char lands of Bangladesh, riverine and coastal islands formed by silt deposition, are among the most vulnerable and marginalized regions in the country. Home to millions of people, these unstable lands are marked by poverty, ecological fragility, and chronic underdevelopment. Char dwellers face multidimensional challenges, most of which are exacerbated



by the accelerating impacts of climate change. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, prolonged flooding, riverbank erosion, and salinity intrusion not only threaten livelihoods but also compromise basic human needs, including food, water, and shelter (Islam et al., 2014).

Approximately 20 million people—about 12.5 percent of the country's total population—live on chars, which cover nearly 8% of the nation's land area. An additional 15–20 million people reside along riverbank areas at risk of erosion (M. Zaman and M. Alam, 2021).

Climate-induced hazards have led to recurring food insecurity and malnutrition in char communities, particularly during flood and lean seasons. Agricultural productivity is declining due to salinity and changing cropping patterns, while limited market access and weak infrastructure intensify food crises (B. Roy, M. Ullah, and M. Rahman, 2015).

Moreover, sanitation and clean water access remain critically low; open defecation increases during floods, and water sources often become contaminated, causing outbreaks of waterborne diseases (M. S. Islam, S. Sultana, and M. A. Miah, 2014).

Despite these hardships, char dwellers exhibit strong resilience through indigenous adaptation strategies—such as floating agriculture, homestead elevation, and seasonal migration.

However, the scale of climate variability now demands climate-resilient interventions that are scientifically informed, locally grounded, and socially inclusive (M. A. Rahman and M. A. Siddik, 2018). Strengthening institutional support, ensuring access to climate-resilient crops, safe sanitation, and developing sustainable adaptation frameworks are imperative for building long-term resilience in char regions.

Chars, the shifting sandbars and islands in Bangladesh's major rivers and coastal zones, are home to millions of people living under precarious conditions. Frequent flooding, river erosion, and salinity intrusion disrupt their lives, causing repeated displacement and economic instability. Coupled with poor infrastructure, low literacy, health crises, and gender disparity, these areas represent one of the most vulnerable zones in Bangladesh.

A World Bank report released on April 24, 2025, warns that 3 million additional Bangladeshis are projected to be pushed into extreme poverty (living on less than \$2.15/day PPP), raising the rate from 7.7 percent in 2023 to 9.3 percent by the end of 2025. Alongside this, the national poverty rate is expected to climb to 22.9 percent in 2025, up from around 20.5 percent in 2024, (bdnews24.com/economy/488e5eb8c40a, 2025)

The Bangladesh government has taken some initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty, improving education, and enhancing public health among char dwellers, especially those in the Teesta River irrigation area. The Char Development and Settlement Project (CDSP) launched in 1994 as a successor to the Land Reclamation Project. CDSP integrates water management, land titling, infrastructure, and livelihood interventions across coastal and riverine chars via multiple government agencies (cdsp.org.bd). In 2024, the Environment Ministry initiated the construction of 900 char homes, installed rainwater harvesting, built mini-shelters, and provided solar power infrastructure (The Daily Star, Dhaka, 2024).

Besides, a number of government and non-government organizations have played a significant role in improving the lives of char dwellers by complementing and often filling gaps left by state-led development. Given the frequent isolation, infrastructural deficits, and environmental vulnerability of char regions, NGOs have targeted multi-dimensional interventions in poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, and climate adaptation.

Organizations like Friendship, BRAC, Swisscontact, and Practical Action have implemented programs ranging from mobile health clinics, floating schools, and homestead-based agriculture to climate-resilient housing and livelihood diversification (e.g., sheep rearing, vegetable farming). These efforts have significantly improved food security, women's empowerment, access to primary education, and resilience to climate-induced disasters.

For instance, Friendship NGO operates floating hospitals and satellite clinics to provide healthcare in hard-to-reach chars in the Teesta and Brahmaputra basins. Similarly, Swisscontact's M4C project, in partnership with the Rural Development Academy (RDA), connects over 200,000 char households to agricultural markets and microfinance. Such initiatives have been crucial in reducing extreme poverty, enhancing income generation, and building community resilience in some of the most neglected parts of Bangladesh.

The above-mentioned part of this article has briefly discussed the role of government and non-government initiatives for changing the fate of char dwellers of Bangladesh. Through reviewing the literature of research articles will try to address the livelihood challenges, climate impacts, and adaptation practices among char dwellers in Bangladesh. Furthermore, some critical issues like access to information, media literacy, education, public health, gender dynamics, and institutional support systems in char regions are largely underexplored. This research will find the effectiveness and long-term viability of adaptation strategies. Additionally, the lack of inquiry into the policy frameworks and governance mechanisms that affect access to essential services, land rights, and disaster risk management in these

transient, high-risk areas will be found through reviewing research articles.

1.1. Potential Research Questions

1. What are the issues of research articles on char dwellers of Bangladesh?
2. What are basic livelihood problems, climate change effects and adaptation patterns?

2. Materials and Methods

The current literature review focuses on the tendencies of research on Char dwellers in Bangladesh. Based on scholarly publications, this review article tried to find the trends of well and woes prospects, the impact of climate change, livelihood and adaptation and limitations of inhabitants of char areas of Bangladesh. Online databases such as Google, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and online news portals were primary sources for gathering relevant literature. The exploration was conducted using fixed keywords, including "Char dwellers", "Crisis", "Livelihood", "Sufferings of Char dwellers of Bangladesh" and "Literature review".

Thirty articles that included these terms in their title or abstract and were published in different journals were identified for this review. These articles concentrated on the different aspects of Char dwellers in Bangladesh. Moreover, the articles also highlighted the own experiences of char dwellers and trends of policymakers. The following tables present the details of the selected literature on Char dwellers in Bangladesh.

3. Literature Review

Here is a review of literature categorized into several important areas like Flood and Livelihood Impacts, Health and Sanitation, Climate Change Vulnerability and Displacement, Adaptation Strategies, and Institutional and Policy Issues. This body of literature collectively demonstrates that char dwellers in Bangladesh face multi-dimensional vulnerability, from environmental hazards and infrastructural gaps to social exclusion. Adaptive strategies are rich and diverse, but are undermined by systemic neglect.

Several studies highlight how recurrent flooding devastates the lives and economies of char dwellers. M. Sirajul Islam, M. Solaiman, M. S. Islam, T. R. Tusher, and M. H. Kabir (2015) reported that 82 percent of farmers in Sirajganj experienced flood impacts, losing 59 percent of their cultivable land, with few alternative livelihoods. Similarly, B. Hossain, M. S. Sohel, and C. M. Ryakitimbo (2020) observed that floods in Gaibandha's char villages reduced household earnings by two-thirds, triggering reliance on loans and asset sales.

M. Nazirul, I. Sarker, and A. Ali (2015) identified 25 causes of poverty in char lands of Gaibandha and Jamalpur,

ranging from poor infrastructure to river erosion, while S. Rahman (2017) linked poverty to low human and financial capital, recommending institutional support for resilience. The article found that 70 percent of agricultural households in Char Montaz faced losses due to climate-related events like salinity and floods, prompting a shift toward non-farm occupations. Similarly, F. Raihan and M. M. Hossain (2021) emphasized the lack of education, infrastructure, and alternative livelihoods as core factors of vulnerability in Tangiar Haor.

3.1. Health and Sanitation Conditions

Health infrastructure is critically underdeveloped in char areas. K. S. Halim and M. J. Mia (2025) identified geographic isolation, poor transport, and economic barriers as the main challenges to healthcare in Char Nizam, Bhola. Climate-induced health vulnerabilities were also documented by F. Raihan and M. M. Hossain (2021), who found rising respiratory and waterborne diseases due to flooding and erosion in Gaibandha, compounded by a lack of formal healthcare access.

3.2. Climate Change Vulnerability and Displacement

Char dwellers are increasingly vulnerable to climate-induced displacement and disruptions to their livelihoods. E. Alam, M. S. Khan, and R. Salam (2022) confirmed high exposure to coastal hazards in Dammar Char, Noakhali. Studies by B. Roy, M. Ullah, and M. Rahman (2015) documented key perceived hazards like drought, floods, and erosion, and revealed community adjustments in cropping schedules and homestead elevations. N. M. Saifullah (2010) reported that 78 percent viewed flooding as a natural and predictable event, leading to adaptive behavior in cropping and occupation selection. M. S. Islam, T. Hasan, M. S. I R Chowdhury, M. H. Rahaman, and T. R. Tusher (2012) showed erosion and flood coping mechanisms, but early warning systems were absent.

