

Scene on Radio

Season 5, Episode 7: Deluges and Dreams

Transcript

John Biewen: *Season 5 is made possible in part by listeners who've supported our show, and by a grant from the International Women's Media Foundation.*

Amy Westervelt: You know those mind-bending factoids that you hear these days about the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few?

John Biewen: For example, that the world's 25 or so richest billionaires, who could take a trip together on one good-sized private jet — that they've piled up more wealth than the poorest half of the entire global population, almost four billion people?

Amy Westervelt: Jeebus! Yes, yes, just like that, John. Wow. There's a parallel kind of gross inequality when it comes to climate and greenhouse gas emissions. A United Nations report in 2020 found that the richest 1 percent of the global population are responsible for twice the emissions of the poorest *50 percent*. Now, that calculation is about individual behavior.

John Biewen: Right. So richer people drive around in gas guzzlers, use lots of energy at home, take lots of airplane trips for business and pleasure.

Amy Westervelt: That's right. But more important than those individual choices is the way *societies* live based on their very different levels of wealth. The carbon footprint of the *average* American is thirty times that of the average person in ... Bangladesh.

John Biewen: To mention one country not at all randomly.

Amy Westervelt: Mmhmm. A key takeaway in that UN report was that the leading emitters, like China, the U.S., and the European Union, would need to triple their current pledges to cut greenhouse gas emissions, if the world is gonna meet the agreed-upon goal of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. That's their *pledges*, mind you.

John Biewen: So, the big polluter countries in the Global North are congratulating themselves for announcing plans like, we're gonna cut our emissions in half by 2030, from our 2005 levels, and we're gonna achieve net zero by 2050 – put aside for now that while some of them are stepping up their actions somewhat, or at least announcing their intentions to, the big emitters are not putting policies in place to make those pledges happen.

Amy Westervelt: That's right. And a lot of countries are straight up lying about their emissions reductions. So even what they're reporting to have done so far may not actually be true. A new investigation from the *Washington Post* found that the gap between reported and actual emissions is somewhere between 8 and 13 billion tons a year. On top of that, even the *pledges*, if they were hitting them, are not enough.

Climate experts crunching the numbers say rich nations need to cut our emissions by about 8 percent *each year*, year after year, for the coming decade, if we're gonna avoid catastrophic warming.

John Biewen: Catastrophic, meaning we're now on pace to warm the planet by close to 3 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels — that's more than 5 degrees Fahrenheit.

Amy Westervelt: And the results of that kind of warming are basically unthinkable.

John Biewen: With these realities staring us in the face, I gotta say, it is — is poignant the right word? To hear about people in poor, profoundly vulnerable countries — again, countries that did the least to create the emergency that they are suffering from — to learn about actions they're taking to reduce their own emissions.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah. It really puts to shame those with infinitely more power, who just keep dragging their feet.

[Music: Theme]

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio, Season 5: The Repair, Episode 7. I'm John Biewen.

Amy Westervelt: I'm Amy Westervelt. This time, to Bangladesh, that very low-lying country in South Asia that often makes the lists of countries hardest hit by climate disaster.

John Biewen: Bangladesh produces something most Americans use: inexpensive clothing, also called fast fashion. Ready-made garments account for 84 percent of the country's exports, mostly bound for Europe and the U.S. Bangladesh is the third largest exporter of garments, after China and Vietnam.

Amy Westervelt: The industry employs four million people. Most are women, and they've been mostly invisible to the rest of the world, except for catastrophes in the early 2010s, like the Rana Plaza factory collapse that killed more than 1100 people. More recently, there's been a push in the industry toward more sustainable manufacturing, driven in part by western clothing companies and their desire to brand themselves as eco-friendly.

John Biewen: In 2020, international retailers including H&M, Target, and KMart joined garment factories and recyclers in an initiative called the Circular Fashion Partnership. That partnership has pushed Bangladeshi garment producers to establish 125 factories, textile mills and washing facilities with LEED certificates from the Green Building Council. LEED stands for "leadership in energy and environmental design." Of the world's ten highest-ranked eco-friendly factories, seven are in Bangladesh.

Amy Westervelt: That emphasis on sustainability is a way to make a small dent in climate change. But a big, big part of “fast fashion” relies on cheap synthetic fibers made or coated with petrochemicals. And that’s a pretty major problem. We know from various reports — and from that video leaked in summer 2021 of the Exxon lobbyist — that the fossil fuel industry’s big plan for when we all stop using its products in our cars and buildings, is right here: petrochemicals, in the form of plastics and synthetic fibers. By 2030, they’re projected to make up seventy-three percent of all fiber production around the world. Not all synthetic fibers are petrochemical-based, but most of them are. Polyester is, and it accounts for more than 80 percent of synthetic fiber production. This stuff is everywhere and, like with plastic, all this talk of recycling fibers is basically rubbish.

John Biewen: So we can hope that greening Bangladesh’s garment industry is *starting* at making the factories less energy- and water-intensive, but won’t stop there. Tareq Ahmed produced this story for our series. He begins at a LEED-certified garment factory outside Dhaka, Bangladesh’s capital and largest city.

Tareq Ahmed: My producing partner, Tareek, and I drove to the Remi Holdings factory in an export processing zone on the outskirts of Dhaka city. The central compound of this particular factory is about one-third of the size of a soccer field. The space between factories is filled with trees and flower gardens — good for appearances. The factory

operators say it's also good for the workers' health. As our car approached, we saw those employees, particularly the women workers. Some are coming on buses. We also found some are coming on foot. We found one or two bicycles.

[Sound: machine noises, voices]

Tareq Ahmed: Inside the factory, hundreds of women labored at their sewing machines. Sunshine through the windows eliminated the need for artificial light. A huge electric overhead fan — one of the 200 the company uses here — circulated the air. One employee named Sadia has worked in other garment facilities. She says she appreciates that breeze.

Sadia (Bangla)

Voiceover: It keeps our minds cool. Previously, I used to feel irritated when I went home from the factory. Now I return home from work with a cool mind.

Tareq Ahmed: Her co-worker, Fatema Akhter, is another garment industry veteran.

Fatema Akhter (Bangla)

Voiceover: I have been working here for three years. Earlier, I was in another factory which was not green. We are getting vitamin D through sunlight inside the factory and getting pure drinking water after it is recycled at the water treatment plant in our factory.

Tareq Ahmed: That water also is an element in this factory's sustainability. Unlike traditional garment makers, this facility processes its wastewater so, its supervisors say, it is safe enough to drink.

[Sound: running water]

Mahbubur Rahman (Bangla)

Voiceover: Textiles in Bangladesh are totally dependent on water. It needs a huge amount of water.

Tareq Ahmed: The factory's environmental compliance manager, Mahbubur Rahman, says the company prevents chemical runoff from polluting the water beyond its facilities. Remi Holdings also monitors and tries to reduce its emissions into the air. The factory's executive director, Hasan Mahmud, says that effort begins with the way its facilities are built.

Hasan Mahmud (Bangla)

Voiceover: We are actually running this factory with 35% less energy consumption than a typical factory of this size. We have chosen a rooftop solar system. The energy of this rooftop solar is not used at lunch time and during holidays. So, we can push the energy to the national grid.

Tareq Ahmed: The giant ceiling fans that cool the workers operate at 35 watts of electricity instead of the 80 watts that standard fans use.

Hasan Mahmud (Bangla)

Voiceover: We had to import these fans as these are not manufactured here.

Tareq Ahmed: Mr. Hasan says the commitment to efficiency doesn't stop here.

Hasan Mahmud (Bangla)

Voiceover: The windows are double glazed at this factory. Double glazed means that there is a vacuum between layers, with nitrogen gas there. As a result, less heat radiation comes from this. We have to do these things to adhere to the green building concept. It took us a year and a half to build this factory.

Tareq Ahmed: He says that three of the company's factories are LEED certified. Two merited the council's platinum rating, the highest available rating. Mr. Mahmud says the company plans to further reduce the environmental impact.

Hasan Mahmud (Bangla)

Voiceover: Now, we wash each pair of denim pants with 16 gallons of water. But the advanced technology which is coming ahead will help me to wash the same denim with one glass of water. The machines are in the pipeline. As less water will be consumed, it will consume less energy, which will reduce treatment costs.

[Music]

Tareq Ahmed: As Mahmud said, that technology is in the pipeline, not yet in the factory. So for now, the manufacturing process remains very water intensive.

[Break]

Tareq Ahmed: At the same time when the garment industry in Bangladesh tries to mitigate the effects of climate change, many thousands of people in the country are fleeing those same effects. Some have settled in slums near major cities, like this one in

Dhaka, where people from the southernmost part of Bangladesh, Bhola district, have relocated many years ago.

