

Building comprehensive resilience and facilitating women's leadership: critical success factors for Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation



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ActionAid and Disaster Risk Reduction

It is now widely acknowledged that disasters play a central role in contributing to destructive cycles of hardship, increased vulnerability and growing poverty. The past two decades have seen a significant increase in the frequency and intensity of disasters – particularly climate-induced disasters – and prompted much discussion around the convergence between disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation (CCA).

Disasters are not ‘natural’. They can often be prevented and their impact mitigated.

ActionAid’s work on DRR in 16 countries across Asia, Africa and the Americas plays a key part in our fight against poverty. In eight countries across Asia, we have been implementing risk reduction and disaster preparedness programmes since 2004, with funding from DIPECHO and donor governments. These programmes have focused on building national and sub-national capacity to address the risks faced by communities, facilitating community-centred and managed DRR through social mobilization and placing DRR at the heart of national development policies.

In Guatemala, where floods, landslides and other disasters are common, we have worked in

collaboration with other development and humanitarian agencies to mobilise and build the capacity of communities to prepare for and respond to emergencies.

Our pioneering five year Disaster Risk Reduction through Schools (DRRS) project, implemented in nine countries¹, sought to institutionalise DRR efforts within communities by using schools as a locus for working with children, teachers, parents, local officials and other key stakeholders. This innovative approach also provided strategic opportunities to integrate the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) priorities within national education systems.

¹ Bangladesh, Ghana, Haiti, India, Kenya, Malawi and Nepal (projects funded by DFID, UK government) plus DRC and Zambia (projects funded by Hellenic Aid, Greek government)

The DRRS project used participatory methodologies to involve communities in analysing their vulnerabilities to hazards and developing action plans to prepare for, prevent and mitigate the impacts of disasters. The process engaged authorities at the district and national levels, linking people's first-hand experience of disasters to wider policies and practices in order to bring about real and lasting change. Working in collaboration with civil society organisations, local and national authorities, international policy-makers and institutions, as well as communities themselves, the project contributed to a number of key achievements at local, national and international levels, including:

- ❑ Reaching out to over 425,000 people to institutionalise DRR efforts in line with the priorities of the HFA;
- ❑ Facilitating the integration of DRR into the national Nepalese school curriculum;
- ❑ Establishing/supporting and training over 167 disaster management committees at local level;
- ❑ Lobbying at international level for governments to fulfil their responsibilities with regard to the implementation of the HFA priorities, and ensuring policy and practice is informed by the experiences of communities.

At the heart of all ActionAid's DRR work lies one common aim – to support people to increase their resilience and reduce their vulnerability to disasters. By linking local experience to national and international frameworks, and by engaging in the process of analysing their vulnerabilities, communities are able to address the underlying inequalities and injustices which increase their vulnerability to hazards. However, our experience of DRR over the past ten years has underlined the need to further develop two areas of work critical to inclusive, effective and sustainable DRR efforts: the importance of building comprehensive resilience and the need to put women's leadership at the centre of DRR initiatives.

International recognition for ActionAid's DRR work

In 2007, ActionAid was awarded a Sasakawa Certificate of Distinction by the UNISDR for its contribution to integrating DRR into “national, sub-national, sectoral and community initiatives.” ActionAid's work was commended for facilitating the “development and introduction of the Hyogo Framework as a component of these efforts in moving societies towards inclusive, integrated strategies and plans for achieving sustainable development.”

Building resilience in an increasingly vulnerable world

In 2010, 373 disasters (both 'natural' and man-made) were recorded globally². While the resulting worldwide economic losses were estimated at around USD 109bn³, the human costs were immeasurably greater. Disasters invariably hit marginalised groups and people living in poverty the hardest, precisely because they lack the power to negotiate access to/control over information, infrastructure, basic services and financial resources to be able to mitigate the hazards they face. The ability of those living in poverty to recover and rebuild their lives following disasters is similarly compromised. By building the resilience of communities in a comprehensive manner, the cycle of poverty which sustains their vulnerability can be broken.

Research suggests that every \$1 invested in risk reduction measures can save up to \$7 in post-disaster recovery costs⁴. Increasingly there is consensus among policy-makers and practitioners on the imperative for DRR efforts to focus on preventing the worst consequences of disaster by investing in increasing communities' resilience. This represents a significant paradigm shift in the way we look to meet the challenge posed by disasters in today's world.

Comprehensive resilience can be understood as stemming from an analysis of *all* factors driving vulnerability and how these can be mitigated and managed. It takes into consideration the political, social, cultural, economic and physical hazards, shocks and threats which face communities, and it seeks to join up the multiple layers – local, national, regional and international – which impact vulnerability.

“ We need a radical shift in development practices and planning and, as a priority, merging disaster risk reduction, poverty reduction and climate change adaptation into a single, coherent and innovative approach.”

Margareta Wahlström,
UN Assistant Secretary-General
for Disaster Risk Reduction

Participatory methodologies such as Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA) can be used to engage communities in an analysis of the full range of risks they face, and in developing actions that address them. By integrating this comprehensive vulnerability analysis into all development and humanitarian programming, communities can analyse and start to address the multiple threats and vulnerabilities they face, lifting themselves out of poverty in the process.

ActionAid's experience in DRR has revealed a need to view the basic needs of disaster-affected communities as basic rights, both by communities themselves as well as policy-makers and practitioners. Local level analysis must feed into national level resilience-building through drivers such as five year development plans, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, Disaster Risk Management Strategies and climate change adaptation strategies and action plans. From there, linkages need to be made with international policy frameworks to ensure a coherent process for addressing all aspects of vulnerability.

Case Study:

A comprehensive approach to reducing climate risks in Bangladesh

Sirajganj district lies on the course of the river Jamuna in northern Bangladesh. Climate change has exposed communities living along the river's edge to flooding and land erosion, reducing the availability of productive agricultural land. An ActionAid project initiated in 2008 aimed to analyse and address the multiple vulnerabilities faced by the communities, with a view to building comprehensive resilience. The project focused on building resilience through a series of key processes and initiatives:

- **Facilitating community-led analysis and action:** community members were supported to lead an analysis of the vulnerabilities they face and how these link to the effects of climatic changes. This was informed by interaction with experts from the scientific community, enabling the communities to link their experiences with wider scientific analysis and predictions. Many of the risks and vulnerabilities identified were linked directly to poverty and unequal access to resources, further compounded by the changing climate. The communities identified and prioritised their problems and developed action plans to address them. ActionAid supported the communities and their institutions to mobilise resources for household-level coping and adaptation strategies.
- **Raising the plinth levels of houses:** experience shows that this is one of the most effective strategies to protect homes from loss of assets due to regular flooding. The intervention prevented damage to houses, loss of income and assets and population displacements due to flooding. It also provided more space for household-based income generation activities such as homestead gardening, weaving and cattle rearing. Follow-up analysis showed that the fertility of the top layer soil of the raised plinth contributed to increased vegetable production in homestead gardens, supporting year-round cultivation and thus providing additional income.
- **Strengthening the capacity of houses to withstand disaster:** most of the houses in the project area were made from thatch and bamboo, with an untreated earth base with minimal or no foundation. Every year, houses suffered severe damage during floods. The project identified this as a risk to the security, privacy and dignity of the communities, and undertook to strengthen houses against flooding and high winds by using locally-available durable materials.
- **Provision of drinking water and sanitation systems:** the communities identified availability of safe drinking water as a key risk resulting from climate change, so as part of the project tube wells and latrines were installed. The tube wells reduced the burden on women to collect water from distant locations, thus reducing the likelihood of them suffering violent attacks whilst undertaking this task. The construction of latrines and sanitation systems also helped reduce the health risks facing women and children during floods, another issue that had been identified as contributing to vulnerability.
- **Promoting alternative livelihoods:** weaving by handloom was identified as the principal economic activity of the project area. Women were generally tasked with producing threads on locally-made wooden wheels, earning between 10-15 Taka (USD 0.14 – USD 0.21) per day. In order to strengthen the income-generating potential of the women, the project introduced a four-spin charka with more advanced technology. The improved spinning wheel enabled the women to quadruple their income, promoting greater security of livelihoods and providing additional capital to improve their standard of living.
- **Lobbying and advocacy:** the project strengthened local capacity to engage in climate-change issues by building a platform of community-based organisations to act as a pressure group to demand services from local government institutions and to influence the formulation of national climate-change policies. In addition, the project facilitated a tripartite dialogue between the Ministry of Environment and Forests, civil society and the Union Parishad forum (the lowest tier of the local government body in Bangladesh) on the national-level Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan.

Critical success factors

- **Community participation:**
mobilising all sections of the community, especially women and marginalised groups, to identify multiple risks and develop action plans, and to move from individual experience to collective action.
- **Combining scientific and local knowledge:** facilitating understanding of the scientific processes behind climate change, and providing information on appropriate technologies (both high and low-tech) to mitigate its impacts.
- **Community empowerment:**
using a rights-based approach to empower community members to speak out and demand action on climate-related issues.