3.3. Adaptation Strategies and Indigenous Knowledge

Char dwellers increasingly rely on indigenous knowledge and local innovation for adaptation. M. Sirajul Islam, M. Solaiman, M. S. Islam, T. R. Tusher, and M. H. Kabir (2015) reported traditional responses in Tangail, such as farming system shifts and settlement relocation based on flood patterns. M. O. Faruk and K. L. Maharjan (2024) found that farmers in Sirajganj prioritized income and crop risks over other concerns, indicating a rational, risk-based approach to adaptation.

Sarker et al. (2020) detailed localized strategies such as crop rotation, seasonal migration, and livelihood diversification, which strengthened resilience despite low formal support. M. Z. Hoque et al. (2023) described advanced Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) practices in Bhola, including floating seedbeds, agroforestry, saline-tolerant crops, and solar irrigation.

Ahmed et al. (2021) highlighted adjusted planting calendars and short-duration crops as key responses, while S. N. Islam (2010) emphasized forced settlement relocation every 3-5 years due to erosion.

3.4. Institutional and Policy Issues

Institutional constraints remain a critical problem. M. A. Rahman and M. M. Rahman (2011) revealed a dominance of

informal handloom labor and low per-capita income (US\$0.54–0.87). Rashid (2016) connected asset-transfer programs to child labor and increased dropout rates by 260% in Kurigram, raising questions about development interventions. The Daily Prothom Alo Roundtable (2023) identified access barriers to justice and advocated for digital village courts and broader institutional reform.

4. Review of the 28 literatures on Char dwellers in Bangladesh

SL	Author, Publication Year	Journal Reference	Objectives and Methods	Key Findings
Livelihood-related articles-14				
1	Islam, M. S., et al, 2015	Journal of Scientific Research Vol. 28 No. 2	To investigate flood impacts on farmers of 3 char areas under Sirajganj district of Bangladesh using household surveys.	Study finds around 82 percent of char dwellers impacted by floods, 59 percent of land inundated; farmers lack alternative occupations and recommend flood-tolerant crops and institutional support.
2	Islam, M. S., et al, 2014	Journal of the BAU Vol. 11 No. 2	To examine sanitation and drinking water conditions in flood-affected char lands in Tangail district of Bangladesh, employing the survey method.	Around 19 percent of households practice open defecation during floods; NGO support is available, but sanitation remains unreliable; there is a high risk of waterborne diseases.
3	Sarker, M.N.I. et al 2015	Natural and Social Sciences Vol. 2	To identify the background and solution behind the poverty of the two riverine villages of Gaibandha and Jamalpur districts using a household survey.	The article lists 25 causes behind poverty.
4	Raihan, F. et al 2021	Water and Climate Change 12 (7)	Assessed the livelihood vulnerability of communities of the Sylhet district of Bangladesh. Used Semi-structured household surveys, field visits, and FGDs.	Lack of education, health care, and alternative livelihoods during extreme events was found to be behind livelihood risk.
5	Rahman, M. A. et al 2018	Environmental Science & Natural Resources Vol. 11 No. 1-2	Aimed to evaluate the livelihood status evaluated in Chapai Nawabganj district of Bangladesh using a household survey.	The study indicates that Char dwellers are predominantly poor; low human, social, and financial capital hinder their well-being; institutional support is recommended.
6	Rashid, M. S. 2016	International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies, 4(8)	Wanted to investigate how child labour linked to asset-transfer programs affects school attendance and dropout rates in the char of Kurigram district of Bangladesh. Used a quasi-experimental comparison	The paper finds that treated-group children worked 1.62 hours more daily and attended school 8.18 days fewer monthly. Dropout rates rose by 260 percent (treated) vs. 37.5 percent (control).

