

Bangladesh's natural resources are no longer sufficient to meet people's needs. The conversion of coastal forests to other uses has lessened the country's protection from increasingly threatening cyclones and storm surges.

CARE in Bangladesh: Reducing Vulnerability Through Strong Partnerships

Background

Compared to many other countries, Bangladesh was once quite gifted in terms of natural resources. In its pristine state, the country featured an abundance of water, plenty of arable land, rich and productive soil, good fishing—all the makings of a self-sustaining society capable of supporting large populations.

But today, the country's natural resource base is unable to meet people's needs. Coastal forests, for example, have largely been lost to shrimp farms, rice paddies and farm fields. The loss of these valuable forest assets is a tragedy. But their conversion has also resulted in reduced protection from increasingly frequent cyclones and severe storm surges.

At the same time, the obstruction of waterways by roads, embankments and the like has resulted in reduced drainage. This aggravates flooding, causes vast areas of land to become waterlogged, and increases saline intrusion from the Bay of Bengal. The result is contaminated drinking water and a loss of productive land for farming.

People in southwestern Bangladesh are currently struggling to sustain their livelihoods and meet basic needs — and climate change is making things much worse. Indeed, decades of environmental abuse/neglect are now combining with climate change to take a massive toll on people's well being, access to safe water, food security, and opportunities for sustainable economic development.

© Angie Dazé/CARE 2007



Women make up 40 percent of the water management committees established by CARE.

The Project

To help communities in southwestern Bangladesh adapt to the consequences of climate change, CARE launched the Reducing Vulnerability to Climate Change (RVCC) Project in 2001, with support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

The project tackled the consequences of climate change deemed - by residents themselves - most important to local wellbeing. Through a participatory assessment, community members identified spreading salinity, waterlogging, flooding and drought as primary concerns.

Women's groups, in particular, prioritised water and health. Access to safe water, and implications for family health, are considered critical but are deteriorating due to the accelerating impacts of climate change.

The RVCC project took an integrated and comprehensive approach to reducing vulnerability that included the implementation of household-level adaptation activities. However, the program's main focus was on developing the capacity of local organisations and creating an enabling policy environment for locally-led adaptation. The participation of women in all activities, from the household level to the national level, was an important theme.

Our strategies were oriented toward institutions and policies, including:

Integrating climate change into local planning

The project engaged Union Parishads (UPs), the local governing bodies—continually reaching out to leaders to make them aware of residents' concerns, and elicit their support. We focused on increasing the understanding of vulnerability to climate change among local government representatives, and integrating those issues into local planning mechanisms. The approaches emphasized the governance process—promoting participatory planning, increased representation of women and vulnerable groups in local governance structures, and greater transparency by local government institutions.

At the end of the project in 2006, all 14 targeted UPs had developed Three Year Development Plans for adaptation to environmental degradation and climate change. The plans include specific actions to address waterlogging and salinity, including the removal of illegal barriers in the canal system and the promotion of rainwater harvesting. Steps to reduce the impact of cyclones were also included: 11 UPs decided to plant trees as "living windbreaks" and two UPs made building cyclone shelters a priority.



Building civil society capacity on climate change

CARE worked hand-in-hand with 16 local partner organisations, representing local and national NGOs, a community based organisation, and two research organisations.

As climate change was a new issue to many of the partners, we invested a great deal of effort into building their technical and analytical capacity on learning about climate vulnerability issues. Partners then worked directly with target communities to implement adaptation strategies and undertake advocacy activities at the local level. Several partners produced publications or tools to communicate on specific aspects of their work with RVCC, including a song on disaster preparedness and a publication on floating gardens, one of the adaptation strategies promoted by the project.

Influencing Public Policies

One major component of the project was an advocacy campaign to drive policymaking at the national level. With community priorities in mind, we chose to advocate on the potable water crisis, with the goal of getting the government to provide safe water to vulnerable populations, and to address the problem of saline intrusion.

CARE and civil society partner the Pani Committee launched a grassroots campaign to mobilise citizen support for the issue. This was a multifaceted effort involving a number of activities, including a letter writing campaign to the Prime Minister, generating over 10,000 letters from residents describing their struggles to access water, and demanding action to provide safe water; and district rallies that attracted hundreds of residents.

In addition, CARE coordinated a symbolic strike attended by national political leaders and Members of Parliament, who urged the government to take action on the water crisis.

A roundtable discussion was also organised to highlight the drinking water problem, identify policy constraints, possible solutions, and provide an overview of the advocacy campaign to date. Key participants included the Chair of the Parliamentary Water Policy Committee, high-level officials from water-related government agencies, other NGOs and projects working on water issues, journalists, civil society representatives, and grassroots representatives from the southwest region. As a result, the Chair of the Parliamentary Water Committee committed to reviewing the policy and plan in the near future. He also emphasized the need to control expansion of shrimp farming in the region through legislative action.

Results

In terms of adaptation strategies, RVCC has yielded a number of successes. Overall, access to potable water has increased through the installation of rainwater harvesting systems, promotion of simple filtration technologies, and installation of deep

tube wells, together with training on operation and maintenance.

Even more encouraging are the results of the capacity development and advocacy initiatives. Here are some highlights:

- Local government bodies are acting on adaptation. Two UPs have completed river dredging (total of 20km/12 miles of river dredged) to improve drainage and reduce flooding. Roadside tree planting has been carried out by five UPs, covering both sides of a total of approximately 55km/35 miles of road. To ensure better drainage, two UPs worked cooperatively to remove all unauthorised barriers from the Kabodak River.
- Women's participation in local organisations increased. In the water management committees established by the project, approximately 40 percent of committee members are female. There is also evidence of increased participation by female UP members. Gender issues such as violence against women and dowry were included in UPs' Three Year Development Plans.
- Important Actions Taken at the national level. The Prime Minister's Office issued a directive to relevant ministries to address the potable water issue in the region. A significant financial commitment was made to address rural water supply issues in the southwest region. The Water Development Board (WDB) initiated the re-excavation of silted river beds in Jessore District, which will restore fresh water flow to 19 villages and provide more access to safe water.
- Local NGOs are demonstrating capacity to address climate change issues. Three of the project's partners presented their RVCC activities and lessons learned at the 2005 International Workshop on Community-Level Adaptation to Climate Change in Dhaka. Two of the partners joined the Climate Action Network (CAN), an international network of organisations who are committed to addressing climate change. One partner received a grant to attend the World Water Forum in Mexico to present adaptation work done through the RVCC Project.

Conclusion

The RVCC project's pleas for safe water have found a receptive audience; proof of this can be found in the resulting commitments of government leaders, which will increase the sustainability of adaptation measures and strengthen the ability of project participants to secure their rights to government support.

The project illustrates how efforts to forge strong relationships with government service providers can and do work in effecting change. Through this collaboration, combined with the strengthened capacity of the local partner organisations, RVCC has made great headway in creating an enabling environment for adaptation—and a wellspring of ideas.