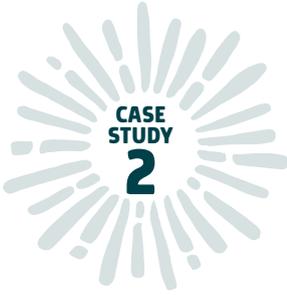# Dealing with Disasters

Capacity Building Toolkit for National Civil Society Organisation Platforms

CASE STUDY 2

Bangladesh: Responding to everyday disasters

Bangladesh: Responding to everyday disasters

The people of Bangladesh face particular challenges in building livelihood resilience in the face of intensive and everyday disasters. CSO Platforms recognise the need for effective localisation of response, based on detailed local knowledge and on locally based decision making and partnerships.

Context

Bangladesh is exposed to a wide range of climate related hazards and as a result has sometimes been styled Nature's disaster laboratory. Summer monsoons and cyclones cause regular flooding and erosion of riverbanks and coastlines. Saline incursion reduces agricultural output. Climate change is increasing the severity of these events. Bangladesh ranks low on many measures of economic development, increasing vulnerability to hazards.

Cities face particular challenges, especially for those living in the informal sector, slums or shanties. The latest World Bank estimate (2018) puts the population density per square kilometre in the capital, Dhaka, at 1,239,579,[20] making it the most densely populated city in the world, with 30%[21] of its total population of 19,578,421 living in slum areas.[22] In 2017, Dhaka was ranked as the fourth least live-able city in the world by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Livability Ranking.[23]

Case study contributors

Participatory Development Action Programme (PDAP) is a local CSO and is also the National Coordinating Organisation for GNDR's Views from the Frontline (VFL) programme. Its work focuses on slum areas of Dhaka and encompasses work with children and education, skills development training, empowering women,

healthcare, environmental action, advocacy, land and housing rights. It collaborates with other CSOs across the country to conduct nationwide VFL surveys.

Website: http://www.pdapbd.org/index.php

The National Alliance of Humanitarian Actors Bangladesh (NAHAB) is a national level humanitarian platform for local and national NGOs. It was established in 2017 as part of the START Network 'Shift the Power' project which promotes localisation. It places an emphasis on strengthening local capacity and resourcing among CSOs nationwide.

Website: http://www.nahab.net/

Focus on: Bangladesh

Though exposed to intensive disasters resulting from the many hazards Bangladesh faces, many of the challenges local populations face are the result of everyday disasters. PDAP gave the example of challenges faced by residents in the slums being magnified by the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic: 'Most slum dwellers are daily wage earners, but they are not able to earn money. They are not able to maintain social distance, because in one room 4-5 members are living. Many people are using a shared bathroom. It's very difficult to maintain hygiene. There is not enough space to sit or sleep at home while maintaining sufficient distance. Due to lack of money, many slum dwellers have only one or two meals a day. Violence and sexual harassment are increasing in the community due to cramped conditions. Children are not attending school.' These pressures add to regular challenges of air pollution and garbage management, flooding, water-logged land, and poor quality water.

Civil society plays a large role in response to

these small-scale disasters, as government has limited capacity and poor information to meet the needs of slum dwellers. According to PDAP, 'When a cyclone happens, there is lots of government action, but post-disaster, they do not reach the people.'

Many civil society actors at different scales engage with the needs of slum dwellers. An international organisation, Habitat for Humanity partnered with PDAP to undertake a one-year pilot project, 'Building Resilience in Urban Slum Settlements', in Talab Camp, Dhaka. A research study on the project highlighted challenges to working effectively at local level,[24] finding that engaging with, understanding, and working with communities was extremely difficult and time consuming.

Both PDAP and NAHAB place an emphasis on overcoming these challenges faced by external actors through local understanding. They support locally based actors who understand local contexts and can respond rapidly and effectively. Two examples of this are PDAP's work with Views from the Frontline, and NAHAB's 'Localisation road map'.

Views from the Frontline (VFL)

As national coordinating organisation for VFL in Bangladesh, PDAP involves partner organisations in conducting surveys and consultations. It also gathers and analyses the data. VFL employs a citizen-based process to measure local progress in risk governance.[25] It consults people locally through questionnaires and qualitative community consultations. Analysis develops a detailed picture of progress and challenges in local disaster risk reduction from the perspective of local people.

Findings reveal that despite the prevalence of natural hazards, threats cited by respondents are primarily social and economic. Unemployment and drug addiction are dominant threats. Early marriage is a particular concern among rural respondents and political unrest among urban respondents. Data is used by PDAP and others (and more widely at regional and global level)

to increase understanding of local contexts and challenges. It also supports advocacy for local action, challenging external perceptions of local realities.

Localisation road map

NAHAB aim to give a stronger voice to local actors and have used the focus on 'localisation' emerging from the World Humanitarian Summit[26] as a foundation for their work. They are developing localisation models in several districts, with local organisations taking the lead, and defining their own coordination and cooperation mechanisms with local actors. NAHAB's work is guided by a localisation road map which emerged from consultations. NAHAB explains: 'The discussions went beyond 'localisation of aid'. These discussions helped NAHAB expand the vision of localisation around local level decision making relating to humanitarian assistance – response through rehabilitation'.

Consultations established three basic principles to drive the localisation road map.[27]
1. Humanitarian response is a shared responsibility.
2. Actions are led by local actors with remote organisations (i.e. not located in the district) providing support.
3. Local actors are first responders, identifying contextual needs and reaching the most vulnerable households.

Based on these principles the road map was established to institutionalise this view of localisation and piloted in three districts in 2018 and five more in 2019.

Summary

The case shows the importance of local knowledge and action to respond to local needs and priorities. VFL and the Localisation road map shift the focus from localisation of aid to localisation of knowledge and decision-making, strengthening local actors to pursue effective response and development.

FOOTNOTES

[20] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.DNST?locations=BD

[21] https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/82121528.pdf

[22] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.URB.LCTY?locations=BD

[23] http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/607511534337128809/pdf/WPS8552.pdf

[24] Ahmed. I. 2016. 'Building Resilience of Urban Slums in Dhaka, Bangladesh'. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 218 (2016) 202-213

[25] More information on VFL can be found at https://www.gndr.org/programmes/views-from-the-frontline/vfl-2019.html#:~:text=Views%20from%20the%20Frontline%20(VFL,development%20and%20climate%20change%20frameworks

[26] IASC (2018) *The Grand Bargain In a Nutshell*. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-hosted-iasc (Accessed 22/05/18)

[27] http://www.nahab.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Nahab-Report_2019_b_low1.pdf