A woman in Sirajganj pumps water from a new handpump installed after the community identified access to clean water as a priority during vulnerability assessments. Photo: ActionAid

Putting women's leadership at the centre of resilience-building

Disasters have a disproportionate impact on women. Structural inequalities, existing gender discrimination and unequal power relations mean they are often hardest hit, take longer to recover, and may not recover as fully. Similarly, the way women experience vulnerability is very different to men. Lack of access to, and control over, resources, and exclusion from claiming basic entitlements increase women's vulnerability and undermine their ability to cope with the impacts of disasters, including those induced by climate change.

However, the fact that women in developing countries are still largely responsible for securing food, water, and energy for cooking and heating gives increased importance to their role in disaster preparedness initiatives. Any lack of resources resulting from disaster or climate change reduces their ability to fulfil not only their own needs, but also those of their families and the wider community.

The question of women's participation and leadership in DRR is not a new one. Indeed, building women's leadership potential in DRR/CCA initiatives is closely aligned with HFA strategic goal 2 – *The development and strengthening of institutions, mechanisms and capacities at all levels, particularly at the community level, that can systematically contribute to building resilience to hazards* and HFA priority 4 – *Addressing the underlying risk factors which make people vulnerable*. However, the challenge now is how to really

“Without the full participation and contribution of women in decision-making and leadership, real community resilience to climate change and disasters simply cannot be achieved.”

Sálvano Briceño, Director, UNISDR

capitalise on the leadership potential of women for building community resilience, and how to institutionalise such initiatives in mainstream DRR programming and policy.

ActionAid's experience shows that facilitating women's leadership in DRR initiatives builds a sense of self-confidence and empowerment which can help transform power relations in societies where women have traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes. However, achieving such gender-equitable DRR requires a multi-layered approach. Space must be created to accommodate the active involvement of women in the design and implementation of local level resilience initiatives, and to facilitate sharing of their experience in national and international discussions. In addition, resources must be focused on building the capacity of women's networks and social movements to mobilise around DRR/CCA, and on providing support for women-led initiatives.

Case Study:

Bringing women's voices and leadership to the climate change debate

In Nepal, the impacts of climate change are already being keenly felt, particularly by rural communities. Although women often have significant knowledge to share about adapting their agricultural practices to increase resilience to weather-related hazards and reduce losses, they are routinely excluded from participating in decision-making processes on disaster-related issues.

An action research project undertaken by ActionAid trained three local partner organisations and Disaster Management Committee (DMC) members in the Banke and Rasuwa districts and Kathmandu on how to use video technology as a means of communicating their concerns around climate change and their experience of adapting to its impacts. The aim was to support women to identify and voice their opinions, enabling them to take a lead in demanding appropriate support and action from policy-makers at local and national levels. The project also sought to empower women to become advocates for change and to keep their concerns on the evolving climate change policy agenda.

The process of participating in the action research helped the women to take a leading role in identifying risks and documenting climate change impacts. In addition, it facilitated discussion and critical analysis amongst the women on the success of different adaptation strategies, enabling them to make informed choices on the best way to increase their resilience to disasters. The project was also successful in empowering the women to share their experience in local discussions where their voices had previously gone unheard, in the process starting to transform gender relations in their communities.

“The video encouraged us to identify the problems ourselves and gave us the means to solve them with more impact. Before, we had difficulty to speak out but now, when we use the video and see the pictures of ourselves, we have more confidence to share our experience. It makes us ambitious to know new things.”

**Basanti Sunar from Bageshwori,
Banka District**

As an advocacy tool the project was successful in bringing the voices of the women to the attention of national and international stakeholders. The women shared their films with the Nepal Ministry of Environment, Science and Technology to advocate for the inclusion of women's concerns in adaptation funding plans as per the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA). The project also brought the voices of the women to international conferences such as the UNFCCC COP 14 in 2008, where they called on governments and the international community to ensure international and national policies and financing mechanisms address the impacts of climate change on women and children.

Critical success factors

- **Valuing women's experience:** recognising that women are on the front line of climate change, and facilitating the sharing of their existing knowledge and experience of adaptation, as well as introducing appropriate alternatives.
- **The process as a social action and empowerment tool:** using a methodology which engages women and builds their confidence to take a leading role in the process of identifying and addressing vulnerabilities.
- **Facilitating local-national-international linkages:** empowering women to bring their voices to national and international level climate debates and ensuring women's issues are reflected in climate change and DRR policies and processes.



Women from Matehiya, Banke District in Nepal, watch their personal testimonies recounting climate change impacts in their village. Photo: Tamara Plush/ActionAid



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Front cover: Hafeza Khatun leads discussions during a community meeting in Fathapur, Bangladesh

Photo: G.M.B.Akash/Panos/ActionAid

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Back cover: Ghanaian women combine songs about Disaster Risk Reduction with traditional dancing

Photo: Silva Feretti/ActionAid