7	Rahman, M. A. et al 2011	Journal of Bangladesh Association of Young Researchers	Livelihood practices of char dwellers in Sirajganj and Chadpur districts of Bangladesh, as assessed using participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools and household surveys.	Major engagement in handloom labor; non-farm income contributes significantly, per-capita income US\$0.54–0.87 per day.
8	Islam, S. N., et al 2010	Advance online publication. doi.org/10.1007/s11707-010-0122-5	To analyze the frequency, patterns, and processes of settlement relocations among char-dwellers in Madaripur district of Bangladesh using the survey method.	Most char dwellers reported being relocated approximately every 3–5 years due to embankment breaches and riverbank erosion.
9	Daily Prothom Alo Roundtable 2022	en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/roundtable/6og7315cm?	To find ways to improve the living standard of char dwellers in Bangladesh. Method: Roundtable meeting with the newspaper.	Discussed barriers to justice access—costly, remote village court services, and the need for digital union expansion.
10	Sarker, M. N. I., et al, 2019	Journal of Life and Earth Sciences, JU 4(1): 54-64	To assess the livelihood risk of char land households in the Tangail district using direct observation, interviews, and FGDs.	Seasonal flood, riverbank erosion, drought and Char's isolated position are major problems.
11	Rahman, S., et al 2017	American Journal of Modern Energy, 3(4), 58-64	To assess the risk of agricultural livelihoods to climate change in the coastal Patuakhali district using a field survey.	The study finds 70 percent of households experienced agricultural livelihood losses. Many shifted to alternate livelihood activities (non-farm).
12	Alam, E., et al. 2022	Natural Hazards 113:329-344	To conduct a household-level vulnerability assessment in Dammar Char under the Noakhali district of Bangladesh, a survey-based study was conducted.	The study said that people have a high vulnerability to coastal hazards and disasters.
13	Halim, K. S., et al. 2025	Social Science Review 41(2), 99-118.	To examine the barriers to accessing healthcare among the char inhabitants of Bhola district, Bangladesh, using fieldwork and interviews.	Key obstacles include geographic remoteness, poor infrastructure, and transport costs.
14	Sarkar, et al. 2016	Global Journal of Human-Social Science, 16(B2), 9–22.	To analyze the health status of women and children in Gangachara char under Rangpur district using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) employing GIS mapping with field surveys.	The study finds high morbidity among char dwellers; poor access to sanitation, emergency care, and health infrastructure severely affects maternal and child health.
Climate Change Effect Related Articles-9				
15	Roy, et al. 2015	Environmental Science and Natural Resources	To analyze climatic parameters, vulnerability, hazards, and adaptation in Kazipara under the Sirajganj district of Bangladesh. Used FGDs, direct observation, and stakeholder workshops.	Char dwellers face threats such as drowning, water scarcity, erosion, crop loss, and animal diseases; common adaptation measures include raised homesteads, drought-tolerant crops, and embankment repair.

16	Parvin, et al. 2024	International Journal of Environment and Climate Change, 14(2), 407-422	To examine how climate change affects livelihoods and ecosystem dynamics in the Teesta River basin char lands of Rangpur and Niphamary districts, a survey will be conducted.	The study finds 93 percent of respondents recognize climate change impacts.
17	Islam, M., et al 2013.	Environmental Science and Natural Resources, 5(2), 251-261.	To explore and assess the indigenous survival strategies employed by char dwellers in the Tangail districts of Bangladesh using social surveys, KII, FGDs, and field observation.	The findings of erosion and flood coping in indigenous responses were noted, but early warning systems were lacking.
18	Saifullah, N. M. 2010.	Dissertation for the Degree of Master BRAC University, Bangladesh.	To investigate char dwellers' of Kazipara under Sirajganj district of Bangladesh perception of climate variability (e.g., flood, erosion). Method: Survey	Explored char dwellers' perceptions of climate change. 78 percent of respondents said that floods are a natural process.
19	Hossain, B., et al 2022	Front. Psychol.	To investigate how climate change-driven hazards (like flooding, river erosion, and crop loss) lead to internal displacement of char dwellers of Gaibandha. Used the household survey, KII.	The study documented climate-induced displacement, post-displacement livelihood challenges, and coping mechanisms among char dwellers.
20	Fahim, T. C., et al. 2024	International Journal of Rural Management 20 (1), 106-123.	Aims to examine the impacts of salinity intrusion on the livelihoods of char dwellers in Satkhira district of Bangladesh using mixed-methods.	The study finds that salinity intrusion forced 27 percent of households to change their livelihood patterns.
21	Hossain, B., et al. 2020	Progress in Disaster Science	To investigate the effects of floods on livelihoods and management mechanisms in char villages under Gaibandha district, Bangladesh, using a household survey.	The study finds that flooding cut earnings by two-thirds; employment loss was widespread. Households resorted to loans and asset sales. Policy guidance should focus on credit/insurance and disaster policies.
22	Hossain, B., et al. 2021	International Journal of Environmental Health Research, 32 (11)	Finds the effect of climate change on health, and its adaptation strategies in the Gaibandha district of Bangladesh. It used mixed methods.	The study finds that a high incidence of flooding, erosion, and drought correlates with respiratory, diarrheal, and skin illnesses.
23	Ahmed, Z., et al. 2021	Land Use Policy, 103	To assess climate risk perception and agricultural adaptation among char island farmers of Kamarjani Union, Gaibandha District. Used household survey, FGDs, and risk index.	The study finds that farmers perceive drought, erosion, and floods as the main hazards: adjusted planting times, short-duration crops, and alternative practices.
Adaptation Related Articles-5				
24	Islam, et al 2015	Environmental Science & Natural Resources	To explore indigenous adaptation to flood and erosion in char inhabitants of	The study said that the inhabitants of char land are at high flood risk. The char people

