



# PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN DISASTER RISK REDUCTION:

Oxfam's Experiences in Southeast Asia



**OXFAM**

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# FOREWORD

Oxfam is committed to putting women's rights at the heart of all that we do. Our vision of gender equality is that through our work many more women will gain power over their lives. This will happen through changes in attitudes, ideas and beliefs about gender relations, and increased levels of women's active engagement and critical leadership in institutions, decision-making and change processes.

The compiled case studies illustrate the close ties between our concern for gender equality and our efforts in humanitarian crises and disaster risk reduction (DRR). The case studies collected here do not claim to be comprehensive, but simply reflect some recent Oxfam experiences in Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar and Vietnam.

They are examples of how natural hazards like cyclones and floods affect women differently from men. Analysing the efforts Oxfam has undertaken in these countries shows which steps are possible and desirable in overcoming the disproportionate vulnerability of women in disaster-prone areas and making use of their capacities.

Some common features leading to good impact could be identified in all case studies are:

- Conducting assessments and creating action plans with male and female community members was effective in creating a better understanding of women's vulnerabilities and capacities as well as creating infrastructures accessible to both sexes.
- Developing livelihood projects that focused on encouraging women to take part in new kinds of activities, for example setting up new businesses as alternative forms of income generation, served as a good point of entry to build up women's capacities.
- Building up community-based disaster preparedness structures supported women to experience an increasing sense of empowerment and agency by providing adequate training and creating women's leadership roles in the community.
- Similarly, encouraging men to share the household responsibilities typically conducted by women led to men's enhanced appreciation of the women's role as well as giving women the opportunity to take a more active role in the community.
- Implementing gender-related activities in the communities helped to influence the authorities, e.g. federal ministries and others, to consider gender related issues in their policy making and to improve the skills of the ministerial staff on the matter.

The case studies illustrate that through projects on DRR gender equality can be successfully enhanced. They have also shown that despite progress, much remains to be done, men still disproportionately own and control resources, knowledge and information. They often consider women to be less intellectually and physically able to take leadership roles, to make important decisions or even to understand the issues around DRR.

Discrimination against women is still prevalent among community figureheads, husbands, and local and national government officials. Moreover, women are still widely faced with the 'double-burden' of work, being responsible for income-generation and domestic duties. This is widely used as an excuse to legitimise exclusion of women from DRR activities.

Against the background of such critical barriers to the transformation of gender relations and the achievement of women's rights, it is indispensable to stay committed to building resilience to disasters and struggling against the values of patriarchy that have, thus far, been a constraining force on women's lives.



*Hun Chan Nang of CCK talking with members of the rice bank committee in Tonlab village: Prak Roun, the finance officer, and Mrs Seang Yon, the head of the committee. (Jim Holmes/Oxfam)*

# WOMEN FLOURISH IN DISASTER RISK REDUCTION LEADERSHIP ROLES

## CAMBODIA'S CASE STUDY

Oxfam's programme in Takeo province linked emergency response with mid- and long-term development as a way of enhancing the sustainability of livelihoods improvements from other development projects. It built up community-based disaster preparedness structures and aimed to empower women by creating women's leadership roles in the community. In addition, the programme increased the ability of the community to better cope with disasters through strengthening the structure of houses to provide protection from wind and floods, identifying and constructing safe areas, and raising house foundations.

## INTRODUCTION

Takeo is a province of Cambodia located along the southern Cambodia-Vietnam border and is affected by flooding every year. From September through to at least December, people's movements, agricultural work and productivity are restricted until the water recedes. Those living in flood prone areas experience significant difficulties in protecting their livelihoods. This has resulted in out-migration as families and individuals seek more secure livelihoods in other districts or provinces of the country.

In 1999, the Vietnamese government built a dam on the Mekong River close to the Vietnam-Cambodia border. Since then, the flooding experienced in Takeo is different: water rises faster than before, stays longer, and recedes more slowly.

Banteay Sloek is a village in Chey Chouk commune, Takeo with a population of 148, of whom 78 are women. It is one of many villages affected by flooding since the dam was constructed. The community lives with six months of flood and six months of drought. During the flood months, the source of livelihoods is fishing and harvesting aquatic products, whilst during the drought period income is derived from rice cultivation.

As a remote rural area, the community faces a lot of difficulties including food shortages, inadequate health services and a lack of access to education. Life is challenging at the best of times; when disasters hit, there are no resources to respond to them and years of development progress can easily be wiped out.

## TAKEO FLOOD MITIGATION PROGRAMME

Oxfam worked with partner Chamroeun Cheat Khmer (CCK) to implement the Takeo Flood Mitigation Programme in villages throughout Takeo province, including Banteay Sloek village. It was a 24-month project, running from 2002 to 2004, with a total budget of £145,000.

The programme linked emergency response with mid- and long-term development as a way of enhancing the sustainability of livelihoods improvements from other development projects. It built up community based disaster preparedness structures and aimed to empower women by creating women's leadership roles in the community. In addition, the programme increased the ability of the community to better cope with disasters through strengthening the structure of houses to provide protection from wind and floods, identifying and constructing safe areas, and raising house foundations.

Consequently, villagers felt better prepared to deal with disasters. Through the programme they acquired valuable tools and knowledge to reduce risks and to better deal with critical situations once a disaster has occurred.

The major activities undertaken by Oxfam and CCK included:

- Capacity building for Village Committees for Disaster Management (VCDMs) and local authorities on humanitarian response and DRR related concepts.
- Building up women's leadership within the process of establishing VCDMs.
- Implementing 'cash for work' schemes.
- Promoting house repair by contributing construction materials.
- Distribution of boats, fishing nets and water filters.
- Making and distribution of cement water jars/containers.
- Growing vegetables.
- Tree and bamboo planting in the village as protection from strong winds and storms.
- Safe area and school construction.

"The project gave our villagers knowledge and livelihoods assistance such as wooden boats, cash for work to elevate our homes, giant water jars, emergency kits, fishing nets and houses for the most vulnerable families. The aid from the programme improved our day-to-day living conditions. Compared to five years ago, the community's life is very different. Every family has enough food to eat, increased income and reduced debt. Increasingly people are able to send their children to school and our health is improving.

The majority of households have been able to upgrade to new engine boats from the wooden boats that were distributed by the programme. The new boats support people to earn more income through increasing the volume of aquatic products taken to market and decreasing time spent as well.

A number of trees were planted and have grown high to protect houses against strong winds during flood time, and the house structures are now stronger. These changes show that community members understand how and take action to manage living with floods." **VCDM Chairwoman in Banteay Sloek village**

## PROMOTING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

Gender equality and women's leadership was a central focus of the Takeo Flood Mitigation Programme. This involved conducting a systematic and complete gender analysis, and included specific methodologies to promote women's leadership and gender equality. There was a wide series of consultations with women and there were opportunities for them to develop community leadership skill and abilities, especially through the VCDMs. A forum was created for women leaders in VCDMs to come together, share experiences and support each other.

The project also worked with men, to build their awareness of gender equality and gain their support for women's participation. By making the whole community acknowledge women's role in DRR and preparedness programmes and by actively involving them in VCDMs, women's need and interests were effectively addressed. This means the right of women to participate in decisions that affect their lives has been enhanced.

"More women are participating in key aspects of the programme and its implementation. There are real opportunities to learn village institutional leadership and management skills. This is a contribution to women's strategic needs. Some women in two of the target villages stated firmly that "they want to be leaders."

**Team leader of the project evaluation**

"Female VCDM leaders are visible in the eye of community and are able to make decision equally within the family. Whether about small or big things, the women and their husbands always makes decisions together. Those women leaders of VCDMs feel that they have more value within their family and community. Community members, especially women, feel comfortable seeking assistance from them when they face a problem."

**CCK Director**

## SETTING UP AND BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF VCDMs

In Takeo, Village Committees for Disaster Management (VCDMs) were elected by their communities. The committees usually consist of five members, of whom three have to be



women. The chair must also be a woman whilst the deputy position is assigned to a man. In normal circumstances, the VCDMs meet on a monthly basis. In a flood situation they are recommended to meet on an 'as needs be' basis but at least every two weeks.

