

VULNERABILITIES AND RESILIENCE AMONG EXTREME POOR PEOPLE: THE SOUTH WEST COASTAL REGION OF BANGLADESH

BRIEFING PAPER

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Save the Children UK

For the detailed report: www.shiree.org.

OVERVIEW

The South-West coastal region of Bangladesh is unique for its environmental characteristics. It is extremely vulnerable to natural and climate change-related disasters such as floods, cyclones, tornadoes, tidal surges, storm surges, river bank and coastal erosion. Cyclone Sidr, struck the coastline of Bangladesh in 2007, and cyclone Aila hit the region on 25 May 2009 with 13 ft high waters, breaking river embankments and dykes in several places, washing away the lives and livelihoods of people. People in this area are vulnerable to cyclones, tidal surge and river erosion along with salinized water and soil. Extreme poor people are suffering the most because of their exposure to, and dependence on, natural resources for their lives and livelihoods. This climatically challenged and ecologically

¹ This is based on SCUKs working paper number 5, written by:

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The paper has been peer reviewed by colleagues in either the Chars Livelihood Programme (CLP), the UNDP Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction (UPPR) and BRAC's Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction – Targeting the Ultra Poor (CFPR-TUP) programmes – all part of the DFID/UKaid extreme poverty portfolio in Bangladesh. It was also peer reviewed by Nidhi Mittal, Climate Change Adaptation Advisor, Save the Children UK.

fragile region is rendered more so by the rapid growth of shrimp farming in the region which exacerbates its vulnerabilities.



Since 2009 (after the devastating cyclone Aila), Save the Children UK (SCUK) has been implementing its Household Economic and Food Security (HEFS) project in six *upazilas* (sub-districts) of two coastal districts Khulna and Bagerhat. The project aims to graduate 70% of its 15000 extreme poor beneficiaries' households from extreme poverty by strengthening their income sources and diversifying their employment opportunities through a variety of interventions. These interventions include, for example: asset transfers; capacity building and cash stipends; skills development; business counselling; strengthening market linkages; together with awareness training in health, nutrition and disaster risk reduction. This package of interventions was thus designed to not only increase incomes but also increase resilience to future climate-related disasters and environmental stresses.

Another storm resulted in a huge tidal surge in October 2010. The water level rose by 1 foot after the tidal surge and destroyed the embankments and other structures in 14 Upazilas. Koyra and Morrelganj were the most tidal surge affected Upazilas of the SCUK project area. In Koyra, 624 beneficiary households were damaged, and the corresponding figure was 228 in Morrelganj.

A key underpinning issue is that SCUK livelihood interventions, undertaken in April 2010 to protect extreme poor beneficiaries, comprising of asset protection or transfer, diverse livelihoods and awareness raising to build resilience to floods, were not enough to prevent assets lost or damage to the beneficiaries by the tidal surge which came in October 2010. Such ex-ante resilience measures were inadequate in the face of a severe covariant shock, such as flooding, which is becoming less predictable and more severe in recent times. Ex-post resilience measures, such as links to existing services cash for work, relief, and additional financial support were arranged only after the intervention, several weeks later, after the damage was done. Given the increasing threat of climate change and man-made risks, it would seem that ex-ante approaches should be given a higher priority at all levels – from the household level (indigenous methods) to the community level (social protection) and the level of political economy (to challenge the dominance of shrimp farmers, to build more secure embankments, and challenge the state to address the extreme siltation build up in the rivers).

This study aims to explore why the HEFS model - based on assets, diversified livelihoods plus awareness training - was insufficient to prevent the damage done to assets and livelihoods. How can we build on successful examples of resilience in order to prevent damage to the livelihoods of SCUK beneficiaries in the future and enable long-term adaptation to climate change? Such a study will enable us to identify the role that distributed assets play in enabling poverty reduction and enhancing adaptive capacities for the beneficiary households (BHHs) during the proposed plan. It will also shed insight on possible modifications to programmatic approaches necessary to ensure the sustainability of SCUK asset interventions and inform advocacy on key issues.

