

building Safer Communities in South Asia

a series of case studies on Community-Based Disaster Management (CBDM) in South Asia (Jan 2008 Vol 1 No. 2)

Promoting Community Resilience through Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments (VCA)

BACKGROUND

The geophysical situation, land characteristics, multiplicity of rivers and the monsoon climate render Bangladesh highly vulnerable to natural hazards such as floods, cyclones and droughts. The consequences of such hazards and the resulting environmental degradation pose a serious threat to the economic development of the country and causes untold miseries to the communities in large scale.

To add to it are human factors such as overpopulation, social inequality and rapid urbanization. In fact the twin economic burden of poverty and demographic pressure are making a vast majority of people more vulnerable by forcing them to migrate to high-risk areas such as flood plains.

With a legacy of activities related to humanitarian emergencies, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) recognizes the important role of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) and has etched out specific role for it in the Government's Standing Order for Disaster Management; "to complement the government's efforts in case of emergency situations and emphasizing the development of disaster preparedness related plans and programmes". Accordingly disaster-related development initiatives have constituted the core programmes of the BDRCS since its foundation.

In 1997, the BDRCS initiated the Community-Based Disaster Preparedness (CBDP) programme focusing on community participation to have a more decentralized and cost-effective approach to disaster preparedness at grassroots level.

Learning from the success of the CBDP programme, the Community-Based Disaster Management (CBDM) programme is being implemented since 2005 in 80 flood-prone communities under 10 districts of Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Sirajganj, Tangail, Jamalpur, Faridpur, Madaripur, Sariatpur, Munshigonj and Chandpur. This CBDM programme aims to adopt a more holistic approach towards disaster risk management. It is supported by Hong Kong Red Cross and Department For International Development (DFID) through the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The CBDM programme has conducted intensive Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments (VCAs) in targetted communities to enhance their existing local capacities and increase their awareness towards reducing flood risks.

The process of conducting VCAs has promoted community self-reliance and resilience by sharing of local coping mechanisms and knowledge to take collective actions for short, medium and long-term priorities for making communities safer.

ABSTRACT

This case study highlights the value of VCAs conducted in 10 flood-prone communities under four districts of Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Sirajganj and Tangail. The VCA findings provide greater understanding on local capacities and how the whole community; particularly the women, the aged, and the children could play active roles in identifying priorities, local resources and practical steps for flood risks reduction. The outcomes and the lessons learned illustrate that the process of VCAs promotes community awareness and self-reliance to reduce the recurring impacts of floods.

PROJECT

In order to reach-out to communities, the programme adopted the methodology to carry-out Comprehensive Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments (VCAs) in targeted communities. The VCA process in each of the community was facilitated by CBDM programme personnel, staffs from Red Crescent Units and volunteers. The communities with active participation of women took the lead in identifying and prioritizing actions to reduce their risks. Local government officials and other stakeholders were also invited to participate in the VCA.

Various participatory rural appraisal techniques like focus groups, historical timeline, seasonal calendar, direct observation and problem tree were used with the communities to gather and analyse information on community risks, social and economic vulnerabilities and existing capacities.

The methodology allowed the community to draw a map of their built environment, to mark their households and community assets and to understand the following:

- Nature and level of flood risks which households are facing
- Root causes of the risks which households are worst affected
- Existing capacities among the community to reduce their risks
- Short, medium and long-term interventions required to reduce risks

The analysis of the information gathered and validated during the VCA process reflects the root causes of risks identified by the communities which are translated into actions for transformation.

In all the communities, the interventions primarily revolved around livelihood-generation programmes such as rearing goats and sheep, planting fruit-bearing trees, providing sewing machines to most vulnerable women and granting rickshaws as part of the programme's household income-generating alternatives. The beneficiaries of these livelihood initiatives agreed that a portion of their profits would be contributed to a community revolving fund which could be used for risks reduction measures identified by the community.



Priority Ranking Exercise in Sirajganj district facilitated by BDRCS volunteers and staff



Planting of fruit-bearing trees gives multiple benefits: good source of livelihoods and nutritional value as well as preventing soil erosion that were identified during the VCA process in the communities.



Raising of plinth, one of the structural mitigation needs that the communities identified during the VCA process.



BDRCS volunteers and staff facilitated Priority Ranking Exercise with community people in Lalmonirhat district.

"livelihoods was our priority, with the raised income we build a machha in my house and also a raised platform for my livestock..."

- Zorina, Sewing machine beneficiary from Gunergati, Sirajganj

As part of the programme's sustainability strategy, beneficiaries of sheep and goats also received orientation from the Government's livestock department and were provided primary care knowledge and contact details for future needs on proper livestock rearing.