Oxfam worked with CCK to support the community to develop VCDM guidelines and internal policies, to provide committee members with a framework for the effective functioning of the VCDMs. CCK also offered day-to-day support on project management to ensure that these local bodies had the capacity to perform their roles.

The VCDMs in affected communities received a package of training in disaster management leadership, management skills, and participatory methods such as Participatory Rural Appraisal and wealth ranking. The project staff assisted the communities to analyse the information and material that they collected.

VCDM members have taken turns to attend Commune Council meetings and community members have been encouraged to attend Commune Development Plan and Commune Investment Plan meetings. This is an important space for the VCDM to raise issues and to explain the challenges of building sustainable livelihoods in the face of climate change.

VCDMs have demonstrated the importance, usefulness and ability of genuine village institutions to promote community leadership, especially that of women.

"Even though Oxfam and CCK phased out in late 2007, the VCDM still functions. VCDM members continue the work, including meetings and plans to support community people. I am very proud to be a woman leader of the VCDM. It helps me as an illiterate woman to get involved in development and gives me a chance to serve my community."

**VCDM Chairwoman in Banteay Sloek village**

"Promoting women's leadership in VCDMs can be an effective approach to promoting women's participation in local level development. These women leaders are enabled to effectively address women's strategic interests."

**CCK Director**



*A separate group discussion for women was held in Jenggala Village, Lombok Utara district; The women discussed about their vulnerability and capacity to build resilience to flood disaster risk, Building District Resilience Project, 2011. (Yenny Widjaja / Oxfam)*

# JENGGALA'S WOMEN LIVING CLOSE TO DISASTER

## INDONESIA CASE STUDY

Oxfam Indonesia has been working with local partner organisation Koslata to change attitudes which leave people vulnerable to disaster and to assist the community of Jenggala with disaster risk reduction (DRR). The aim of DRR activities is to help the community to better prepare for floods and landslides and to reduce the negative impacts of such hazards. The programme has sought to engage women in DRR activities both because women's participation enables them to benefit from DRR activities, manage their livelihoods and reduce food insecurities and because women's exclusion deprives the projects of vital skills, knowledge and capabilities which the women possess.

### INTRODUCTION

The village of Jenggala is located in the hilly North Lombok District of West Nusa Tenggara in eastern Indonesia. The main livelihood of the community is rice farming which is supplemented by cultivating bamboo, coffee, corn, coconuts and bananas. Women take

primary responsibility for both cultivating the crops and trading them locally. However, these livelihoods are threatened by frequent floods and landslides. Flooding destroys homes, drowns livestock and inundates agricultural land causing crop failure. Landslides cause deluges of mud and uproot trees, which block access routes to hill-top gardens meaning that any crops which survive the floods cannot be harvested before they spoil.

Since 2010 Oxfam Indonesia has been working with local partner organisation Koslata to change attitudes which leave people vulnerable to disaster and to assist the community of Jengjala with disaster risk reduction (DRR).

The aim of DRR activities is to help the community to better prepare for floods and landslides and to reduce the negative impacts of such hazards. DRR includes improving the community's knowledge about how to minimise the impact of floods and landslides on life, property and livelihoods; conducting Participatory Capacities and Vulnerability Assessments (PCVA); developing community action plans; and organizing and training village disaster preparedness teams. Central to all these activities is the empowerment of women and the advancement of gender equality.

## **WOMEN AND DISASTERS**

The programme has sought to engage women in DRR activities both because women's participation enables them to benefit from DRR activities, manage their livelihoods and reduce food insecurities and because women's exclusion deprives the projects of vital skills, knowledge and capabilities which the women possess. This is illustrated by these examples:

- In Jengjala, it is usually women who labour in remote fields and hilltop gardens. Landslides and floods obstruct access to these remote locations compromising their personal safety and livelihoods. However, this means that women often have a better understanding of where floods and landslides are likely to occur. Men's roles are often organisational or business-related so they are less aware of what happens in the fields.
- Although women are less likely to have access to weather-related early warning systems or be informed about oncoming rains and floods, social networks among women are strong. This means that information can be disseminated in informal ways such as through social gatherings and during conversations with friends and relatives. In this way, essential information about disaster preparedness reaches entire families who may not otherwise have benefited from such knowledge.

