

Towards a Safer Tomorrow



Plan

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community in Dhaka and Barguna project site.

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Project Background

Bangladesh currently ranks as one of the world's most disaster prone countries, and will become even more so as a result of climate change. It is a low-lying country with more than 230 waterways that make the country particularly vulnerable to natural disaster. Annual flooding from monsoon rains and run-off from regional catchments, cyclone and storm surges in coastal regions and drought in the northern regions are hazardous natural events with which people try to cope. Earthquakes pose a less frequent but potentially more devastating hazard, particularly in the eastern and northern parts of the country.

Considering the country's vulnerability to natural hazards, Plan International Bangladesh is implementing ‘Disaster preparedness and mitigation: build safe and resilient communities’ following Child Centred Climate Change Adaptation (4CA) approach partnering with Dhaka Ahasania Mission and South Asia Partnership-Bangladesh for the implementation.

The 4CA is an approach that works in partnership with children (as agents of change), their communities and government agencies, to raise awareness of climate change, to create locally appropriate climate smart solutions to protect children, their communities, and fulfil their human rights. This approach also promotes Climate Change Adaptation as it fosters the agency of children and youth, in groups and as individuals, to work towards making their lives safer and their communities more resilient to climate change and related disasters. It is empowering for children, and respectful of their views and rights as well as their vulnerabilities. It applies strategies such as awareness raising, capacity building, group formation, institutional development, research and influencing and advocacy across a range of arenas.





Learning to live with disasters

Life in Barguna is inextricably bound up with disaster. Its closeness to the sea and fencing by two rivers have rendered it the perennial prey of cyclone, tidal surge and flooding. People, poor and unaware, would resign themselves to their fate knowing no other ways. But that fatalism appears to be finally giving way to an awakening – they can prepare for disasters and keep its impact minimal. Plan's project "Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation: Build Safe and Resilient Communities (DPM:BSRC)" that seeks to help communities prepare for disasters is playing its part to deepen people's understanding of and changing attitude to climate change and disaster.

Children are at the heart of disaster risk reduction work

Meem, a student of Grade V, can tell if a snake is dangerous or not from its biting marks. As a member of the First Aid taskforce she has trained on how to deal with different kinds of injury or cut one might sustain during a disaster.

Selim, around 10, knows what to do in case one is traumatized. “I will try to distract him/her, will sing and tell stories,” he says if one is “frightened”, his equivalent for “traumatized”. He is a member of the Psychosocial Support taskforce.

Beauty, Selim’s classmate, explains the implication of one flag, two flags and three flags (denoting different levels of threat from cyclone)

Meem, Selim and Beauty are members of different taskforces formed at Lobon Gola Government Primary School under the project. School safety is a focus area of the project and these children taskforces have been devised to provide the children with an opportunity to play a role in keeping their school and themselves safe. The children are quite excited about it as one can glean from their enthusiastic exhibition of their learning. “They feel empowered, strong and confident when they are given a responsibility or asked for their opinion,” explains Imamul Azam Shahi, the project’s manager.

The enthusiasm of children seems to have touched their parents too. Merjina, around 35 and a single mother, was taken by surprise when her 10 years old daughter, Sumaiya, asked her to get involved with this initiative of building safe schools. “I discovered much to my amazement that she knew much more about cyclone and flood than I did,” says Merjina in a voice tinged with pride. She was curious, talked to a teacher of her daughter and became a member of the School Disaster Management Committee (SDMC).

The principal responsibility of making school safe rests with the SDMC, a platform of teachers, parents, school management committee members and children. With the support of a trained Union Mobiliser the SDMC methodically analyses the risks facing the school, identifies solutions and acts on them. Lobon Gala SDMC has done its exercise and over the last several months has actually materialised some of the identified solutions, thanks to the commitment of some of the SDMC members. Afzal Hossain is one of them.

For Afzal the motivation was simple – the horrifying experience of Sidr, the 2007 cyclone that killed 400 and inflicted massive destruction on lives and property. Barguna was among the worst hit. Seven years on Afzal is still haunted by his experience of that fateful day. “I still remember vividly how my cousin, who lives next door, was groping for his 6-year old son who was swept away by the fierce onrush of water while they were leaving their house for safety.

He found the child within a minute or so but the horror we all had to endure for those seconds is indescribable,” Afzal reminisces. He has a son who studies at grade 2 at the same school. “I don’t want to see my son having to face such situation. I don’t have many days left to me, but these children have their entire life ahead of them. We need to work for their sake, for their future,” Afzal sounds resolute.

Such community involvement like that of Merjina and Hossain has not gone in vain. The SDMC has materialized some of the plans they chalked out to reduce disaster risk – a link road that connects the school from the main road, put up a barricade to protect the school field from going under water from the near-by canal during the high tide and installed a solar panel. As for the resources a part of it came from the project while the rest was raised from the community, courtesy people like Afzal.

These are not massive interventions but educating children and creating space for them to take part in such efforts can go a long way to bring about positive and durable changes.