In this study we use the concepts vulnerability and resilience to frame our analysis and draw on the work by Kessy and Tarmo (2010) to guide our analysis. This study mostly relied upon qualitative data, including Life histories (LHs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and Key Informant Interviews (KII).

KEY FINDINGS

Our findings reveal that tidal surges made the extreme poor more vulnerable by destroying or damaging the few assets they owned. The most immediate and visible impact of the tidal surge was the damage to community infrastructure, household equipment (housing, poultry shed etc.) sanitary and water bodies/tube-wells, production assets, poultry and livestock, natural assets (water bodies). People's human assets (health, skill and children education) were also severely affected with short and long-term implications. We also found that the climate-related disasters affected social relations within the community, for instance, some women were forced out to work, despite social norms which prohibit women's work outside the home.



Crab fattening

The majority of our beneficiaries tried to apply their own ex-ante resilience strategies but these were inadequate in the face of increasing severity or scale of climate-related disaster events. For instance, many made attempts to raise their pond/hatchery dyke or raise the platform inside the house, nevertheless, the unexpected tidal

surge (which happened at midnight) washed away and destroyed their assets. Very few could protect their assets during the tidal surge by leaving these with relatives and neighbours and by applying some indigenous strategies (for instance, valuable items hung on the top roof covered by polythene).

It was also found that vulnerabilities vary across households, as do households' abilities to prevent, mitigate and adapt to the impacts of disaster and climate change. Therefore retaining assets and protecting damage depends on the household's ability to manage their vulnerable situation. At the household level it was found that these asset retaining strategies enabled households to maximize their available human capital. In addition to this institutional support, the HEFS project, government safety nets and other support initiatives from NGOs provided opportunities towards building the resilience of the extreme poor and improving their asset base. However, most of the links with government safety nets and with local NGO schemes (e.g. cash for work scheme, children's education stipend and relief) were implemented only after the tidal surge, which limited the effectiveness of the project. This is an important lesson for future asset based strategies: links to safety nets and NGOs should be made early and in an expedient way along with asset interventions in order to build ex-ante resilience.

PROGRAMME IMPLICATIONS

During the period of the study, one of the issues which emerged was the need to promote climate-resilient and sustainable livelihoods of extreme poor households from the project, this included:

- Strong housing structure for small business shops (grocery, betel leaf, vegetable business);
- Fresh water;
- Cyclone resistant houses and secure boxes with locks (cloth business);

- Wooden shed for ducks, poultry birds and goats;
- Net, bamboo fence and raise ponds/hatchery dikes (crab and fish culture);
- More diversified and stable livelihood options for BHHs;
- Livelihood diversification for round the year to cope with disaster vulnerability (seasonal livelihoods e.g. crab);
- Need more diversified and female focused livelihood options for female-headed BHHs, which have immediate cash flow/returns;
- Ownership of the asset to women – who are so often abandoned or divorced in this region marked by very high post-disaster male migration for work outside the region.

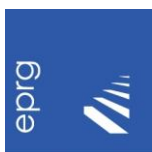
WIDER POLICY ISSUES

Some policy issues also emerged from this study. These are:

- Construction of the adequate number of cyclone shelters and *killa* (raised platform) for the protection of lives and properties from cyclone and tidal surge;
- Stop the shrimp farmers from the practice of making holes within the embankment which severely weakens it;
- Safe drinking water for coastal people in the face of increasing salinization of water resources which renders them undrinkable (installing water treatment and desalination plant);
- Human capital is key to successful livelihood diversification, so education is needed for children in extreme poor households.
- Establish social protection programmes for the extreme poor for long-term climate adaptation.

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The Extreme Poverty Research Group (EPRG) develops and disseminates knowledge about the nature of extreme poverty and the effectiveness of measures to address it. It initiates and oversees research and brings together a mix of thinkers and practitioners to actively feed knowledge into practice through interventions taking place in real time. It is an evolving forum for the shree family to both design and share research findings.

The data used in this publication comes from the Economic Empowerment of the Poorest Programme (www.shreee.org), an initiative established by the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) to help 1 million people lift themselves out of extreme poverty. The views expressed here are entirely those of the author(s).