[Sound: ambient noise: vehicles, voices]

Tareq Ahmed: Shanties line both sides of the street. Many have tea stalls out front. In one of these stalls, people were drinking tea and watching television. Erosion along the mighty Meghna River destroyed almost everything these slum dwellers had, they told us. Over the last 40 years, an increasingly destructive cycle of cyclones and sea level rise has led to erosion that causes the river to overflow its banks. The resulting floods swept away lives and land and forced these people out of their home villages. In the slum area, each dwelling is very closely attached to one another. Often, four or five people occupy each room. Minara Begum lives in one of them. We don't have a recording of our interview with her, but this is what she said to me.

Minara Begum voiceover: I came here 26 years ago when I was a little kid. I used to beg for food. My wedding also took place in this slum. I have a daughter and a son. My husband has died. Now I am working as a house maid to support my family. I dream that someday my children will be established and that day this miserable situation will be over.

[Sound: chickens squawking]

Tareq Ahmed: People here dream, and some also organize. They contribute some of their earnings to a landless people's cooperative, raising money to eventually buy land and build housing for its members. Kamal Hussain, the general secretary of this people's cooperative, describes how it started.

Kamal Hussain (Bangla)

Voiceover: In the beginning of 2021, we urged the slum dwellers to save some money every month and do something for our future. That's how the cooperative was initiated. There are about five hundred households in this slum. Around two and a half thousand people live in these houses.

Tareq Ahmed: Mr. Hussain shares a common history with many people in the cooperative.

Kamal Hussain (Bangla)

Voiceover: 25 years ago, I came here with my parents. We were a rich family but the mighty River Meghna took everything away.

Tareq Ahmed: During the day, many of the men who live in the slum are looking for work throughout the capital city. In the early evening, the men return to the slum, where they gather to gossip and relax after the long workday. Nurun Nabi spent much of his life as a fisherman before the supply of fish declined. To keep himself and his family alive, he borrowed a lot of money. Eventually they moved to this slum.

Nurun Nabi (Bangla)

Voiceover: Now, I work as a day laborer along with my two sons. I am educating my youngest daughter and she is on a path to graduate from university. It's very difficult to bear her educational expenses, but I dream of a bright future for her.

Tareq Ahmed: Sitting next to him and sipping a cup of tea is Muhammad Shahjahan, a farmer who moved to this area in 2000.

Muhammad Shahjahan (Bangla)

Voiceover: We had a big business in the village. There were many cows at our farm. It is so painful to remember the past. I came here and started a tailoring shop with training I got before. My present clients are mostly the slum dwellers.

[Music]

Tareq Ahmed: Like others we met in this slum, this man's children are also students, progressing through school. What comes to my mind when I talk with these displaced people is that dreams keep them alive. Education for their children, or a one- or two-room apartment that could become a home of their own in this megacity. People who learn to dream will never lose all their hope.

[Music]

John Biewen: Tareq, those are some compelling stories and voices, thank you.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah. Really. So, Tareq, Bangladesh is the eighth most populous country in the world, with more than 165 million people. I think a lot of us in the West have a general sense of the country's vulnerability to flooding, but could you describe the lay of the land?

Tareq Ahmed: Thank you. Actually, the Bengal Delta is surrounded by big rivers. Rivers like Ganges, Brahmaputra, which flow through China, India, then Bangladesh. And disasters are a most common and normal occurrence here for centuries. But now as the Himalayan glaciers are melting because of global warming, sending more water down these rivers, and the sea level is rising, there are a lot of cyclones and other catastrophic disasters, like floods, droughts, tornadoes, river erosion — and salinity also

is a big problem in some regional districts in Bangladesh. Those are the chronic hazards now millions of people in Bangladesh are facing in the south and southwest parts of the country.

John Biewen: About the green garment factories, like the one you visited, Tareq — and as we said in the intro, Bangladesh is a leader on this, with 7 of the top 10 green factories in the world. What's your sense of why this is happening? Is it the pressure from the Western clothing companies that want to be able to tell their customers their garments come from eco-friendly plants? Or does the Bangladeshi industry have its own motives as well?