			the Tangail district of Bangladesh using household surveys and FGDs.	use their indigenous knowledge to adapt to this diverse situation.
25	Hoque, M. Z., et al. 2023	Agriculture and Ecology Research International, 24(5), 87-97.	To evaluate charland farmers' perceptions on climate change and adaptation in the Bhola district of Bangladesh. The study employed face-to-face interviews.	The study reveals that farmers identified cyclones, salinity, erosion, and drought. CSA practices included saline-tolerant rice, raised seedbeds, floating-bed systems, agroforestry, mulching, organic fertilizer, alternative crops (sunflower, soybean, and watermelon), fodder planting, pumps, and pest traps. Food diversity remained low; farmers stressed the need for infrastructure like embankment reinforcement and irrigation.
26	Sarker, et al. 2020	Land Use Policy, 94, 104574	To identify indigenous adaptation plans of char dwellers in Gaibandha district of Bangladesh using a survey of households.	A number of local adaptation strategies are adopted by char dwellers in the face of climate change effects, which enhance their livelihood resilience.
27	Faruk, M. O., et al. 2023	Sustainability, 15(18), Article 13727. doi.org/10.3390/su151813727	To identify and analyze socio-demographic and cognitive factors influencing char-land farmers of Chouhali in Sirajganj district of Bangladesh using the survey method.	Farmers prioritized risks affecting crop production and income over psychological or health-related concerns.
28	Ahmed, Z., et. al 2021	Land Use Policy, 103,	To evaluate how char-island farmers in Gaibandha district of Bangladesh perceive climate change hazards and to examine their farming adaptation strategies. The research used a survey and FGD.	The article finds the local adaptation strategies.

5. Results and Discussion

In this paper, 28 research articles related to the Char Island inhabitants of Bangladesh have been reviewed.

- Out of 64 districts, the research papers were found to be specially focused on 14 districts of Bangladesh, including Sirajganj, Kurigram, Rangpur, Tangail, Jamalpur, Sylhet, Chapai Nawabganj, Madaripur, Chadpur, Patuakhali, Noakhali, Nilphamari, Satkhira and Bhola, while the highest 6 research papers were on Gaibandha districts, 5 on Sirajganj and 4 on Tangail districts. So, it can be assumed that the char dwellers of 14 districts are highly vulnerable to climate change, livelihood and adaptation issues.
- Most studies and surveys were done on a small number of char dwellers of a district, so a holistic picture of char dwellers in Bangladesh has not been found in the research articles.
- Most char inhabitants depend on subsistence agriculture, fishing, daily labor, or seasonal migration for their livelihoods. However, frequent river erosion and floods often wash away farmlands, homes, and livestock, leading to repeated displacement and loss of income sources. Limited access to markets, modern farming technologies, credit, and training further constrains their ability to diversify income or increase productivity.
- Climate change, however, acts as a poverty multiplier for char dwellers, deepening their vulnerability by attacking

every aspect of life—housing, food security, health, education, and economic opportunity.

- The research articles find that the char dwellers in Bangladesh rely on a combination of traditional knowledge, community-based strategies, and external NGO or government support to adapt to their harsh and changing environment.
- The role of mass media and access to information of char dwellers was found to be very little. Studies on long-term solutions for women's empowerment, healthcare, and rights on land, migration, employment generation, digital access, legal literacy, and environmental issues should be stressed in further studies.

6. Conclusion

The study, after reviewing 28 research articles, underscores the multidimensional challenges faced by char

dwellers in Bangladesh. Climate-induced hazards, food insecurity, poor infrastructure, limited education and healthcare, gender inequality, and unemployment contribute to chronic vulnerability. These challenges are deeply interlinked and require a holistic, inclusive approach. Current adaptation practices, though locally devised, remain inadequate without structured support. Policy and institutional interventions must be targeted to break the cycle of marginalization and promote resilience.

In this case, the use of mass media can play a pivotal role in society. Hundreds of inhabitants of small chars of different parts of Bangladesh are still uncared for and deprived of the fundamental rights of the state. Through access to information, the underprivileged people can be aware of their rights and can raise their voice.

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