Considering the related issues of health and disasters, the communities also prioritized the need for mobile cookers and raised tube wells for a continuous source of safe drinking water in the event of a disaster and a preventive measure against water-borne diseases.

The communities also realized the need for structural mitigation such as raising of plinths for their homes and river embankment. Significantly, the families expressed and prioritized their local knowledge on building *machha* (bamboo or wood) platforms which is a more practical and less-costly measure to reduce their vulnerability.

Importantly, the communities identified the need for community-based trainings and capacity building initiatives on first aid, maternal health and safe delivery, primary health care and reproductive health, disaster amangement and leadership that would eventually help to improve their skills and formulate interventions related to risk reduction.

The need for advocacy and raising awareness within the communities and with other stakeholders were also one of the important results of the VCA. The awareness on using reinforced concrete columns for construction of houses and taking shelter on higher grounds during floods were also identified through the VCA process. The Community Disaster Management Committees (CDMCs) consulted the people and led the procurement of local materials for making their homes more resilient to disasters.

Vulnerability Actions for Transformation

The VCA methodology facilitates the level of interventions that leads to Change, Influence and Transformation (CIT) by identifying the existing resources of the communities and prioritizing specific actions to reduce their risks. Indications of CIT are detailed below:

- **C = change.** Indicates that change could happen through community interventions and could occur immediately or in a short period
- **I = influence.** Indicates that some level of influence would be required to make change happen, for example the initiative requires the approval and support at the local level
- **T = full transformation.** Indicates that a high-level intervention, support and assistance (i.e. from government, regional groups or an external agency) would be required to make any change happen



Hazard Mapping exercise with community people in Kurigram district

This visualization helped to identify the water-clogged areas in the community, the households located in it and the location of elevated grounds. It also identified the larger problems related to infrastructure like embankment and roads with low elevation.

INTERVENTIONS MADE BASED ON VCA FINDINGS IN KURIGRAM DISTRICT

The interventions made based on VCA findings in East Hatiya community, Kurigram district under the CBDM programme attempts to reduce the vulnerabilities in respect to the following five components that embody most aspects of people's exposure to a given natural hazard:

Livelihoods: One of the income-generating interventions had been providing sheeps to the most vulnerable women in the communities. The community had chosen sheep, because of its faster reproductive cycle and which would enable the households to sell the babies and contribute to their income. Usually a sheep gives birth twice in a year and each lamb could be sold for two thousand *taka* (around US\$ 35).

Well-being: The communities have also identified vulnerable households to be provided with saplings of fruit-bearing trees. Apart from contributing to livelihoods and nutrition, the trees would add to the greenery and improve the living conditions in the future. Various trainings imparted to the communities also helped build their capacities and led to empower the communities, particularly women.

Self-protection: Awareness was fostered on raising the plinth of households and tree planting would reduce their risks and could save lives and livestock in times of floods.

Social protection: The formation of community structures like Community Disaster Management Committees (CDMCs), Community Disaster Response Teams (CDRTs) and Micro Groups (MGs) helped to foster a sense of unity in the community. Linkages with the Kurigram Unit Disaster Response Team (UDRT) also helped to establish contact with other stakeholders at the Union level. This sense of social protection was particularly felt during the 2007 floods when the Kurigram UDRT and the CDRT members were very active in saving lives and reducing the impacts of disaster.

Governance: The community recognizes the CDMC as a future focal point of the community and partner of the local government to advocate for implementation of hazard-resilient development activities.

“Through the VCA, income-generation initiatives were identified and introduced. It also contributed in raising awareness in terms of finding our own capacity and has provided both male and female equal opportunity to be involved in the household and community work. It has created self-reliance and unity among community members. It also helped us identify our strengths and weaknesses.”

- Jasmine, community member



“I am teaching sewing skill and impart knowledge to the community. Without the VCA, it is not possible to identify the mitigation activities and also to define community's real needs, strength, capacities and vulnerabilities”

- Nasima, community member from Sirajganj



- One of the most important outcomes of carrying-out the VCAs had been the confidence built in the community to understand the problem and recommend actions. This was possible because of the in-depth VCA process conducted which enabled the information gathered during the exercise to be triangulated with other stakeholders and finally validated by the community. It resulted in the communities owning the process and becoming an integral part of decision making related to development.
- The VCA also brought together a number of local government officials and NGOs. This helped raised awareness among the communities on the work being done and at the same time enabled other stakeholders to understand the priorities of the communities and explore other possibilities to address them in their programmes. This process also made the communities articulate the types of interventions they expected from the Red Crescent and were implemented under the CBDM programme accordingly.

During the VCA process in Lalmonirhat district, one of the priorities identified by the communities was provision of safe sanitation facilities. In dialogue between the stakeholders, the Union chairman highlighted the development plan of the Union Parishad to provide all households with sanitation facilities by mid-2008. Accordingly, the Red Crescent was guided to prioritize other interventions namely livelihoods, capacity building and advocacy.

