

Community-Based Disaster Management – Flood Programme in Bangladesh

Background

Disaster Context

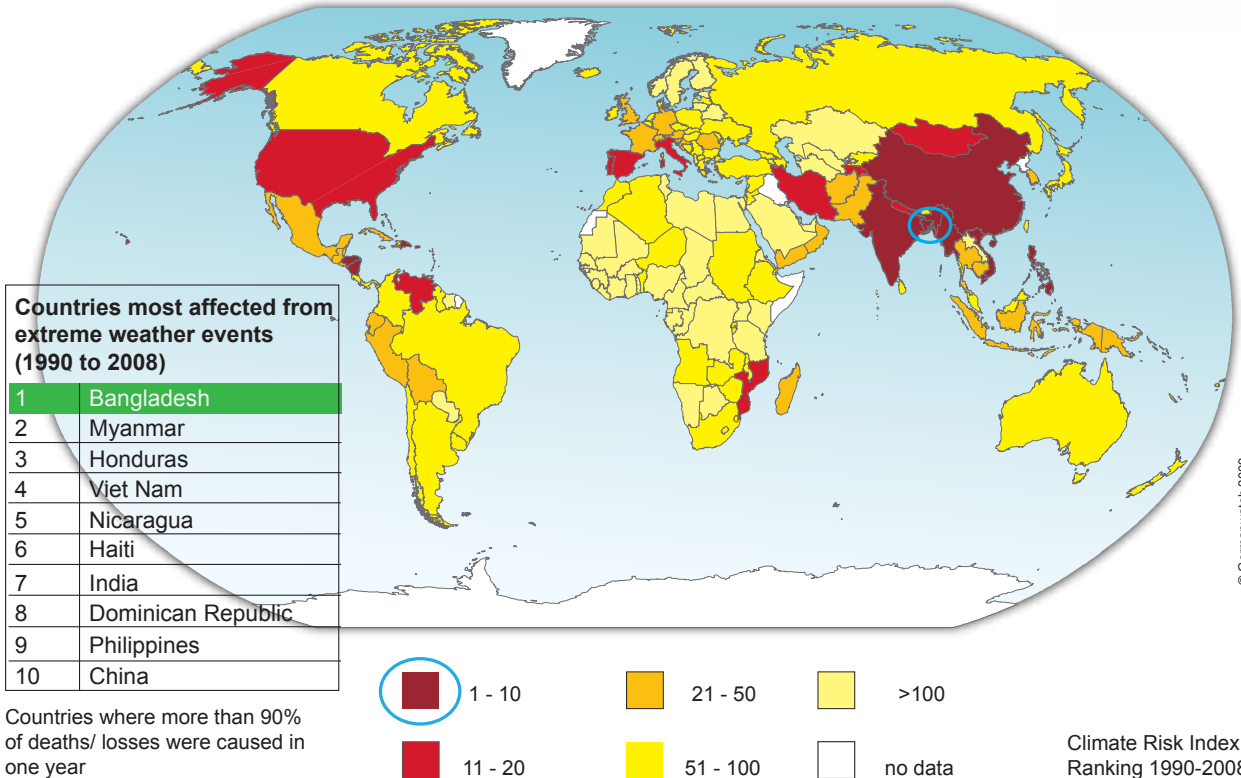
Bangladesh covers an area of 147,570 square kilometres and is home to more than 156 million people, making it the 7th most densely populated country in the world. The country consists of 6 divisions, 64 districts, and 496 *upazilas* (sub-districts). Muslims constitute almost 90 per cent of the population, Hindus about 9 per cent, and other religions about 1 per cent. Agriculture is the driving force of the economy, employing 80 per cent of the population.¹ Bangladesh ranked 146th out of 182 countries on the 2009 UNDP Human Development Index. An estimated 40 per cent of the population was still living below the poverty line in 2005, making Bangladesh one of the poorest countries in the world.² In 2008, nearly 4.5 million (16 per cent) of households were landless, with many more households being land

poor (holdings less than 0.5 hectares). Landlessness has been increasing, particularly in rural areas, due to poverty and widening income disparities – leading many people into urban slums.³

