

URBAN DISASTER RISK REDUCTION IN VOLA BOSTI, BANGLADESH

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The Participatory Development Action Program (PDAP) began a six-month pilot project in the slum area of Mirpur in the area of disaster risk reduction. After completing a risk mapping of 100 families in Vola bosti, it was found that the community was suffering from the effects of seasonal climate change. For example, when heavy rains fall, the community's drainage system does not work, houses become damaged, people are not able to walk because roads are flooded, and cooking becomes difficult. Drinking water and electricity access also become compromised.

To address these threats, women in Vola bosti began to organize themselves. One hundred women self-organized into five groups, with 20 women in each group. The women received training on leadership and formulated a plan of action to change their situation.

Participants discussed the impacts of climate change on their community's migration from rural to urban areas. Originally, the people of Vola bosti were living in a coastal area of Vola district in Barishal division. Due to river erosion, many lost their homes, properties and agricultural lands. Employment opportunities disappeared. They relocated to Mirpur, and were promised land upon arrival by a local leader who would allow them to stay. Thirty-five years later, the community members continue to live in the slum under constant threat of eviction.

The training showed participants how to save their money in order to invest in land for the community. Group members started to deposit money and increased their savings to 80,000 Taka (over 1,000 USD). The members were prepared, should the government choose to sell off their lands, to pay for the costs themselves in installments. The women leaders contacted their local MP and lobbied him to give them permission to remain on those lands without the possibility of being evicted. Having access to savings greatly decreases their vulnerability to disaster risk.

A number of issues that are important to the community arise from weekly group discussions, including the prevention of early marriages, street sexual harassment, HIV/AIDS, disaster risk reduction, gender equality and legal service for domestic disputes. Other issues the women's groups have addressed include community hygiene. For example, the women were in contact with local authorities to lobby support for building a sanitary toilet facility. By providing their own labour, they prepared two separate toilet facilities (one for women and girls, and one for men and boys).

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Local-to-local dialogue on the role of community people during disaster for their community resilience.

Part of PDAP's organizing plan included a local-to-local dialogue – a tool of the Huairou Commission. In this dialogue, women in the community were given an opportunity to present their issues in a public community forum. Many issues arose, including poor road conditions, homes in disrepair, a lack of safe drinking water, and a lack of education and employment opportunities. Local business leaders, government officials, and NGO representatives also participated in the dialogue.

The women's groups members of Vola bosti now have much more awareness of their rights, and are maintaining contact with local government authorities to ensure that appropriate follow up occurs. They have also prepared an action plan to solve their disaster risk-related problems according to their capacity. PDAP's leadership and training tools have helped the community realize their goals of addressing issues of importance, including land access stability, sanitation, and participatory democracy, and is an excellent example of a community pilot project making tremendous difference in the lives of grassroots women and their families.