Tareq Ahmed: Of course, I must agree with you that the major pressure is from the Western buyers buying products from these garment factories. Particularly, you know, North America and European, Indian, still are the major buyers of our products, garment products. But another reason, which is a very important reason: lack of electricity and power is a big problem in Bangladesh. Particularly, if you talk about industry, I can recall in 20 years, maybe in 2005, 2008, huge number of electricity crises, and factories were struggling, really. And now what is happening the last ten years: the large factories are producing their own electricity. They are having the power plants — which are called independent power plants, small power plants — which is very much expensive. So that is another reason, a major reason, I must say, these factories are trying to shift their look toward making their factories small, greener rather than what it was before.

Amy Westervelt: Tareq, Bangladesh marked 50 years of independence in 2021. As a citizen and a documentary filmmaker, what are your thoughts on the national government in your country and its approach to the climate emergency? Has the Bangladeshi government shown much independence from the West's dominant, pro-growth, extractive approach to economic development?

Tareq Ahmed: Actually, the government is formulating good policies, like they've formulated the Bangladesh climate change strategy and action plan in 2009. It now calls its environmental protection agency the Ministry of Forest, Environment, and Climate Change, signaling how seriously they're taking the climate emergency. But on the other hand, the government is inconsistently enforcing its environmental policies. For example, the government is now constructing a coal-based power plant at Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world, adjacent to Bay of Bengal. And it is constructing that power plant with Indian support. Bangladesh is also not in the list of countries that have pledged to end deforestation by 2030 at this just-ended COP26. Also we have problems of rapid urbanization and deforestation, which are affecting the environment, and again the government has failed to address those trends. Our whole economy is heavily dependent now on growth-based economic models, a typically Western model. That is also a real problem, another problem, I must say.

[Music]

John Biewen: Tareq, thank you. Tareq Ahmed. He is the director of the Dhaka DocLab, a pitching and mentoring platform for documentary filmmakers in Bangladesh.

Amy Westervelt: John, just one last thought on the fight over clothing manufacturing. You've got these attempts to green the industry on one hand, and on the other, the oil industry betting its future on petrochemical-based fibers. But the root of the problem is overconsumption. Those of us in the rich world, especially, buy and throw away too much new clothing, so much more than we need. It's one more way in which our habits are just flat-out unsustainable, and need to change.

John Biewen: Yeah. We promised in an earlier episode that we would talk in more depth about climate reparations. This seems like a fitting time to do that.

Amy Westervelt: Definitely. If the rich nations of the Global North owe money to any country for climate damages, it's Bangladesh.

John Biewen: We should start by explaining that climate reparations, in the context of international negotiations like the one in Glasgow in 2021, usually refer to "loss and damages." That's sort of the jargon. That's money that rich countries pay to poor countries for the damage climate change has caused them. But sometimes people include the cost of *adapting* to climate change as well. Moving people from one part of a country to another, like what's been proposed in Indonesia, for example, or helping poorer countries build sea walls or transition to renewable energy more quickly.

Amy Westervelt: And actually, it's a renowned Bangladeshi scientist, Saleemul Huq, who's been pushing this idea at the international climate summits forever. In Glasgow, a new Loss & Damages fund was proposed. It was supposed to create a fund solely to compensate poorer countries for the impacts of climate change. And it was presented as kind of a matter of historic responsibility, this pot of money that would at least try to compensate countries in the Global South for irreparable losses, like the disappearance of land, culture, and ecosystems. But, once again, rich countries blocked it, especially the US, UK, and the European Union.

Channel 4 News, UK, November 2021, Saleemul Huq: I'm talking about the most vulnerable people on the planet. They came here expecting to hear something being done about loss and damage, and all we got was a "dialogue" to talk more about it. That's absolutely unacceptable. It's happening now. Loss and damage is a reality. It's not about adaptation and mitigation anymore.

John Biewen: That is disappointing. But I suppose we shouldn't be surprised because those same countries have failed to deliver on even the most modest pledges they've made to pay reparations in the past. In 2009, at the climate summit in Copenhagen — that's when talk of global climate reparations really started to make headlines — rich countries made a pledge that by 2020, they'd be paying poor countries 100 billion dollars a year to help them adapt to climate change, mitigate the problems it's causing,

and transition to renewable energy. Well, the rich North broke that promise and fell 20 billion dollars short in 2020.