The country experiences natural disasters almost every year, including droughts, cyclones and seasonal monsoon floods. For example, in 2007, Super Cyclone Sidr struck the south-west coast of Bangladesh, causing an estimated 3,400 deaths and affecting around 2.3 million homes, with damage and losses of approximately 1.7 billion US dollars (Government of Bangladesh/International Development Community, 2008). This was following severe monsoon floods earlier in the year that affected an estimated 2 million people in some of the poorest

Global Climate Risk Index 2010 (covering 1990-2008)

Source: Germanwatch and Munich Re NatCatSERVICE ®



1. CIA (2009), *The World Fact Book Bangladesh* | 2. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and World Bank staff estimates in World Bank (July 2009) | 3. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2009). *Agricultural Census 2008*. Dhaka: Government of Bangladesh

districts in the country (Government of Bangladesh/ World Bank et al, 2008). More recently, in May 2009, Cyclone Aila killed 330 people and left about 1 million people homeless and by 29 May 2010 it had also caused substantial damage in southern Bangladesh and West Bengal. (Source: http://wape-dia.mobi/en/Cyclone_Aila).

Bangladesh is also highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, especially increased floods, salinity intrusion, and droughts. According to the Germanwatch and Munich Re 2010 *Global Climate Risk Index*, extreme weather affects Bangladesh more than any other country in the world. The Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers combine to form one of the largest deltas in the world, one that comprises a large part of the country.

Gender Context

Bangladesh's constitution enshrines equal rights for all citizens, while recognizing the unequal status of women by reserving the right to make special provisions in their favour. At the same time, according to the *Citizenship Act of 1951*, citizenship by birth or by marriage can only be granted through the father or husband. Bangladesh has also passed legislation aimed at preventing dowry-related and other forms of violence against women and children, as well as child labour and trafficking. Unfortunately however, these practices remain widespread. While the Government of Bangladesh acceded to the *UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1984*, it expressed some reservations to articles 2 and 16.1c. These articles addressed discrimination against women, and rights and responsibilities related to marriage and divorce, and were perceived to conflict with *Sharia* law.⁴

The *National Policy for Advancement of Women* was adopted in 1997 and is committed to eliminating discrimination against women and girls in all sectors including education, health and nutrition, shelter, political empowerment, public administration and the economy. Despite the Government of Bangladesh's many efforts to provide equal opportunities for women in Bangladesh, there is an unequal gender division of labour, unequal land ownership and a higher incidence of poverty in female-headed households than in those headed by men. The number of women in the Parliament remains small, even though the Constitution provides for equal participation of women in public and political life. The country ranks 101th out of 155 countries on UNDP's

Gender-related Development Index and 108th out of 109 countries in the UNDP Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), which assesses the degree to which women take an active part in the economic and political life of their countries (UNDP HDI, 2009).

Women are highly vulnerable to natural disasters in Bangladesh. Of those who died during the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh, 90 per cent were women. This high percentage was due to adherence to codes of honour that prevented women from staying in public shelters (where they would be in the company of unknown men) without a male relative. Therefore, many women died in their homes with their children while they were waiting for a male relative to come and make a decision regarding evacuation (Oxfam, 2002). In addition, the way women traditionally dressed made it difficult for them to flee from the floods, and few could swim, since this was not considered to be an appropriate activity for women. The comparatively low human value ascribed to girls may also be responsible for tragic consequences in this and other disasters. One report from Bangladesh described a father who, when unable to hold on to both his son and his daughter to prevent them from being swept away by a tidal surge, helplessly released his daughter, because "... (this) son has to carry on the family line" (WHO, 2002).

At the same time, some Bangladeshi men are also quite vulnerable to disasters. For example, many fishermen who are out at sea never return when they are hit by cyclones.

Project Overview

Background

In the mid-1990s, the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) encouraged the recruitment of at least two female members to each of the community action teams being formed for its Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP). The BDRCS expected that having female volunteers would better enable the programme to:

- reach female beneficiaries
- ensure gender-sensitive programme planning
- increase opportunities for women.