Child Organisations brought into the act

Engaging children has been at the heart of the project. One focus has been the children of primary schools. Lobongola Primary school is one of the 70 schools that are taking part in the project. But it is not just them. The project has also involved 100 Children's Organisations (CO) across Barguna sub-district. Now these COs had been there before the project took off. Plan invariably engages children in every community it works with and COs are a common platform Plan forms and fosters to mobilise and build capacity of the children to support them grow up as agents of change.

These children, members of COs, are an intelligent and motivated bunch, thanks to their education - they are all studying, most in high school and some in college – but also to a series of orientation and training programme Plan has provided them over the years. They have learnt about child rights and protection issues and whenever there is a project, be it disaster preparedness or early childhood care, they are usually part of it. The result is a group of children who are outspoken, active, motivated and keen to take up challenges thrown at them.

Talking to the members of Purakata Child Organisation in a June afternoon in a far-flung village called Alya Patakata was stimulating. To begin with they have good grasp of the climate change concept, particularly how it relates to them and their community. But more importantly, they have clearly taken a keen interest in the awareness raising role that the project has involved them into. The beginning was hard though. Sumaiya Shimu, President of Purakata CO and a student of grade ten, recounts how she and other CO members were jeered at when they visited houses to get across disaster risk reduction messages. “Here come the kids. They now want to teach us what we should do and do not do”, some would say. “Allah gives disasters. What can we humans do about it?” others would mock. Some were quite rude and would simply drive them away from their house. They nevertheless carried on. “We would tell them that if they had raised the floor of their house they could have protected their houses from being inundated during the Mahasen, a tropical storm that hit Barguna in 2013,” Shimu says how they impressed upon them at one stage. They gave them many practical advices like covering up the tube well with plastic so floodwater doesn't get into it and boiling water or using fitkiri to purify drinking water in the immediate aftermath of flooding to avoid diseases. These sound very simple but in these far-away villages of Bangladesh such tips can still be life-saving.

These days people seem to be more willing to listen to these child activists. Especially the houses with literate people or school going children are more welcoming, points out Shimu. During their awareness campaign Shimu and her group members make house to house visit and also hold courtyard meeting. “We try to explain to them climate change issues in a simple way. We encourage them to plant trees in their backyard, saying the economic benefit of it as well as the fact that they would protect their houses during storms. We also tell them to use organic fertilizer, which is cheaper and keep their crop fields healthier,” she gives some example.

Like the school children, the CO members also do the exercise of disaster risks and come up with an action plan to address those risks. The action plan is then shared with Union Disaster Management Committee (UDMC), a working group that deals with the Union's disaster preparedness. The activism of the children has started winning hearts and minds of the local-level decision makers who believe the children's voice need to be heard. Azizul Haque Shawpan, Chairman, Dhalua Union Parishad, is quite impressed: “We have children's representative in the UDMC. And their work in the form of risk assessment and action plan has helped inform the Union's development plan.”



Youth groups mobilised

Forkan Islam is in his mid-thirties and looks rather misfit in a group of some 15 youths all in their early twenties. However the motivation for him to join this group named Garjanbunia Youth Group working to reduce disaster risk in their community is clearly stronger than most others. He lost his father to the Sidr. "We all took refuge in a nearby shelter but my father insisted on staying back. We had 7 cows and other valuables and my father feared that these might be looted if no one was at home to guard them. But he could save neither the cows nor himself," Islam recalls that tragic event.

Warning signals had been an issue with many, especially a lot of people found it hard to realise what a certain number of signal exactly meant. The other problem was, warning signals did not, on occasions, follow up with feared level of cyclone, making many skeptics about signals. There was some signal a few days before the Sidr and many of us left our home in a hurry, but there was hardly any storm, Jahir, a student of a Polytechnic Institute and a member of the youth group, explains the reluctance of taking signals seriously. Attitudes are changing though, courtesy efforts of these youths and others who are helping members of the community to better understand what different signals mean.

The youth group, one of 33 in the working area, has done its exercise identifying the risks, resources available and actions that need to be undertaken to build safe and resilient communities. Half way through the project the group has some solid actions to show besides educating the community people of the need to be more proactive.

Thanks to their campaign many have raised their floor of their house, cut off tree branches that could fall on their roof during storm and cause destruction, some of the road-side shops have strengthened their structures adding cement-made poles, reports Jasim, one of the members. Nazma, one of the female members of the youth group, says she has learnt how to make compost fertilizer and persuaded a number of girls in her neighbourhood to do it as well.



Women are in charge of household level preparation

Women are often the worst sufferers in a disaster. They often don't have the essential information they need to escape the onslaught of a disaster. They are usually the last ones to leave home for a shelter and sometimes it is their long hair that gets them caught up with a tree or something and become the cause of their death. The women of Purakata village are unlikely to meet such a fate, thanks to their participation in the project.