Amy Westervelt: And then in 2021, at the COP26 summit in Scotland, some rich countries said, oh sorry, our bad, we're gonna do better going forward, and they did try to promise to make up that difference. We'll see if they live up to that. But, honestly, the fact that their only promise in this arena is to pay what they already owe, which they're already behind on, and not any more, is pretty infuriating.

John Biewen: Yes. Because, surprise, 100 billion a year is grossly inadequate, anyway. Climate-related disasters cost an estimated 95 billion dollars *in the United States alone* in 2020, with our fires and hurricanes and floods. Imagine what an accurate total number would be for all of the poor, formerly colonized countries in the Global South.

Amy Westervelt: In recent years the conversation around climate reparations has also expanded to include righting the wrongs of the past, not just by paying for what's been lost and damaged already but changing the systems that enabled all that damage in the first place. So, kind of a forward-looking approach. And we're gonna get into later this season.

John Biewen: Yes, we will. People have tried to quantify the debt. Based on one analysis, the United States has produced about one-fifth of all climate warming

emissions — more than 500 gigatons, or 500 billion tons, of carbon dioxide. There's a number that's impossible to wrap your head around. We've done that over a century and a half, but mostly in the last fifty years. Kind of makes me wonder what my share is, Amy, but let's just say I've taken more than my share of airplane flights. Economists have also come up with a number for the damage that carbon dioxide causes: 100 dollars a ton. So, do the math and the U.S. owes the world 50 trillion dollars. China would come in second at 30 trillion according to this analysis, having become the largest emitter in recent years. The UK is a distant third, owing 8 trillion for its historic share of emissions.

Amy Westervelt: And of course these numbers are a rough estimate, and rich countries are a long way from agreeing to make payments of that size. The point is, the rich colonizers and extractors and emitters have committed a great crime against the world, in particular against the vulnerable Global South, and they — we — we really owe a huge debt.

John Biewen: One possible objection to this argument is, hey, wait a minute, you're gonna hold Americans responsible for the coal and oil we burned going back to the 1800s? People didn't know they were causing global warming back then! Trouble is, the U.S. pumped out more than half of our total contribution to the climate crisis in the past 40 years, when people in positions of power, in industry and government, absolutely did know. Or had to choose not to know.

Amy Westervelt: That's right. And then there's the whole question of what the major oil companies — most of them American and European — what they owe, and whether that goes on their government's tabs or their own. You could argue that American companies bear a lot of the blame for emissions well beyond the borders of the U.S. They're exporting oil and gas to lots of other countries. They've also had a major hand in developing the oil industry in other countries. The Polluters Pay bill in the U.S. Senate is asking for oil companies to put 500 billion dollars into a fund that would cover some of the cost of climate impacts and adaptation. There's also two dozen or so climate liability cases in courts across the country asking those companies to pay damages to communities hit hard by the climate crisis.

John Biewen: But all that's happening within U.S. borders. What about what we, and they, the oil companies, owe the world? They chose short-term profits and wealth at the expense of the planet, future generations, and more vulnerable people in those long-exploited parts of the world. You know, President Biden said in Glasgow that he wants the U.S. to lead the world on climate "by the power of our example." Okay, maybe we should lead on this: rallying rich countries to make good on that debt.

Amy Westervelt: That would be at least a first step in trying to lead by example. And, if somebody asks, well, where do we find the money for that? I think about that little club of billionaires you mentioned at the top of this episode who hold more wealth than half the world. And a lot of them hardly pay taxes.

John Biewen: Yeah. For starters, let's try to pry some of that money out of their hands.

[Music]

John Biewen: Next time, we go to Scotland. It was the first country to actually say yes to the Loss and Damages proposal at the Glasgow Summit, and has made a lot of other commitments to lead on climate. So we're not headed there to report on the climate summit, but to hear from one Western country that's wrestling hard with its role in the crisis — including facing a choice about its energy future: oil or wind?

John Biewen: Tareq Ahmed had recording and production help from Tareek Muhammad and Muhammad Rabbi. Our script editor for Season 5 is Cheryl Devall. For assistance with voiceovers, thanks to Rawyan Shayema, Rafiur Rahman Rafi, Zahid Hasan, and Rahi Hasan. Music in this episode by Lili Haydn, Kim Carroll, Lesley Barber, and Fabian Almazan. Music consulting by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. We post transcripts on our website: sceneonradio.org. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter, @SceneonRadio. Amy's on Twitter, @amywestervelt. The show is distributed by our friends at PRX, and comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.