Based on positive results, when preparations began for another major disaster preparedness programme in 1996, the BDRCS adopted a policy stating that 8 out of 25 members of both branch-level volunteer

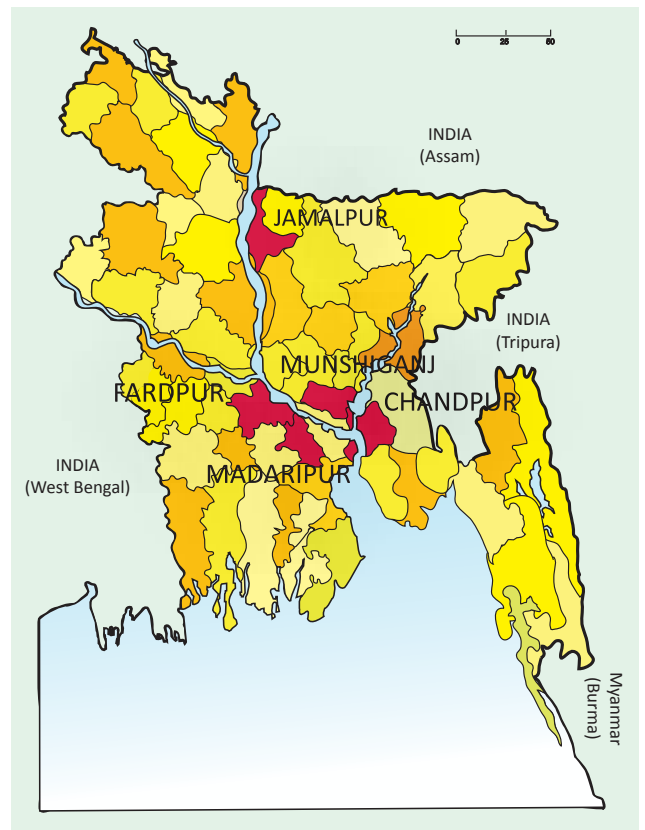
4. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reservations-country.htm> | 5. available on CD-ROM that accompanies this kit of gender and disaster management guidelines and case studies | 6. available on CD-ROM that accompanies this kit of gender and disaster management guidelines and case studies

squads and community disaster preparedness groups should be female. This approach proved to be highly successful in increasing women’s participation in community level disaster preparedness, despite many socio-cultural and other constraints. This was documented in a 1999 case study: Bangladesh Red Crescent Society: The recruitment of female volunteers to respond to disasters.⁵ The lessons learned from this experience led to the adoption of a Gender Policy in 2005 to guide the future work of the BDRCS, including in community-based disaster management.⁶ The main purpose of the policy is:

“To define the main approach of BDRCS for addressing gender issues within the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, both in its programme and human resource practices. The BDRCS focus is on gender rather than exclusively on women. With regard to gender issues, the goal of the BDRCS is to ensure that all BDRCS programmes benefit men and women equally, according to their different needs, and with the input and equal participation of men and women at all levels within the National Society.”

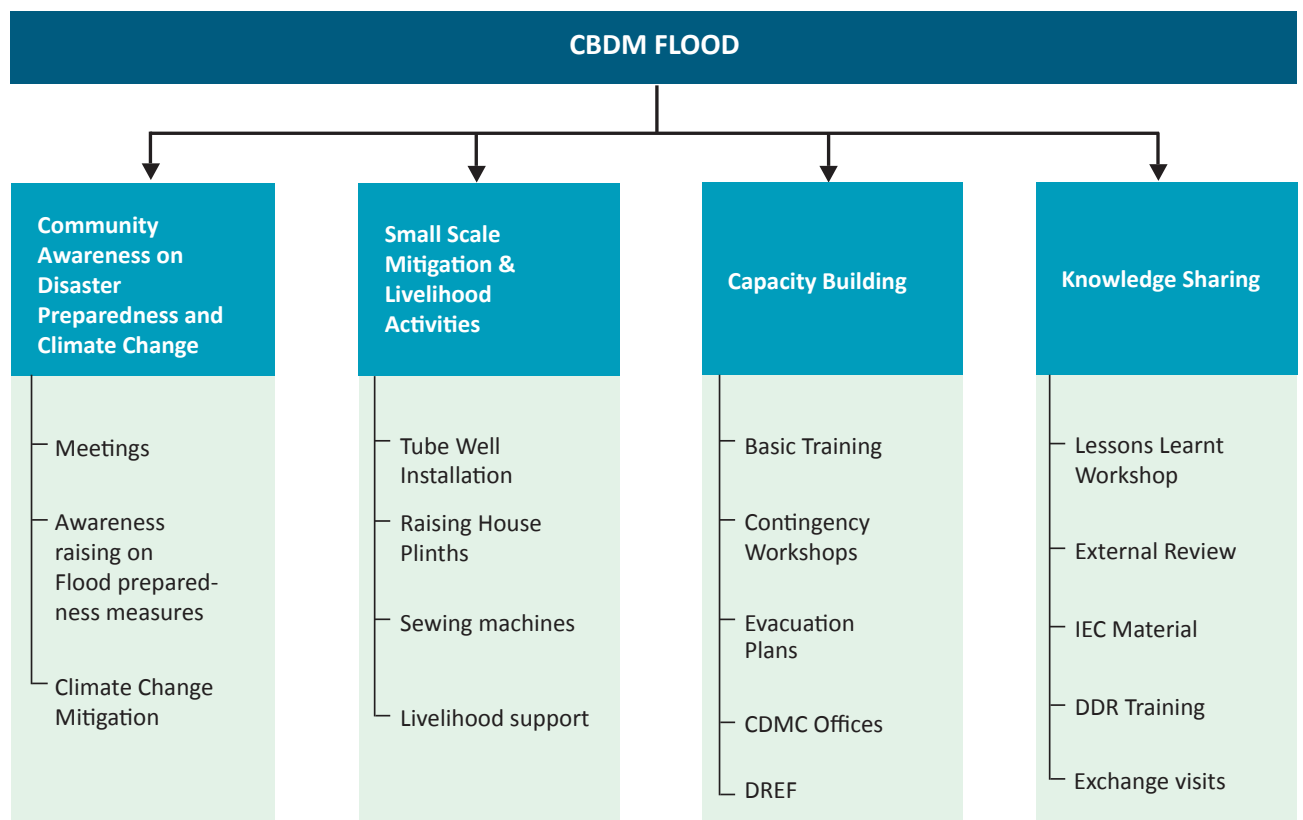
Community-Based Disaster Management Flood Programme

Community-based disaster management is an effective approach to reducing people’s vulnerability and building their capacity to cope with disaster, in line with the objectives of the *Hyogo Framework*



CBDM Flood Project Location

for Action (2005-2015). The BDRCS implemented a Community-Based Disaster Management Flood and Earthquake Preparedness and Response Programme (CBDM), in Bangladesh beginning in early 2005. This has been a pioneering initiative in Disaster Risk



Reduction (DRR) within the National Society.

In line with BDRCS's *Disaster Management Strategy 2005-2008*, the CBDM programme aimed to reach 31,000 families from 80 communities in 10 flood prone districts (Lalmonirhat, Kuirgram, Tangail, Sirajgonj, Jamalpur, Munshigonj, Chandpur, Faridpur, Madaripur and Shariatpur).

The goal of the programme is reducing the vulnerability of people, particularly women, to disasters. It's objective is to enhance and sustain the capacity of high-risk communities to mitigate the impact of emergencies, particularly in flood and earthquake prone areas of Bangladesh. The programme takes a holistic approach to reducing and mitigating the physical, social and economic risks to households and communities. It supports communities by forming community-based disaster preparedness organizations, raising disaster risk awareness, constructing small scale physical mitigation works such as tube wells, and improving livelihoods. Annex 1 provides a detailed description of each area of activity.

Gender Considerations

Overall Design

The key gender-sensitive features of the CBDM programme are:

- inclusion of gender-disaggregated data in the reporting systems
- setting recruitment quotas for female volunteers of 50 per cent in Community Disaster Management Committees (CDMC), and 30 percent in Community Disaster Response Teams (CDRT)
- holding basic first aid and disaster risk reduction trainings for both men and women, and other courses like Trained Birth Attendant (TBA) training for women based on self-identified needs and priorities
- taking gender differences in vulnerability into account when planning and implementing disaster mitigation measures
- providing livelihood-support measures according to the different needs of men and women
- involving local political and religious leaders as active volunteers when addressing issues of cultural and religious constraints to women's participation.

Some of the gender-specific challenges that have been faced in designing and delivering the programme have included:

1. The BDRCS management did not make gender and other diversity inclusiveness issues a priority when planning activities.
2. The average age of marriage is 14-18 years for girls in remote areas of Bangladesh. Typically after marriage these valuable, trained BDRCS volunteers become less active. This is primarily due to the pressure of increased family demands and, later, due to pregnancy. According to female volunteers, married women find it more difficult to convince their husbands that volunteering will not be detrimental to the running of the household.