- The process of VCA made the communities realize that though all priorities cannot be taken care under the CBDM programme, they themselves can play a vital role in advocating for change and influence the process of development in their locality.
- Lastly, the VCAs led to the realization among the communities that disasters are related to the types and patterns of development activities. Communities have understood that reducing risks of natural hazards is a long-term intervention where multi-stakeholder collaboration is essential. This requires a shift of mindset from disaster response and preparedness to risks reduction.

From Preparedness to Risk Reduction

The need to have tube wells for safe drinking water especially after floods has been a well-documented realization under the Community-Based Disaster Preparedness (CBDP) programme implemented in the late 1990s. However, the current shift of understanding from disaster preparedness to a more holistic approach towards disaster risk reduction has led to the demand from targeted communities of the CBDM programme to construct only tube wells with raised platforms that would continue to function in times of floods.

LESSONS LEARNED



- Implementing VCA together with the staff from disaster management (DM), Health and Organizational Development (OD) departments from the National Society could lead in addressing the identified community's need more effectively and in an integrated manner.
- It is essential that in the VCA process the entire community be involved with active participation of the women, the aged and the children. This helps in bringing out the real concerns of the people in the community. Interestingly these concerns are normally of problems related to their daily survival and may not be necessarily be related to hazards. However, since it is the joint decision of the community, the interventions are always aimed at reducing the economic and physical vulnerability of the community which eventually would lead to disaster risk reduction.
- Since it is understood that catering to all the priorities of the communities is beyond the capacity of the BDRCS, it is essential for BDRCS to plan ahead and build strategic partnerships with other organizations before the assessment begins, in order to have more coordinated and cost-effective interventions to address outstanding issues identified by communities and further advocate changes with the Government.

“One day VCA was not enough to address many issues such as health, mitigation and support in child deliveries (Traditional Birth Attendants-TBA), we want to strengthen our VCA to identify and implement more DRR activities and programmes to reduce risk in the community.”

-Aarti, community member

- A comprehensive VCA, being a time consuming process and requiring the active participation of the communities, should be planned and coordinated accordingly to the suitability of the community. For example, carrying-out a VCA during the flood season would be inappropriate because there would be other priorities during that time for the community. A VCA before the flood season would provide enough time for the community to implement interventions that would help reduce the impact of the next flood.

THE WAY FORWARD

In 2007, the Fifth South Asia Disaster Management Working Group (DMWG) meeting and the Joint Forum of DM, health and OD recommended the Integrated Programming Approach (IPA) for “Building Safer Communities” in South Asia. Thus, this VCA process provides an opportunity for the National Society staff to work together in the areas of response, recovery, preparedness, mitigation, shelter, public health, HIV/AIDS, water and sanitation and volunteer management, which are all important elements for developing and implementing long-term integrated disaster risk reduction initiatives.

The comprehensive VCA conducted in targeted communities is only the beginning for the people to take decisions collectively towards reducing their risks from floods and adopting a long-term hazard-resilient development.

The following are some immediate actions that BDRCS would initiate and facilitate with the communities:

- Share the VCA findings with the local government and other relevant stakeholders. Particularly of urgency is to share the priorities of the communities related to physical infrastructure with the local government before the next development plan is prepared and the budget is finalized.

- Facilitate a local development planning workshop involving all targeted communities, which another set of VCAs would be conducted. The workshops’ VCA findings would serve as vital inputs for a more integrated approach in developing the CBDM programme exit strategy.
- Advocate for various risks reduction priorities with respective government counterparts. For example, on issues related to climate change, a dialogue could be established with the Ministry of Environment and Forest, GoB and linkages with the priority projects identified under the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA). Similarly on issues related to hazard-resilient housing, knowledge would be shared and lessons learned from the on-going cyclone Sidr housing reconstruction activities.

Although the interventions implemented under the CBDM programme primarily are addressed to reduce risks from floods, the issues identified by the VCA are related to multi-hazards. BDRCS has an opportunity to develop future programmes with a multi-hazard approach together with other stakeholders.

“There will be more ducks, hens and fruit-bearing trees, increased income, most of the children will be educated. I would like to make and show my community as a model to other neighbouring communities. I want encourage and help them replicate our DRR safer community model.”

- Rekha, community member

LINKING VCA FINDINGS TO BROAD-BASED DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

The BDRCS would play a vital role in linking the findings of the VCA to the local development agenda by:

- Advocating for the community concerns related to socio-economic development in the national development plans, policies and programmes.
- Forming partnerships with other organizations and with local governments to address community needs in a more integrated multi-agency approach.
- Incorporating the findings of the VCAs in future non disaster management programmes of the BDRCS (e.g. health).



