

Coastal Livelihoods Adaptation Project (CLAP)

A Women's Group in Bainchutki Defies Tradition

In the village of Bainchutki, a group of 25 women have taken up farming—a profession normally reserved to men. The women self-confidently show visitors their fields of sunflowers ready for harvest. At the same time, they explained what they have learned about preparing for natural disasters and surviving them when it happens. Climate resilience and livelihood rehabilitation plays a massive role in this innovative project supported by German development cooperation in the coastal district of Barguna in Bangladesh.

Climate change is predicted to increase the frequency and intensity of tropical cyclones in the Bay of Bengal, where the southern coastal division of Barisal is located. In fact, Barguna was one of the districts most severely devastated by Cyclone Sidr in 2007 and Cyclone Aila in 2009. The poor are the hardest hit by these extreme climate events, particularly poor women. Studies have shown that up to 90% of the victims of natural disasters such as cyclones and floods are women, children, and the elderly.

Women, who generally care for children and the elderly at home while men work outside the home, have less access to information and therefore do not know what to do in case of a disaster. Furthermore, socio-cultural traditions restrict their movement and limit their decision-making power, so that they often do not dare make a decision about whether and when to evacuate their family without the permission of their husbands.

Climate change also impacts the livelihood activities for which women are responsible, such as nutrition, water, and energy supplies. Again, their traditional roles and lack of education provide them little scope for income generating activities that would improve the situation of their families. Furthermore, there are in reality very limited income opportunities for either men or women in the poor division of Barisal.

So, when German development cooperation agreed to support a project to rehabilitate the livelihoods of people in Barisal after Cyclones Sidr and Aila, it was clear that the activities had to target women in particular.

Women of the group working in the field



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The project, Adaptation to Climate Change and Rehabilitation of Livelihoods in Selected Districts of South Bangladesh (CLAP), is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by the Bangladesh Ministry of Agriculture in cooperation with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and Bangladeshi partner organizations in the field.

One of GIZ's partner organisations is INCIDIN Bangladesh (Integrated Community & Industrial Development in Bangladesh). INCIDIN is working in the sub-district of Patharghata, an area very close to the Bay of Bengal in the district of Barguna, which is part of Barisal Division. INCIDIN has helped form 32 community interest groups in 10 villages in Patharghata, including 18 women's groups, 10 farmers' groups, and 4 youth groups.

Volunteer groups of 40-50 students were also formed in selected schools. In addition to participating in training on climate change adaptation and disaster preparedness, the students have planted trees around their schools, including orange and almond trees obtained from the demonstration farm in the nearby village of Kakchira.

The purpose of the community interest groups is to rehabilitate community livelihoods in a sustainable, climate-resilient manner and to train and organize the community to address the risks associated with natural disasters and climate change. Each group has 25 members.

Members of the women's group



The members of the community interest groups were chosen in consultation with community representatives and the local union parishad (local government). Particular emphasis was placed on including female headed and female managed households and small and marginal farmers.

Once the women's groups were formed, the skills and interests of the members were evaluated and each woman decided what kind of new income-generating activities she would like to undertake. Members of the group typically chose to raise livestock such as chickens, ducks, cattle, or goats, engage in homestead gardening, or pursue tailoring, basket weaving, handicrafts, or puffed rice production.

Women assume new roles and responsibilities

One women's group, however, in the village of Bainchutki, decided to cross a traditional gender barrier and begin farming. The community allowed the women to work on a quarter acre of uncultivated land outside the village. INCIDIN provided the training and inputs, and the women went to work. They drew up a duty roster, according to which ten women work on the land for three hours a day.

They ploughed and hoed and planted sunflowers, potatoes, lentils, and other pulses. The sunflower seeds are brought to a local mill and crushed into oil, which the women then use for their own household consumption or sell. Sunflower stems are fed to the cows. Some potatoes and lentils are also used for their own consumption; the rest is sold at the local market.

Kalo Rani, the spokeswoman of the group, explains that they are storing the potatoes at the moment and waiting for prices to rise, at which point her husband will sell the potatoes for the group – market analysis was part of the group's training. She also proudly points out the seed potatoes that the group will use next year to plant again.

The group has plans to purchase a lentil processing machine and a press for sunflower oil. This type of value chain development will allow the group to retain the part of the profit that now goes to the local mills.

Working together allows the women to spread the risk of a new venture and also leaves them time to pursue their individual income generating activities. Many raise livestock and also tend their own homestead garden, which combines timber and fruit trees, vegetables such as sweet gourd, spinach, okra, bitter gourd, pumpkin, medicinal plants, and spices on a small piece of land right around their houses.

Women collecting sunflower seeds



Harvested potatoes stored in group member's house

A homestead garden allows a family to diversify its diet and improve its nutrition. INCIDIN staff and the team from the demonstration farm in Kakchira provide extensive training and come by regularly to monitor the progress of these gardens and to troubleshoot.

The women also meet twice a month to discuss social issues like dowry, diarrhoea management, domestic violence, and early marriage, and to learn about climate change and disaster preparedness. They discuss simple measures like building houses on raised plinths, planting tall trees around the houses, so family members can climb into them in case of emergency, and storing non-perishable dry food, drinking water, and seeds high above the ground. The women have learned how to obtain information about approaching cyclones – usually in public spaces where they would not normally go – and what cyclone warning signals mean.

The women's group has received training in community based first aid and community based search and rescue (including water rescue). They now know, for example, how to make a raft out of banana leaves. Some of the women were involved in drawing up a local disaster preparedness plan in close coordination with local authorities and INCIDIN; some of them are members of the local disaster management committee. These activities give them a new status in the community and more mobility. And they have spent a lot of time talking about the roles of women and the action that women need to take in case of emergency and even taking part in role-playing exercises to practice: a woman has to do what a woman has to do.

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