Needs Assessment and Vulnerability Targeting

When a community is selected to participate in the CBDM programme, gender and age- disaggregated data is collected in the initial assessment of the area through field visits and questionnaires. Women are included on the assessment team, though not usually in a 50/50 ratio to men.

Following the initial assessment, Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments (VCA) are carried out. Overall, the VCA process is thought to be an effective ap-

Based on the findings of VCAs, six deep tube wells with raised platforms were installed in Chandpur Unit to provide local communities with safe, arsenic-free water.

Prior to this, the community - particularly women and girls - had to walk to the nearest ponds or rivers to collect arsenic-free drinking water. This was a time-consuming and difficult task that required much physical labour.

proach to empowering communities, as community members are closely involved throughout the process, from recommending forms of support required to increase their disaster resilience, to taking the lead in any interventions identified. This allows them to have a sense of choice and ownership of interventions; they become partners in the process, enhancing sustainability. The VCA process provides opportunities for both the men and women of the local community to evaluate their own situations,

based on their own experiences. They then prioritize their needs and prepare community action plans. More than 20 communities have participated in VCAs up to December 2009. This process has also highlighted the importance of livelihoods projects as key disaster risk reduction activities, and there are ten livelihood (support and skill development) and mitigation projects currently underway in Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Sirajganj and Tangail districts.

During the VCAs, local leaders and volunteers recognized that some women and children were especially vulnerable to disaster impacts. These included divorced or widowed women and their children, and other female-headed households. The needs of these groups were given special consideration in the design process, including the specific involvement of women as volunteers and members of community-based disaster preparedness committees and action groups in order to ensure that women's views were represented.

During some of the earlier VCAs conducted, the BDRCS also observed that in most cases the communities accepted the views of older women and men regarding past history, potential hazards and required mitigation measures, and have specifically included them in identifying plans and activities which are considered acceptable and equitable for the community.

Implementation

Training and Contingency Planning: In order to ensure quick and effective disaster response, participating communities and local volunteers were provided with basic training, which was followed

by periodic refresher training, in disaster management and response, first aid, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and its structure, public health in emergencies (health volunteers only) and leadership skills. Gender issues were covered in this training. Select female health volunteers were also given training in Primary Health Care (PHC) and as Basic Traditional Birth Attendants (TBA), due to the primary role women play in family health. There was 60 per cent female participation in all the trainings, except for PHC and basic TBA, which were attended by 100 per cent women.

The benefits of planning and investing in volunteer-level training were demonstrated by the ability of trained volunteers to disseminate hygiene messages and distribute water-purification tablets to disaster affected communities to control the spread of water borne diseases following Cyclone Sidr in November 2007, Cyclone Aila in May 2009 and the floods of September 2008. Furthermore, because of TBA training, women are now more aware of the potential risks to pregnant women and their infants if delivery occurs in unhygienic conditions. A programme evaluation conducted in 2007 found, that during floods, children of the communities where VCAs were conducted did not play or bathe in the floodwater. As a result, cases of diarrhea and skin diseases were anecdotally reported to be much lower in number than in the non-VCA communities.

Livelihoods activities: Through the CBDM programme, communities were assisted through various income-generating activities. Women were provided with sewing machines and men with three-wheeler rickshaws. A three-wheeler rickshaw is a kind of taxi that is a major source of income for

Improving the Lives of Men and Women

"We received training for three months, and after that we got sewing machines from the Red Crescent. Now we do not depend on the income of our spouses. We can take care of our children if something bad happens to our husbands. We have a lion's share of the investment in cultivation and small businesses of our spouses and sons." says Rosina Begum, 35, mother of two daughters and one son.

Women in flood-prone areas are also contributing to family savings for better well-being and preparedness. As a result they can bounce back to pre-disaster status. "We feel more empowered and our opinion has value in the decision-making of the family." Rosina adds.

I have a three-wheeler rickshaw of my own that the Red Crescent provided. I used to work as a farmer in the paddy field on someone else's land. After the floods, the entire land was washed away and I had no means of income. Now I can earn on an average of BDT 150-200 every day which is twice as much as I earned before." states Rahim, who resides in Kurigram. "I am happy to see the smiling faces of my children, when I buy text books and stationery for them, make uniforms for their school, and also buy clothing for my wife. I am also saving a portion of my money every day so I can arrange for food and other essentials during periods of unemployment when floods occur." Like Rahim, there are many others who are able to make a living with the rickshaws provided to them.

much of the population in Bangladesh. This income-generating programme received positive feedback, particularly from women.