- Although gender discrimination frequently excludes women from decision-making about community disaster response, their dominance in the domestic sphere means they have more knowledge than men about the production, preparation and distribution of food. Additionally, their long-standing role as family carers means that they are often very knowledgeable about medical care. This kind of knowledge saves lives in emergency situations.
- Women are also well placed to contribute to disaster recovery as they often have several sources of income away from the farm. Expanding these business opportunities is vital when natural disasters reduce income from agricultural activities.

### PROMOTING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN DRR

Key steps were taken to support women to engage in DRR work in Jenggala, for example, through joining village disaster preparedness teams and women's self-help groups.

- **A stakeholder mapping exercise was conducted.** Oxfam encouraged partner Koslata to map actors in the community that do and don't support women's initiatives. This fed into community discussions.
- **Separate meetings were held for women and men.** This created a space for women to discuss their needs and vulnerabilities without being silenced by men. The differences between men's and women's needs were illuminated and women were able to make their voices heard. In meetings where both men and women were present women were especially encouraged to speak. When their thoughts and ideas were listened to women gained confidence to express their needs in other aspects of daily life.
- **Both men and women were introduced to concepts of gender equality.** Community meetings were used to raise both women's and men's awareness of gender equality issues and women's rights. For example, the groups explored women's and men's different experiences, capacities and vulnerabilities, and the effect these have on disaster preparedness.
- **Quotas were set for women's participation.** A minimum quota of 30 per cent was set for women's participation in all DRR activities, to ensure that women were not excluded from information and knowledge about DRR.
- **Women were actively encouraged and supported to participate in activities.** Women learned about different DRR activities during community meetings, and came to appreciate their own knowledge and capacity. This realisation that they have a role to play in DRR, and a corresponding growth in self-confidence, encouraged them to

get involved. They also discussed barriers to participation, and gained support from each other to overcome these. Women who got involved in activities at an early stage acted as positive role models, and were encouraged to share information with other women.

- **Women were educated about early warning signs of disaster and how to respond appropriately.** This has facilitated women's independent reactions to climate-related hazards, reduced their reliance on men and strengthened women's belief in their own capabilities. As women gained better knowledge about disasters, men had greater respect for women's contribution to DRR activities.
- **Capacity building on leadership skills was targeted at women.** Women were supported to take on leadership positions and others' recognition of women's capacity to fulfil these roles has improved. This has empowered women to engage in other civil society activities in Jenggala. The inclusion of women in the management of DRR activities creates a more accessible channel for other women in the village to express their concerns and needs.
- **Influential men were targeted to gain their support.** Koslata identified influential men in the community and approached them to gain their support to ensure the 30 per cent quota for women's participation was met. They took time to explain why women's participation was necessary.

However, despite these efforts, women do not enjoy equal access to DRR activities. Those in certain positions in society are more able to attend meetings, assume leadership roles, participate in disaster simulations and trainings, or join village disaster preparedness teams.

#### **Conditions which facilitate women's involvement include:**

1. Prior membership of a community group, such as the natural bamboo crafts group, women's business group or forest farmers group.
2. A source of income independent to that of her husband, such as employment as an Integrated Health Service cadre.
3. Familial ties to local community leaders or those who hold a position in the village governance structure.
4. A husband who has a more stable source of income, such as owning land or working as a civil servant.

Courage is needed for women to be successful in securing their right to be heard and to participate in and benefit from DRR activities. Even when women join in with activities, they

often still face resistance to their participation. It is essential that they are supported by local organisations and that they motivate each other to improve their knowledge of DRR, to attend meetings and to keep moving forwards to become leaders of change.

Continued group discussions among women to share their experiences was an important means of maintaining their motivation, as was providing information about women's rights. In addition, Oxfam encouraged Koslata to nominate a gender focal person, to take on responsibility for sharing information about gender equality, and to provide support to women's initiatives.

