

## Women-led forums enhance livelihoods and reduce risks to climate hazards

### Key findings

- Community cooperatives owned and led by women not only enhance livelihoods and incomes, but can also build confidence to engage more actively in decision-making at the local government level.
- In Bangladesh, in addition to contributing to community development, women-led forums have played active roles in climate change adaptation, including participatory vulnerability assessments, adaptation planning and training in climate change and gender-sensitive adaptation.
- Building technical skills, for example on alternative livelihoods and disaster-risk reduction, is important. However, soft leadership and organisation skills help sustain the impacts of enhanced technical capacity.

### Introduction

In Bangladesh, women are often more vulnerable to climate hazards than men. They are often left out of community decisions and their views are not incorporated into climate change adaptation planning or disaster-risk reduction activities.

Different genders are affected in different ways during a disaster induced by climate change. In vulnerable Bangladesh, men often migrate in search of work after a disaster, while women are left behind to care for the children and the elderly. They lack access to clean drinking water and often have to compromise their health.

Further, 28 percent of the women in Bangladesh rely on activities such as home gardening, raising poultry and cattle and small-scale trading to earn an income.<sup>1</sup> All these livelihood options are vulnerable to climate extremes like flooding, waterlogging and cyclones.

The Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB), with the assistance of Christian Aid, has been forming women-led People's Forums throughout the country to mobilise community development, including enhancing livelihoods and raising women's voices in local planning and decision-making.

One particular forum, the Basundhara Forum in Gopalganj district, has been particularly successful. In 2011, the Government of Bangladesh recognised it as one of the most successful community cooperatives in the country.

### Approach

The 148-member Basundhara forum is registered as a cooperative and is a community business, with the authority to work with the members and the community. It is also recognised by the Women's Affairs Department of the Government of Bangladesh.

The forum, spearheaded by women, works on livelihoods, disaster-risk reduction and social protection. The district is particularly prone to floods and cyclones that result in loss and damage for agriculture, infrastructure and fisheries.



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A woman working on her vegetable farm in Khulna, Bangladesh.

Based on the vulnerability of the households in the district, the CCDB has identified resilience indicators for forum members:

- Education: Members' children are going to schools and colleges.
- Health: Members have access to health centres.
- Access to markets: Established Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) businesses have linkages to markets.
- Social dignity in society and institutions, and a raised voice.
- Food security: Financial ability to access better quality food.
- Members have improved economic stability and capacity to quickly respond to disasters.

The forum members are first trained in organisational and leadership skills. Subsequently, they work with the local government to advocate for certain issues. The forum can prepare business plans and manage funds for achieving its objectives.

Forum members use loans from the forum's fund to engage in income-generating activities like rearing of poultry, ducks and cattle, environment-friendly agriculture, fishing and tailoring. The forum also provides funds for sanitation, health and hygiene programmes for the members.

## Results

The Basundhara Forum has been a catalyst in promoting women's livelihoods and reducing poverty. All 148 members enjoy higher incomes from the training they received on additional livelihood options, which provide them with employment.

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In 2015, 80 percent of the women in the forum were seen to be self-sufficient. CCDB only plays the role of a facilitator and provides guidance, monitoring and supervision when required.<sup>3</sup>

## Learning

Mobilising women through cooperatives and enhancing their skills to generate their own incomes not only boosts their confidence, but can also increase their unity and cohesiveness. Women in the Basundhara Forum felt empowered to work with government officials and other organisations and to seek support for livelihood and disaster-risk reduction activities.

The Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh has been instrumental in forming many women-led forums in the country. Women from these forums have actively participated in Participatory Vulnerability Assessments (PVAs), adaptation planning and training in climate change and gender-sensitive adaptation.

## Endnotes

1. Islam, MZ., Shah Jalal, S.M., Tikader, B.C., Nahar, S., and Barman, S.K. (2015). The climate challenge: Community adaptation and women's empowerment in Bangladesh. Dhaka: Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies and Christian Aid. Retrieved from: <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2016-10/climate-challenge-community-adaptation-Bangladesh-case-study.pdf>
2. <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2016-10/climate-challenge-community-adaptation-Bangladesh-case-study.pdf>
3. Ibid.

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A woman tends to her goats in Chittagong, Bangladesh.