Women's participation in decision-making:

Considerable progress was made in addressing the need for more gender-sensitized projects. The BDRCS set a quota of 50 per cent recruitment for female volunteers in Community Disaster Management Committees (CDMC) and 30 per cent in Community Disaster Response Teams (CDRT). These quotas have largely been met. This has been a significant factor in getting women's voices heard in CBDM decision-making processes within their communities and in the use of gender-sensitive approaches when conducting VCAs.

The active involvement of women in the CBDM programme helped them realize how important their roles are to making small investments that reduce their disaster risk.

The community of Munshigonj has been regularly communicating and cooperating with their local female BDRCS program officer, Laakhi. Community members have indicated that they are happy with her work, and that their needs and problems are properly addressed. According to one woman, overall, the female CBDM unit program officers are very friendly and really listen to what they have to say.

In response to a question regarding local cultural and religious limitations and permission for the female members of their household to participate freely in CBDM activities, Suhraab, an influential community member said: *"The five fingers of a hand are not equal so when one says it's good, another says it's not. Sometime later they'll change their statements altogether. We are poor and face numerous adversities, we want a way out for survival and Red Cross has made us realize our true potential. Therefore I allow my wife and daughters to participate freely in programme activities and trainings, which will ultimately make us one strong and skilled unit in the face of future disasters."*

Gender Equality among BDRCS Staff and Volunteers

There has been a steady increase in the number of female community volunteers and in the number of women becoming involved in CBDM initiatives. Female staff members at the BDRCS headquarters

and branch offices provide additional encouragement and vital support to women volunteers. This has contributed to the increased desire of more women than men in the community to become volunteers and an increase in quotas for female participation. Additionally, as many male family members have migrated to other towns or cities to find work, women often form the majority of community members and carry the main responsibilities for looking after the elderly, children and persons with disabilities in the family. As a result, many are very interested in becoming involved. Some older people reported that they preferred a high number of women as volunteers because they felt that women were more likely to be present and able to assist in a disaster.

Monitoring and Evaluation

While the CBDM programme has a strong focus on gender equality, well-defined gender-related performance indicators have not been developed to assess progress and outcomes. In order to get feedback and assess progress, the programme currently relies on community meetings. The National Society, IFRC Country Delegation and other stakeholders also engage in active knowledge-sharing and capacity-building activities including: community exchange visits, monitoring by officials, and coordinating with governmental and non-governmental organizations, such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), one of the leading NGOs in Bangladesh. The programme officer holds monthly and bimonthly meetings with community volunteers to ensure that feedback is collected from both men and women. Women participate actively in these meetings and have expressed their interest in further skills-development opportunities.

Outcome

1. The impact of CBDM disaster risk reduction interventions could be seen in the timely and effective response of the BDRCS to the floods in 2008 and in the fact that the impact of the floods was lower in the CBDM areas than in others not participating in the programme (IFRC, April 2008).
2. Initially, women in the participating communities were shy and reluctant to become part of the programme, but now, because of the awareness and motivation created by both programme and unit level officers, and the presence of female members among the field staff, they are enthusiastic about becoming volunteers.

3. The recruitment of 50/50 male-to-female volunteers and promotion of more women into leadership and decision-making roles has made a significant contribution to increasing women's access to the opportunities and benefits available through the CBDM program, as well as ensuring their views and needs are incorporated into planning. This, in turn, supports the primary health care, livelihoods and survival strategies of women and their families, leading to an improved quality of life, increased disaster preparedness and better hygiene standards.
4. Through the formation of different committees, the organizational potential within communities has been improved. With a view to reducing disaster risk, under the livelihood support component, CDMC volunteers selected 47 vulnerable women from 10 VCA indentified communities who were then provided with 3 month-long sewing trainings along with sewing machine support. Now these women are able to actively contribute to the generation of household income. The practical results are that women are more financially solvent and more confident.
5. Having community advocates, including religious leaders, who act as BDRCS ambassadors, has helped to increase women's participation in the

programme. Religious barriers are no longer a challenge in one community.

Lesson learned

1. Setting targets and quotas and using related promotional strategies has been important to the recruitment of greater numbers of female volunteers in the CPP and CBDM programmes. This is especially significant in the context of the targeted areas because there are fewer men than women in these communities, as many have migrated elsewhere to find employment and women ultimately must play a leading role in community-level disaster preparedness and response. In most of the communities, the approach of holding combined monthly and bi-monthly meetings with male and female BDRCS volunteers and the programme officer has made it easier to concentrate on finding solutions to the problems they face in the community.
2. The involvement of local political, community, and religious leaders has a profound impact on effective programme implementation in the community, including the acceptance of women's participation. Local festivals (melas), or large gatherings and Friday prayer sermons can be



utilized by the local leaders (Imams), as opportunities to connect to the community on issues of gender.

3. Having a significant number of women participate in DRR efforts strengthens the overall positive outcomes for communities.

The Way Forward

The CBDM programme has achieved good community resilience in disaster risk reduction. The mid-term review clearly shows that communities are now better prepared to respond to floods.⁷ The wide coverage of the programme also provided staff with a great opportunity to replicate and scale up good practices. The programme has a long-term development approach and is focused on capacity-building and the strengthening of community structures. This will ultimately lead to sustained initiatives even when programme activities have ended, resulting in community empowerment.

Within this broader context, gender-sensitive CBDM can be promoted through the following actions:

1. Identify the barriers to women's participation in BDRCS management and community leadership positions, and form a systematic strategy for overcoming these barriers (for example, recruit women union council members as CBDM advisors)⁸.
2. Strengthen BDRCS ties to governmental and non-governmental organizations that are adept at handling gender issues in the local community.
3. Create a gender-friendly environment for volunteers. This could include providing more opportunities for female National Society staff and volunteers to participate in disaster management work in the field. Workshops and creative simulation exercises for evacuation of vulnerable and disabled community members during floods and cyclones, and greater promotional opportunities for both male and female branch-level staff and volunteers if they are performing well could all be effective.
4. In view of the critical fact that there are more women than men living in some communities, the quota for recruitment of female volunteers should be increased to a proportional level of men and women in those communities in order to maintain gender equality and to ensure an effective disaster preparedness and response system. The present practice of BDRCS is to recruit 30 per cent female volunteers from the community. Quotas may be increased to 50 per cent in the future based on the requirements of the community.
5. The BDRCS should pass on the gender analysis skills it has learned to other National Societies in workshops, seminars and by disseminating case studies.

Reference

- Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2009. *Agricultural Census 2008*. Dhaka: Government of Bangladesh
- Burton C, Social Analysis Notes for Bangladesh/ International Development Community, April 2008. *Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh: Damage, Loss, and Needs Assessment Report for Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction*. Unpublished.
- CARE, December 2007, *Rapid Gender Assessment of SIDR Response of CARE Bangladesh*. Dhaka: CARE Bangladesh.
- Central Intelligence Agency, 2010? *The World Fact Book 2010?*: Bangladesh. Washington, DC?: CIA. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>
- Germanwatch and Munich Re, 2010. *Global Climate Risk Index 2010*. <http://www.germanwatch.org/english>
- Government of Bangladesh/International Development Community, April 2008. *Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh: Damage, Loss, and Needs Assessment Report for Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction*. Washington DC: World Bank.
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 1999. *Bangladesh Red Crescent Society: The recruitment of female volunteers to respond to disasters*. Geneva: IFRC.
- IFRC, April 2008. *Bangladesh Report 2006-07*. Author: Tiffany Loh Appeal No. MAABD001 Dhaka? Geneva?: IFRC. WHERE PUBLISHED?
- Oxfam GB, 2002. *Gender, Development and Climate Change (2002)*. Oxfam: Cambridge.
- <http://www.nikk.uio.no/?module=Articles;action=Article.publicShow;ID=958>
- Ministry of Environment and Forest, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, November 2005. *National Adaptation Programme of Action (Final Report)*. Dhaka: GOB.
- World Bank, March 2008. *Whispers to Voices: Gender and Social Transformation in Bangladesh*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- _____, July 2009. "IDA at Work, Bangladesh: Bolstering Governance to Reduce Poverty." Washington, DC: World Bank Group.
- World Health Organisation, 2002. *Gender and Disasters*. WHO: Geneva

International Federation of
Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Asia Pacific Zone Office

The AmpWalk, Suite 9.05
218 Jalan Ampang
50450 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Tel: +60 39207 5700
Fax: +60 32161 0670