



BANGLADESH: Female household heads protect lives, livelihoods in remote cyclone-prone villages

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Abstract

Some remote coastal villages, in southern Bangladesh, are not yet reached by the country's elaborate national disaster management system. So ACF implemented a DRR pilot project in 10 villages, establishing in each a Village Disaster Management Committee (VDMC) and a Women's Committee (WC). The project targeted over 4,000 households, mostly female-headed households or poor women's households highly exposed to disaster risk. When a cyclone struck shortly after the end of the project, the women used the disaster preparedness measures explained to them. They protected lives and livelihoods... on their own initiative... without the national disaster management system.

Acronyms & Abbreviations

ACF: *Action contre la faim* / Action Against Hunger

AECID: *Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo* / Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation

CMDRR: Community managed disaster risk reduction

DRM: Disaster risk management

DRR: Disaster risk reduction

FSL: Food Security & Livelihoods (ACF)

GFDRR: Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (The World Bank)

UDMC: Union Disaster Management Committee

VDMC: Village Disaster Management Committee

WC: Women's Committee

The Initiative

The initiative is a Community Managed Disaster Risk Reduction (CMDRR¹) pilot project implemented by ACF in southern Bangladesh from November 2011 to May 2013.

The project was a community-led initiative that looked into bringing social cohesion, community inclusiveness to reduce disaster risk for vulnerable population, especially poor, landless individuals and women, girls and children.

One of its key objectives was to empower local communities through: (1) introducing sustainable community risk management system; (2) DRR skill building; and (3) creating linkages of local community with the local government authorities such as the Union *Parishad*² (Council).

¹ CMDRR is "a process of bringing people together within the same community to enable them to collectively address a common disaster risk and to collectively pursue common disaster risk reduction measures." - The World Bank's GFDRR

² A union *parishad* is the second smallest rural administrative and local government unit in Bangladesh.

The pilot project was implemented in 10 villages in three unions/wards named Borobogi, Nisanbaria and Sonakata in Amtali *Upazilla* (Sub-District), Barguna District. The villages are in the coastal belt of the Bay of Bengal, which makes the residents vulnerable to cyclones, tropical storms and floods.

Even though the Government of Bangladesh has an elaborate disaster management system, it is yet to reach communities living in the farthest corners of coastal areas. As a result, communities at high risk remain vulnerable to cyclones and tropical storms every year. Also, from experience, ACF had learnt that communities were always the first to respond to disasters and were best positioned to derive solutions to their problems. Therefore, it was crucial that the targeted communities were empowered with DRR skills and with linkages to turn their vulnerability into resilience.

The project targeted 4,613 households. A large percentage of the households were either female-headed households or households of extremely poor women highly exposed not only to high magnitude cyclones but also to low-intensity hazards such as high tide, salinity and winds.

The pilot project was co-financed by ACF International and the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID in Spanish).

Impact and Results

An external evaluation was conducted after the end of the project. It highlighted the following findings and project outcomes:

- The survey respondents confirmed that gender was vital to DRR activities.
- The evaluators found evidence of the usefulness of the preparedness messages and their enforcement by both village disaster management committees (VDMCs) and women's committees (WCs).
- The survey respondents also said early warning and disaster preparedness awareness raising were the two most important project inputs which helped to enhance preparedness.

It is to be noted that soon after its completion, the CMDRR pilot project contributed directly to reducing disaster risk on the ground. When Tropical Storm Mahasen struck in May 2013 (during the last month of the project), the targeted households applied - on their own initiative - many of the preparedness measures explained to them by the project. This helped them protect their lives and livelihoods... away from the Government disaster management system.

Such successful implementation of preparedness measures can be attributed largely to women's leadership. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, a large percentage of the households targeted by the project were either female-headed or those of women living in extremely poor conditions and highly exposed to disaster risk.

ACF addressed also other gender dimensions and issues during this initiative. During the assessment, it was observed women experienced special type of vulnerabilities due to the subservient societal role. These include violence, sexual harassment and limited access to recovery support.

Women's Forum was a key catalyst to raise and address women concerns. This was a new experience for the women in the selected village and many of the members of the women forum never had an opportunity to participate in village meetings previously. Some women were not able to play a meaningful role at community level meetings because of their historical deprivation and muted role and the limited project investment to groom women leadership in this context.

Women Forum offers them a place to talk about general and specific feminine issues (health, pregnancy, menstrual hygiene management, etc). At the beginning, very few women participated in this forum due to lack of information and interest and also lack of time. Then, interest grew among women and teenage girls and at the end, participation was very high.

The capacity building did help women to broaden their understanding about early warning, nutrition for pregnant and lactating women and reproductive health problem of adolescent girls.

Through public awareness work, it created a shared understanding about women's vulnerability within communities.

The forums even now helped extend the coverage of dissemination of early warning. Most women interviewed mentioned that they received early warning from women forum members.

