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Bangladesh: ARTICLE 19 Urges Government to Promote Public Engagement as Key Strategy to Mitigate Climate Change

ARTICLE 19 has called on the Government of Bangladesh to promote greater public engagement with people living in environmentally vulnerable areas, in fulfillment of the Government's commitments to public disclosure, greater participation and access to information as part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

ARTICLE 19 submitted a statement to Dr Hasan Mahmood, State Minister for Environment and Forestry, who heads the Bangladesh delegation to the Bangkok Inter-Sessional Meeting of State Parties, ahead of the Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change due to take place in December 2009. In its statement, ARTICLE 19 noted that:

Public disclosure of national and international strategies for mitigation, adaptation and financing will have profound implications for their success in addressing climate change and its impact, as indeed will people's participation in their formulation and implementation.

Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change. Variable rainfall, extreme weather events such as cyclones, and rising sea levels have all been linked with climate change. In 2007, Cyclone Sidr caused the loss of over 3,000 lives and damages of more than USD1.7 billion. Millions of people living in poverty in 15 of the country's 18 coastal districts remain at risk, due to pervasive logging, saline water intrusion, and a scarcity of drinking and irrigation water.

Research conducted recently by ARTICLE 19 highlights the need for greater public disclosure of the Bangladesh Government's actions and strategies on climate change. ARTICLE 19 consulted with communities living in the coastal belt, in places such as Cox's Bazar, Borguna, Patuakhali and Sirajganj, and also conducted focus groups with local government officials, community organisations and NGOs. The research finds that there is little knowledge or understanding among these constituencies of the Government's National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA), formulated in 2005.

Also, the NAPA has not yet been publicly distributed for consultation (though it has been posted on the website of the Ministry of Environment and Forest), nor has it been translated into the vernacular Bangla. This means it is inaccessible to the majority of citizens.

The research also analyses existing legal frameworks on climate change and the right to information, as well as the Bangladesh Government's obligations under the UNFCCC. In order

to fully comply with these obligations, the Government must be robust in raising public awareness and ensure that information relating to climate change in different areas is readily disclosed. Article four of the Convention sets out clear commitments for states parties, while article six stipulates provisions for education, training and public awareness.

The Government has acknowledged that its NAPA contains weaknesses and has signaled its intention to reconsider the programme.

“ARTICLE 19 is optimistic that the Government intends to revisit its National Adaptation Programme of Action,” comments Tahmina Rahman, ARTICLE 19 Bangladesh Country Director. *“We encourage the Government to stimulate public debate and engage with community leaders and officials in vulnerable areas. We know from our research that people are ready and willing to be part of this process.”*

ARTICLE 19 urges the Government of Bangladesh to take appropriate measures to:

- Ensure greater public engagement and consultations with communities living in environmentally vulnerable areas in the process of revisiting the National Adaptation Programme of Action;
- Support education, training and public awareness on climate change issues;
- Strengthen institutions through targeted research programmes to address the adverse effects of climate change in vulnerable sectors; and
- Continue to build capacity to prevent and react to disasters related to climate change, such as droughts, floods, and extreme weather events.

ARTICLE 19 urges the Bangladesh delegation to the Bangkok Climate Change Talks to:

- Include issues of public disclosure and access to information in their country submission to the UNFCCC;
- Ensure that discussions on the full realisation of Articles four and six of the UNFCCC are prioritised at all working group meetings in Bangkok and other preparatory meetings leading up to the Copenhagen Conference; and
- Ensure that discussions for improving the collection, analysis and dissemination of information on global climate change trends, and increased data sharing among State Parties, take place in Bangkok and the lead-up to the Copenhagen Conference.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information, or to obtain details of the research conducted by ARTICLE 19, contact Tahmina Rahman, Country Director, ARTICLE 19 Bangladesh; tahmina@article19.org or +88 171-303-9669.
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech