EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES IN BANGLADESH WITH DISASTER MANAGEMENT SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

Bangladesh is one of the most disaster prone countries in the world, with a large majority of the population frequently exposed to flooding, cyclones, storms and tidal bores. Around 80 per cent of the country’s surface is comprised of the delta plains of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river system, which regularly floods during the annual monsoon season between June and October.

Between 2013-2014, Y Care International supported the National Council of YMCAs of Bangladesh (NCYB) to carry out a youth-focused disaster risk reduction (DRR) pilot project in Bogra, Chittagong and Gopalganj.

The objective of the pilot project was to increase awareness on disaster preparedness and management amongst vulnerable communities of Sariakandi (Bogra YMCA), Daulatpur (Chittagong YMCA), and Gopalganj (Gopalganj YMCA) which are all frequently impacted by natural hazards; and to build the capacity of NCYB and the three local YMCAs to manage and implement youth-led and community-based DRR activities and projects.

The pilot project evaluation in August 2014 was supported by a Y Care International staff member and key findings and recommendations are summarised below.
Project design
During the project design phase, a needs assessment was carried out with 255 community members and the NCYB to assess experience of disasters, knowledge and coping mechanisms. The needs assessment highlighted three local YMCAs: Bogra, Gopalganj and Chittagong, whose working areas were extremely disaster prone, the surrounding communities had minimal resilience to disasters and staff and volunteers had limited experience of disaster response and DRR.

The communities were found to have few coping mechanisms despite being frequently affected by disasters; in many cases, community members had a largely hopeless or fatalistic attitude to natural disasters and believed that they could do nothing themselves to reduce disaster risk. Staff claimed that initial stages of the project were challenging when they tried to encourage community members to get involved in project activities as they didn’t understand the value of the project.

Approach
The project established 66 village level DRR groups which supported individual communities to identify their vulnerability to disaster risk and how they can be managed by taking appropriate preparedness measures. The project replicated the ward structure, where several small villages are grouped together into a ward, with representatives of the village DRR groups forming 9 ward level DRR groups. These groups helped to disseminate DRR training and identified appropriate strategies to support the village DRR groups to be more active.

Participation
As the project grew in prominence, more community members came forward to join the village DRR groups. Some members of the village DRR groups also joined the ward DRR groups and became responsible for running ward level DRR activities and making their village activities more effective. A total of 530 community members became active members of the ward and village level DRR groups and increased their skills and knowledge on disaster risk reduction.

The village DRR groups became extremely active within the communities. They have identified the most at risk areas and members of the community, taken appropriate measures to prepare for natural hazard events, and have increased awareness about how to support more at-risk groups, such as children, pregnant women, people with disabilities and elderly people, during disasters.

Reach
Ward and village DRR groups reported that they had shared their learning with friends and family as well as with other community members; the total outreach of 530 volunteers is estimated to have been more than 5,000 people across the project locations. In addition, many village and ward DRR group members said they had taken small actions at home to make them less vulnerable to the impacts of floods, such as by raising the foundation of their homes by a foot or more.

Equity
The project successfully included women into the project and gave them opportunities to influence their community; 64 per cent (339) of village DRR group members were women. Given the patriarchal structure of Bangladeshi society which often limits women playing an active role in community leadership this is extremely positive.

Youth participation
There were some challenges in recruiting young women and men as members of the ward and village DRR groups. Overall, the village DRR groups had 26 per cent (140 people) youth membership with youth participation being a particular challenge in Bogra, the largest project location. For some YMCA staff the focus on youth-led processes had not been clearly articulated so they did not actively seek the involvement of young people.

Further, some young people stated that they were busy with other responsibilities, such as school and supporting family livelihoods, so did not have time to volunteer. Whilst youth involvement was challenging, many young people involved in the village DRR groups claimed that it was good to be listened to by their elders.

YMCA capacity building
The Training of Trainers on DRR for YMCA staff was found to be very useful however, it was not quite long or detailed enough for those involved in the project to feel fully confident of their new knowledge, and there were not enough training materials. The YMCA staff stated that refresher training would have been well placed to ensure that that staff were updating and consolidating their knowledge.
Volunteerism
At the start of the project, there was some reluctance by community members to join the village DRR groups as the benefits of being a member were unclear. No financial incentives were provided to these groups; Y Care International and the YMCA believing that such community activities would become unsustainable once the project ended if volunteering was based on financial incentives. It was found that members were happy not to receive financial incentives for their attendance but support for transport to, and refreshments during, the meetings were enabling factors in their involvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM LEARNING

Capacity building
Training provision for both YMCA staff and the ward and village DRR group members was found to be extremely useful however it did not go far enough in making the YMCA and the members feel confident in their knowledge and ability to share with others. Future projects should extend the length of training to ensure it adequately provides the level of information required. Additional refresher training should be included to update and reinforce knowledge.

Hazard mapping
The ward DRR groups and village DRR groups were able to assess and identify the most at-risk groups within their communities however, it was decided not to include training on hazard, vulnerability and capacity assessments (HVCAs). Future projects should include such training to enable ward and village DRR groups to carry this out and ensure the wider community are reached through awareness raising activities and appropriate DRR actions.

Engagement
The project managed to reach over 5,000 people with information on DRR however, this figure could be increased by investing in more interactive and engaging communication methods and targeting. Future projects should support ward and village DRR groups to think of different methods of engagement such as disaster simulation models, dance and theatre and rallies to reach groups such as schools, universities, local government and other local organisations. This would encourage more community members to get involved in awareness raising activities and support knowledge sharing.

Coordination
The project showed that ward DRR groups had been very supportive of village DRR groups and these groups had coordinated well with each other. Future projects should promote effective coordination amongst village DRR groups to ensure they continue to work well together and are able to share learning with each other.

Accessibility
Projects must consider how accessible learning resources are for community members and volunteers; efforts should be made to make information, education and communication (IEC) materials such as posters, leaflets, and banners clear and understandable for those with low levels of literacy. Further, accessibility must also be guaranteed for people with disabilities to ensure they are able to actively participate.

Resources
It is important to provide ward and village level DRR groups with resources which can be used during rallies and awareness-raising and that will last beyond the life of the project, such as cameras, projectors, screens, public address systems, shovels, safe storage area etc.
BANGLADESH: NATURAL DISASTERS

The Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river system’s delta plains cover 80 per cent of Bangladesh. Its people are exposed to frequent flooding, cyclones, storms and tidal bores.

STORIES OF CHANGE

“...Aid agencies normally come to us with relief goods after disaster but Training of Trainers on DRR gives us a clear understanding and builds enough confidence that we can reduce disaster risk and damage if we can take good preparation.”

Community member

“Community members didn’t want to listen to us at first, but we kept trying and now they listen and they are interested.”

Village DRR group member

“I’ve visited Sariakandi many times before but this was the first time that I truly understood what life is like for people there. I am working in community development and I have learnt a lot from the research process.”

YMCA staff member

PROJECT DASHBOARD

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Goal

Increased awareness on disaster preparedness and management amongst vulnerable communities of Sariakandi (Bogra YMCA), Daulatpur (Chittagong YMCA), and Gopalganj (Gopalganj YMCA)

Implementing partners

National Council of YMCA of Bangladesh

Funders

YMCA International

Duration

May 2013-April 2014

Cost

$6,996

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