BANGLADESH RED CRESCENT SOCIETY (BDRCS)

The Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) offers a range of services to deal with both national and international emergencies. As a National Society within the International Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, the BDRCS has access to the largest voluntary network in the world and is also among the oldest humanitarian organisations in the world. Throughout its history, the BDRCS has enjoyed tremendous public support and has played a pioneering role in many areas of health care, social work and education. The society has steadily grown stronger and is now the premier humanitarian agency in the country. For more information, please visit: www.bdracs.org.



DEPARTMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (DFID)

The Department for International Development (DFID) is the part of the UK Government that manages Britain's aid to poor countries and works to alleviate extreme poverty. It is headed by a Cabinet minister, one of the senior ministers in the Government. This reflects how important the Government sees reducing poverty around the world. It has two headquarters (in London and East Kilbride, near Glasgow) and 64 offices overseas.

DFID's values define the way in which they intend to live up to their strategic aim of halving world poverty by the year 2015 and also provide a framework for improved performance. The core values are: ambition and determination to eliminate poverty, diversity and the need to balance work and private life, ability to work effectively with others, desire to listen, learn and be creative, and professionalism and knowledge. Their policies and processes support and underpin these values.

Disaster Risk Reduction Programme Phase II is a three-year programme (May 2005 to April 2008) in seven countries and in particular three countries in South Asia; Bangladesh, India and Nepal and is implemented together in collaboration with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, DFID and British Red Cross. The programme aims to develop community resilience, to strengthen national society and community preparedness for response and to establish networks and develop knowledge sharing. For more information, please visit: www.dfid.gov.uk.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION



EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S HUMANITARIAN AID DEPARTMENT (ECHO)

The European Commission's Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) is one of the biggest sources of humanitarian aid in the world that has funded relief to millions of victims of natural and man-made disasters outside the European Union. Aid is channelled impartially to the affected populations, regardless of their race, ethnic group, religion, gender, age, nationality and political affiliation. Part of the department's mission is to raise public awareness of the issues at stake.

For humanitarian aid, the Commission works with about 200 operational partners, including specialised United Nations agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The Commission under the DIPECHO programmes also funds disaster preparedness and mitigation projects in regions prone to natural catastrophes. It has recognized the vital importance of community preparedness to respond to disasters in the period before aid agencies arrive at the disaster site. Currently, DIPECHO programme is supporting the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, South Asia Regional Delegation to implement Building Safer Communities in South Asia region programme.



ASIAN DISASTER PREPAREDNESS CENTRE (ADPC)

Established in 1986, ADPC is a leading regional, non-profit organization based in Thailand, mandated to promote safer communities and sustainable development through disaster risk reduction. ADPC's programs and projects demonstrate a wide diversity in applications, address all types of disasters, and covers all aspects of the disaster management spectrum-from prevention and mitigation through preparedness and response, to damage and needs assessment, rehabilitation and reconstruction endeavors. ADPC thematic focus areas are Climate Risk Management (CRM), Community-based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM), Disaster Management Systems (DMS), Early Warning Systems (EWS), Public Health in Emergencies (PHE) and Urban Disaster Risk Management (UDRM). For more information, please visit www.adpc.net.

BDRCS COMMUNITY-BASED DISASTER MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME IN FLOOD-PRONE AREAS

The purpose of the programme is to prepare high-risk communities, particularly women at household level in flood-prone areas, to manage impacts of severe floods. It is working with 80 communities in 10 selected districts which are most prone to severe riverine flooding due to their location across the large rivers of the country namely Jamuna, Brahmaputra, Ganges/Padma, Teesta and Meghna. Based from the flood-prone area map prepared by the Government of Bangladesh in collaboration with World Food Programme in 2004, the target beneficiaries are the communities at riverbanks in the districts of Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Jamalpur, Sirajganj, Tangail, Faridpur, Madaripur, Shariatpur, Munshiganj and Chandpur.

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Building Safer Communities in South Asia is a series of case studies on Community-Based Disaster Management (CBDM) in South Asia, as part of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies - South Asia Regional Delegation's (SARD) programme. The programme is guided by the International Federation's Disaster Management strategy and standards in line with the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA). It aims to draw together regional experiences and knowledge to harmonize and standardize Red Cross Red Crescent risk reduction trainings, approaches, systems and tools.

The case studies illustrate processes adapted and lessons learned during the CBDM programme implementation to promote and facilitate a more coherent cooperation among partner national societies, volunteers, international NGOs and local community groups. This is essential to increase the quality and reach of risk reduction measures that create better prepared, more resilient and self-reliant communities. These are written and developed in partnership with the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC) based in Thailand.



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