Some 35 women, all aged from 20 to 60 and members of Purakata women group, have assembled at one of the group member's house in a rain-soaked June afternoon. They have been meeting on the last Thursday of every month for more than a year. They work on their action plan related to disaster preparedness and decide on their next month's programme. A broadsheet paper hung against the tin-wall has in it all the tasks they have set for themselves. There are 10 boxes against each member's name - each box denoting a particular task like tree plantation or raising the floor of the house or digging up a hole for waste disposal.



Not all the tasks they have undertaken are related to disaster preparedness. For instance they are installing sanitary latrines, cultivating vegetables on earthen pot using compost fertiliser, have installed community reservoir to collect rain water etc. The idea is to develop some ideal villages - villages the habitants of which are not only prepared for disasters and working towards adapting to climate change, but also send their children to school, keep away from child marriage, keep their houses clean and have beautiful flower garden in their house premises. "This is linking disaster preparedness with issues such as sanitation, education, environment friendly farming," explains Shahi.



Shahadat, an emblem of voluntarism

He is aged but agile. He crossed 70 a year ago but has retained a 35-year old's energy and spirit. A self-made man Shahadat Khandakar continues to be an active farmer and refuses to retire despite he has the financial ability to do so.

A member of the Disaster Management Committee of Uttar Patakata Government Primary School, Khandakar is the driving force of the community efforts relating to disaster and climate change issues. He played a key role in building two pieces of road connecting the school with the main road and a 3-foot high mud-fence surrounding the school so it does not go under water everytime there is heavy downpour or invasion of tidal water.

He is also the pioneer of compost fertiliser in the village. He shows the roadside spot where he is producing compost-fertiliser, which he learnt from the community mobiliser deployed under the project. It's a pile composed of several layers, each with different items like hyacinth, cowdung, and covered with a polythene sheet. It costs little, compared to chemical fertilizer and more importantly causes little damage to land's fertility. He is the first in the village to try this and his success has inspired some of his neighbours.

"We don't want you to give us money or anything. Just show us the direction and we can walk the way to our destination," says Khandakar. He hasn't spent much time in school but has learnt from life. "I have seen a lot of aid coming our way in the last 10 years or so. But that hasn't made us any richer, rather made us poorer, Khandakar adds.

Khandakar realises that outside support, be it cash or hardware, is not the answer. It is the 'information' and 'motivation' that do the trick. Motivating the community to get into the act is certainly the most important goal of the project and also the most challenging one. However, individuals like Khandakar, who is from within the community and speaks in their language, can make a world of difference.

Next year you will see a different Patakata village," Khandakar is unabashedly confident.



Preparing communities for disaster in urban setting

The project covers 5 wards of Dhaka South City Corporation where it implements the same kind of activities with particular focus on awareness raising among students of government primary schools and the communities. "All the students of my school are prepared for major urban disasters, which are earth quake and fire incidences. They have participated in mock drill and have orientations on pre, during, and post disaster", says Irani Begum, Acting Head Teacher of Brahmon Chiron Govt Primary School.



Like Borguna, schools in Dhaka also have their SDMCs and students from Children Council representatives are active members of the SDMC. SDMC makes a yearly plan for carrying out awareness and preparedness activities. Also the plan incorporates activities to be carried out in different disaster situations.

In the school, a micro phone located in the head teacher's room and connected to amplifiers in every class room, is used to disseminate awareness messages. In the event of any disaster especially earthquake, the head teacher or other teachers will alert the students with an announcement and provide them instruction for safe evacuation.

With awareness raising sessions from Plan and PNGO, the school authority has started tree plantation. "A major problem in a densely populated city like Dhaka is, we do not get space to plant or grow trees. As an alternative, we decided to plant trees in pots in the veranda of the school," says Irani.

The project has its activities in communities as well. Child representatives from 5 wards participate in the central Ward Disaster Management Committee. Apart from capacity building of the children and community people through mock drill, the project also provides life skill trainings to Ward Disaster Management Committee (WDMC) and SDMC, youth group and students as part of disaster preparedness.

Youth group members identify potential disaster risks in different times of the year and develop risk mitigation plan. They street drama, stage performances and go for door to door visit in the community to raise awareness of the community people.

With continuous advocacy efforts, community people now know that dumping organic and inorganic garbage in same bins and firing those up results in increased carbon emission into the environment. "Also, we are aware that inorganic wastes, if clogged in drains will cause water logging in the community. We motivate people to dump organic garbage in one bin and inorganic in another. People these days seem to pay more heed to us," says Al-Amin, a youth volunteer from a Plan-supported community.

For climate change adaptation, community people are now using eco-friendly ovens and have initiated homestead gardening. "We have planted small plants in front of our home to contribute in carbon reduction. We are also having fresh vegetable from the plants" said Mim, a 13-year-old-girl from Dhaka South.





Halfway through the project life the DPM:BSRC has done one thing – people are now aware and have begun to realise that they need not be the passive victims of disaster but have the means in their own hands to protect themselves. Particularly inspiring is the activism and commitment of the children and the youth. And as we all would agree, that is where lies our best hope.