They also helped in the evacuation of elderly, children and pregnant women to the cyclone shelter/safe places. They reminded the households well in advance to keep their essentials safe from the impending tropical storm.

The Good Practice

Two good practices evolved through the CMDRR pilot project:

1. Establishing, at village level, 10 Village Disaster Management Committees (VDMCs) and Women's Committees (WCs) through a gender-inclusive community-led approach; and
2. Directly promoting gender and the importance of women's participation in DRR practices, to enhance disaster resilience among vulnerable communities.

ACF worked together with the community to establish, in each village, VDMCs and WCs which are village-level platforms for DRR skill building and risk planning and management. An innovative approach adopted was to combine men's and women's committees in the same village.

Regarding the community-led approach, such approaches were not new in Bangladesh. However, when establishing the VDMCs and WCs, ACF also introduced innovative democratic selection and decision-making processes to ensure community ownership. In this regard, the project experience suggests that women's forums/committees should be an essential component of national risk reduction efforts and should promote women's leadership in DRR.

How did the project utilise women's skills and leadership for DRR and resilience building? Cultural practices obviously made it difficult to mobilize women within communities. Women generally have low status within community decision-making forums, inadequate access to economic opportunities and low educational standards. So initially it was difficult to link with women and this necessitated an overly long initial preparatory phase which also delayed the whole project schedule. However, these were overcome by building trust and confidence among women groups and the community. A gender-inclusive approach encouraged women to participate in organised meetings and discuss their needs and opinions. This resulted into sharing information and promoted women's participation in previously men-dominated discussions.

What were the key success factors for the project? To initiate the two good practices within the project, ACF adopted a number of effective strategies to address social and health risks faced by women during a disaster, strategies that can be described as key success factors:

- Initiating the establishment of Women's Committees as key catalysts for raising and addressing gender issues;
- Developing, through community awareness raising, shared understanding at community level about women's vulnerability in general; and
- Providing direct livelihoods support to female-headed households and women's households living outside an embankment located in the project area. This helped them to improve their incomes and food security.

To sum up, the CMDRR project directly advocated women's participation and involvement in disaster preparedness, and contributed to DRR and resilience building by carrying out capacity building as well as gender promotion through community awareness raising.

Lessons Learned

Lessons and knowledge from the project suggest that:

- More investment and work are required to strengthen the DRR capacity of the local communities.
- Continued advocacy of women's participation is, in community-based interventions, critical to sustainability and DRR resilience.
- The poor cannot invest in DRR measures because of low surplus of income. So improved livelihoods opportunities are required. However, agriculture-based livelihoods in unprotected areas can be unproductive if a DRR/resilience approach is not used. The project design therefore should create provisions for additional resources for resilient livelihoods.

Globally, a self-reliant DRR project/initiative is a popular approach. ACF's approach of ensuring strong community participation is crucial for a self-managed village-level DRR initiative. To sustain such an initiative in a chronic-disaster context, however, strong community ownership of the DRR process is necessary. ACF role was to act as a facilitator only.

Furthermore, since every disaster is unique and vulnerabilities/risks are influenced by numerous social, political and economic factors, it is important to also invest in communities' ability to research, innovate and take actions individually and collectively. Community participation alone cannot guarantee high-quality programmes because understanding about future risks is limited within communities. Therefore, to strengthen this initiative in the future, ACF's role should also help communities look at the big picture and generate technical knowledge. This is to make sure that community-led planning processes and outcomes are duly informed by technical considerations.

Potential for Replication

The CMDRR pilot project has demonstrated that a community-managed approach and DRR mobilisation at community level through VDMCs and WCs are replicable and effective in similar contexts. However, since VDMCs and WCs are not part of the Bangladesh Government's disaster management system, it is challenging to scale up the initiative for institutionalisation.

ACF believes, however, that VDMCs and WCs, as they are, can already play a supportive role to the Bangladesh Government's UDMCs (Union Disaster Management Committees) in early warning dissemination, evacuation and relief distribution. Furthermore, VDMCs and WCs can also play a role in amplifying the voices of the most marginalised and advocate the adoption of gender-inclusive DRR approaches by local governments.

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Figure 1: Mass awareness session on cyclone



Figure 2: Information about the next Village Meeting



Figure 3: Village meeting



Figure 4: Village meeting



Figure 5: Women committee member distributed the IEC material in the community as a volunteer herself.



Figure 6: Women roll out on search and rescue during training and get ready for performing Emergency Situation



Figure 7: Women worked on proposals review based on hazards in the community to reduce risks of women and girls.



Figure 8: Take lead in table top exercise to include women related risks in DRR plans, PnR (Preparedness & Response) and SoPs (standard operation procedures) by women in the community



Figure 9: Women shared their opinions and take place women conversations in the community openly.



Figure 10: Women committee member conducted regular meeting to find the risks regarding women and girl related issues addressing to find solution.