

PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

Community Based Disaster Preparedness: A life saving strategy using interpersonal communication⁶

A community based disaster preparedness (CBDP) programme was praised as a life and livelihoods saving intervention in the 2004 West Bengal, India floods. The project was launched by the Inter Agency Group (IAG)⁷ and the Government of West Bengal after the 2000 floods affected over 22 million people in the state. In 2004, the project had reached more than 1,500 villages in four districts of the state.

"CBDP saved our lives and our livelihoods" said Sujit Kumar Roy, Gram Pradhan of Bahirgachi Gram Panchayat (GP), which has about 6,000 families. When the project team visited one of the worst affected villages of the GP, community women said that during the previous flood, they were very afraid. All of them reported that this time they were not fearful of the floods because they were better prepared.

Significant outcomes of the Bahirgachi Gram Panchayat CBDP programme:

- Water supply was not affected because community raised the level of hand pumps and disinfected tube wells.
- Hardly any disease outbreak occurred.
- There were no food shortages as each family stockpiled food for 7 to 10 days to meet their immediate needs.
- No reports of children losing textbooks.
- Two deaths in the GP occurred (which were not due to floods).
- No loss of cattle; practically no loss of poultry.
- No families reported any loss or damage to their documents.

This is a marked difference from the aftermath of the 2000 floods where 11 people died; 700 cattle and 10,000 poultry were lost; nearly 3,000 families lost some/all of their valuable documents; and more than half of children's textbooks were lost or damaged.

"CBDP really made a difference in the lives of the flood-affected community" said Rajesh Pandey, District Magistrate. "Besides preventing loss of life, CBDP greatly reduced the loss of livelihoods of people by saving their cattle and poultry. More importantly, the CBDP made the community more resolute and better organised in tackling floods. It also brought about community togetherness in that all elected representatives belonging to the different political parties worked hand in hand with the community to minimise the risk arising out of the flood situation."

The process

Using Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) tools in their emergency preparedness communication initiative, each community prepared an action plan for their village.

1. Produced a **village vulnerability map** that identified the safe places, low risk areas, highly vulnerable areas and the estimated number of families residing in each of these zones.
2. Catalogued the number and location of the **vulnerable groups** such as the elderly, disabled, lactating mothers, pregnant women, seriously ill persons and small children in their village. Information related to the number of persons belonging to each of these categories was also collected.
3. Described **history** of earlier floods and elaborated in detail the damage that occurred in the 2000 floods. The plan also mentioned the key elements at risk such as life, health, property, livestock and livelihood, the resources required/at hand for bringing down the level of risk.
4. Listed **key activities** that the community would do before, during and after the flood. The key activities identified before the flood were flood warning, household readiness regarding the positioning of family survival kits and safe keeping of valuables and important documents, formation of different task forces, training on health and first aid, water and sanitation, and rescue and relief.
5. Identified **key local resources** such as bamboos, banana plantations, and so on, for use in the preparation of *machans* (temporary shelters) and local rafts. The community also identified hand pumps that needed to be raised above the flood level to protect their source of water.
6. Stated the **specific places** where the affected community would go along with their cattle to take shelter in event of a flood. Some of them also acquired the technology to construct small boats, life jackets and other materials for successful rescue operations.
7. **Specified the roles of different stakeholders**, quantitative and time schedule for all activities including mock drills. Overall the activities were prioritised and thus requirements became more realistic.

SPECIAL NOTE ON CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN EMERGENCIES

Emergencies push children to discover new roles for themselves in the face of difficult and unstable situations. The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides the basic principle that should guide UNICEF's programming in child and adolescent participation in emergencies - that children and adolescents have the right to appropriate information, the right to be heard and the right to have a meaningful involvement in the emergency response, according to their best interests.

From a November 2005 discussion in Thailand among child-focused NGOs, UNICEF and with tsunami affected children from, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Thailand⁹ who were involved in various ways in the tsunami response, here are some arguments put forward in favour of children's participation in emergency situations: