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Bangladesh's Enhancing Resilience programme

In Bangladesh, the Enhancing Resilience programme integrates asset creation activities with community training to build resilience among the rural ultra-poor, especially women. This case study illustrates how targeted and strategic efforts can empower individuals, enhance food security and nutrition, and help communities better manage natural disasters and climate change impacts.

Overview

Patharghata, a sub-district in southern coastal Bangladesh, suffered extensive damage from Cyclone Sidr in November 2007. The cyclone displaced millions, created long-term food insecurity and forced many people further into poverty. Patharghata remains at high risk of cyclones and tidal surges – which are predicted to be more severe in coming decades. Families live and farm on low-lying land vulnerable to floods, river erosion, rising sea-levels and salt-water intrusion. These climate-related hazards endanger people's health, safety and livelihoods and offset important socioeconomic gains. They compromise farming, and subsequently incomes and food security for the ultra-poor, who rely on agricultural wage labour and marginal farming.

To assist such communities along the southern coastal belt, and also those in Bangladesh's north western flood plains, the government and the World Food Programme is implementing the Enhancing Resilience (ER) programme across 43 disaster- and poverty-prone sub-districts of Bangladesh. In 2012 the programme provided 82,000 ultra-poor women and men with employment opportunities, benefiting 410,000 household members. This case study covers the 4,500 women and men from three communities¹ in Patharghata who chose to join ER in 2011.

WFP works primarily with the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), under the Ministry

of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives, coordinating with the Ministry of Food, the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, and the Ministry of Environment and Forest.

In Patharghata, WFP's local NGO partner – Shushilan – implements ER. In consultation with local government institutions and community members Shushilan identifies participants, facilitates local planning, distributes food and cash wages, and delivers training.

Background and history

ER works by engaging communities and individuals in planning and building community assets, such as embankments-cum-roads and canals, and by offering training in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. It uses a combined food-and-cash-for-work and training approach in which WFP provides food and the government complements with cash. The goal is to strengthen beneficiaries' economic resources while also building community-based assets that protect development gains from natural disasters and climate change impacts.

ER aligns with the top priorities of the government's Sixth Five-Year Plan (2011-15) and complements its Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, which identifies food security, social protection and health, infrastructure, and capacity building and institutional strengthening as key pillars.

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EMPOWERMENT

ER is strongly self-targeting. It offers low-paying employment, so attracts only the poorest individuals. ER recognises that women face additional barriers to income-generating opportunities and are more vulnerable to natural disasters than men. Due to social roles and poor mobility, women shoulder responsibilities at home, while men can leave in search of higher-paying work. Yet consistent evidence shows that cash transfers to women lead to increased household and family welfare, food security and diet diversity. The ER programme also aims to enhance women's socio-political empowerment. At least 70 per cent of ER participants are women, and mostly women are elected to lead the 'Users' Groups' that consult with Shushilan and help implement the programme.

Interventions and impacts

Patharghata has a poor water management system and frequently suffers from flooding, siltation and increased salinity. These affect agricultural productivity as well as the incomes of the ultra-poor marginal farmers and agricultural day-labourer households. With few alternative livelihood options they must often employ 'negative coping strategies' – eating less nutritious foods, reducing meal size and frequency, selling assets, taking loans, selling labour in advance and migrating to find work – to meet their immediate food and basic household needs, particularly during the agricultural lean seasons.

To enhance resilience for ultra-poor households and communities, and to break the cycle of reliance on negative coping strategies for reoccurring shocks, the ER programme provides short-term employment. This raises incomes and helps safeguard food security and nutritional status for participants and their households. At the same time, the programme addresses underlying vulnerabilities by constructing physical assets that improve flood control and access to arable land, or improve irrigation systems for better water management and increased agricultural productivity. This is combined with training to strengthen participant's capacity to prepare for, and respond to, natural disasters.

Local planning. Local planning teams involving government officials, NGO representatives and elected community people review, map and prioritise community needs, focusing on disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation schemes. During 2011 and 2012 these teams identified 25 canals, 3 embankments, 6 road-cum-embankments, 10 pond re-excavations and 11 homestead-raising schemes to be constructed with technical guidance from the LGED.

Food and cash for work and assets. Participants work for 15 to 18 days each month, earning an

average of 40 kilograms of diversified food and 1,000 taka.² The transfer value corresponds to two-thirds of average monthly incomes for ultra-poor households – on a par with other government employment generation programmes. The diversified food basket and cash wages fill a critical household income gap, and let participants provide enough nutritious food for their families, so reducing the negative coping strategies that lead to longer-term food insecurity.

Households particularly at risk of flooding and tidal surges were elevated by 1.5 feet to 2.5 feet (46cm-76cm) through homestead-raising schemes. These efforts, along with building embankments-cum-roads and excavating canals, are protecting homes and crops from annual flooding or tidal surges, so preventing loss of assets and displacement. The canal and pond excavations have meant improved water access for the community, and greater opportunities for cropping and fish-farming. The schemes will continue to support agricultural production in the dry season and improved food production for years to come.

Food and cash for training. During the wet season (when earthworks are more difficult) the participants join an average of 10 training sessions per month, receiving a monthly remuneration of around 22.5 kilograms of rice and 652 taka in cash. Training helps households improve disaster preparedness, response, recovery and climate change adaptation skills. It also offers marketable post-disaster skills. Awareness sessions for the entire household promote beneficial behaviours that address child under-nutrition, such as infant and young child feeding and hygiene practices. Other sessions tackle risky social norms such as girl-child marriage and pregnancy.

Training delivered to the whole community and to local institutions enhances capacity for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

Grants for new entrepreneurs. The ER programme has now added a third year of support particularly targeting women. In 2013, female labourers/trainees and the wives of male labourers/trainees can receive a substantial one-off cash grant (around US\$150) after submitting an individual business plan. Combined with savings accrued over the past two years, this grant can be invested in an income-generating activity. An allowance will complement the grant for 12 months – long enough to stabilise income and basic food consumption while the women engage in intensive entrepreneurial skills training to select, invest in and develop a viable income-generating activity.

Over this period the women will continue to receive intensive support from Shushilan including a locally

ER participants working at a canal re-excavation site. Once emptied of built-up silt, this canal will help prevent flooding of adjacent fields during the monsoon season, and provide water for irrigation in the dry season



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hired contact woman to ensure timely re-investment and encourage further growth and business diversification.

Main achievements and challenges

Innovative ways to address interactions between hunger, nutrition and climate change

The original two-year ER programme had significant benefits for ultra-poor households by stabilising incomes and smoothing food consumption. The households and communities are now well prepared, knowing how to respond when disasters strike, as well as how to adapt to climate change effects. New community assets protect households and businesses from natural disasters as well as helping rehabilitate agricultural land, so strengthening food production and income opportunities. Key achievements include:

Combining 'protection' with 'promotion'. After two years a platform for growth for the communities has been established and community assets developed. However, at the household level, benefits to the ultra-poor participants have remained largely indirect, and mostly through increased employment opportunities. The modest savings labourers/trainees accumulated over the two years are generally not enough for households to invest and build economic resilience and food security, hence the expansion to include an additional year of support. This expansion has drawn lessons from successful 'promotional safety net' models, and aims for more sustainable resilience to natural disasters and the effects of climate change.

Improved payment processes. Once heavily bureaucratic, cash transfer has been streamlined and participants are now paid on time. WFP continues to trial alternative cash transfer methods (for example, mobile phone cash transfers). For the 2013 'promotion' element, all participants have cash grants for investment transferred to individual bank accounts.

Knowledge sharing, empowerment and rights

The ER programme has a strong empowerment element, providing development opportunities to the poorest and most food-insecure people, who do not benefit from mainstream development. The contributing design elements include:

Prioritising women. The programme recognises women's pivotal position in tackling hunger and improving nutrition. With an opportunity to earn regular wages, and armed with new knowledge and skills, women are exercising more control over income and resources and are contributing to decisions that determine their family's future. ER participants understand the importance of education, and are sending their sons and also their daughters to school. And as elected leaders of the Users' Groups and Users' Committees, women play an important role in representing their peers.

Local level planning. The local planning process involves community members in a participatory bottom-up approach that identifies community needs and solutions. Shushilan facilitates the process, reducing top-down influence from powerful people in and outside the community, and enabling poor and marginalised men and women to help identify community priorities, so generating strong community ownership. Men's participation in the work phase is important to ensure both men and women feel ownership of the schemes.

Capacity building to reduce risk. WFP works closely with local government and non-government organisations through tailored training sessions, knowledge sharing workshops, close consultations and regular feedback. Together we develop joint risk reduction activities, and boost local communities' disaster preparedness and response capabilities.

Challenges and strategies to overcome them

Gender inequality. In Bangladesh extremely poor women have very low social status. As well as needing to earn income, they are responsible for childcare and household chores, have restricted mobility, and have limited control over household decision making. The ER programme incorporated several provisions to mitigate specific constraints faced by women, including: toilet facilities, access to clean drinking water, and childcare.

EMPOWERMENT

As the earthworks in the 'food-and-cash-for-work' element is labour intensive, the daily requirement per participant has been set quite low, to accommodate women's physical capabilities.

Opportunity cost. The work requirement of the ER programme is not full-time, so labourers/trainees can take on other duties and employment, as it is important that the programme should not disrupt long-established work and income generating opportunities for the poor. However, the opportunity cost for older men and for women is lower (particularly for rural women, who are even more likely to be unpaid contributing family members than rural men), which is why they often put themselves forward for ER.

Lessons

A human development approach. Human development encompasses much more than economic growth, it is also a process of enlarging people's choices and enabling them to live a long and healthy life, giving access to knowledge and education, and providing opportunities to participate in their community and contribute to the decisions that affect their lives. By a design where the most vulnerable self-select participation (those who benefit most from the programme), and by prioritising women, ER has encouraged participation in community's development. ER's Users' Committees also give participants an opportunity for local representation.

Local-level planning. Bottom-up approaches that emphasise participation by the local community, including in goal setting and the means of achieving goals, creates community ownership and commitment and adds accountability to development initiatives. Remote schemes with little community ownership usually suffer from poor maintenance efforts. By engaging male and female community members from the beginning the programme identified and responded to their different needs and capabilities, and to the community's aspirations.

Disaster risk reduction and preparedness. Resilience at one level does not automatically result in resilience at higher levels - that is resilient households do not guarantee resilient communities. Therefore, ER includes comprehensive training for

participants on disaster risk reduction, longer-term adaptation skills and climate change awareness; as well as workshops and training to engage and activate local institutions and community stakeholders and strengthening capacity for effective design and implementation of contingency plans; WFP liaises with the LGED and local authorities to ensure resources continue to be allocated and that schemes are maintained.

Partnership. Successful interventions require engagement and coordination from all sectors and stakeholders. There is a strong commitment from the government, especially the LGED, in design, planning, provision of technical expertise, contribution of cash wages and in the entrepreneurial support component. Strong local NGO partners manage how activities are implemented, though design of activities is largely community led. WFP also serves as a link that strengthens government partnerships with NGOs, other government ministries, departments and civil society organisations.

Food and cash. The combined food and cash approach has given households greater flexibility in spending while reducing the impact of food price fluctuations. This is in line with a 2009 study by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), which concluded that a combination of food and cash is better than cash alone in meeting the food security and other needs of vulnerable households. ER provided a diverse food basket complemented by messages on life skills and nutrition that aimed to improve dietary intake and nutritional status. The cash grants are expected to provide economic stability and increase household resilience to natural disasters and climate change.

Women's empowerment. Throughout the world, women represent a substantial and under-utilised force for sustainable development. ER has prioritised women, particularly as recipients of entrepreneurial support, because of their acknowledged importance for family advancement. ER has empowered women to contribute to household income and the decision-making process, something that has consistently been shown to lead to increased household/family welfare and food security, and that also enhances women's status at both the family and community level.

Notes

■ ¹ Targeted communities include Charduani, Patharghata Sadar, and Kalmegha Unions. Unions are the lowest administrative unit in Bangladesh, often representing several small villages. ■ ² Exchange rate in February 2011 was US\$1 = 72 Bangladesh taka



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