### **Preparing to Respond to Disasters**

Women in Jengjala have been enthusiastic about participating in and leading DRR activities. They have shown great interest in acquiring information about disaster preparedness and consider this knowledge to be very important.

In joining village disaster preparedness teams, they identified how their skills can be used and why their contribution is important. Their active engagement in such activities counteracts the assumption that women are too busy to engage in extra work and training.

Sabarni is a housewife who volunteered to be a member of the village disaster preparedness team. If a disaster occurs, she will work in the field kitchen preparing food for those displaced from their homes by floods and landslides. Her responsibilities include collecting food during the onset of a disaster, preparing the food hygienically so as to limit the spread of disease, and, most importantly, monitoring food supplies during the immediate recovery period.

Sabarni also took the initiative to motivate her friends and neighbours to prepare for possible disasters. Some were inspired to attend first aid courses so they can assist in disaster response. Others were motivated to plant trees in the hills near their farms so as to reduce the risk of landslides occurring. By initiating discussions about disaster preparedness in informal settings, Sabarni educates those in the village who would not otherwise have access to such knowledge and information. Her social networks provide valuable channels of communication among villagers.

Sabarni and other team members have also attended simulations of disaster situations at the Jenggala administration offices. This gave them the opportunity to practice their responses. Although the village disaster preparedness team has not yet been called into action, Sabarni knows how she must act when the next floods or landslides come. In the aftermath of a disaster, the whole village will rely on the skills and knowledge of the women of Jenggala for the distribution of food and medical care.

By recognising women's important role in disaster response, both men and women in Jenggala increasingly value women's work. It is the competence of women such as Sabarni who will ensure the survival of disaster affected people and reduce the losses incurred by the whole village.

### **Recovering livelihoods after disasters**

While the men of Jenggala have tended to see the destruction of their crops as the end of their agricultural commitments and therefore a reason to stay at home, the women have been innovative and sought alternative forms of income.

Several women's self-help groups have been established to support women in these enterprises. By generating an income from a source which is less vulnerable to destruction by weather-related disasters, awareness in the village has been raised of women's power to support the village economically in the aftermath of a disaster. Enterprises which have been particularly successful include bamboo handicrafts, coffee grinding and making dried banana chips. Processing raw products into marketable goods increases their value.

By working together the women have increased bargaining power with wholesalers and markets to receive a better price for their products. Additionally, in times of crop failure, members can take small loans from the women's groups in order to buy new seeds or to use as working capital. The enterprises and access to credit supported by these groups are particularly important for small scale farmers whose entire agricultural livelihoods can be quickly destroyed by natural disasters.

Mrs Mardi is the head of one such women's business group. She and the other women in the group are responsible for organising and managing production and distribution activities as well as finances. The women's organisational skills are vital in the immediate response to disasters while their entrepreneurship and innovation are essential in helping the community to meet its economic needs after destructions of crops by floods and landslides.

The success of the group has demonstrated to women and men in the village that they already have the skills necessary to successfully take leadership positions in village disaster preparedness teams and other civil society organisations. These groups provide a space where women can articulate and act on their own needs in relation to disaster recovery. By supporting each other, women can independently address their own vulnerability to disasters and can contribute to the economic resilience of their families.

### **CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION IN DRR**

Although women's involvement in activities has begun to gradually shift attitudes about women's capabilities, they still face a number of constraints to full participation.

For example:

- Many men in the village are not supportive of women's participation in DRR because it is seen to change the status of women in the local community's social system. This means that women were often not invited to or were purposefully excluded from meetings. Women noted that despite this, they do want to attend the meetings.
- Men consider women to be less intellectually and physically able than men to take on leadership roles, make important decisions or even understand the issues around DRR. When women tried to respond to these challenges by asking their husbands to convey messages to meetings, their comments were rarely passed on; the power of knowledge lies in the hands of the men.
- There is an assumption that women lack agency and therefore do not need to know about disaster preparedness. As in everyday life in Jenggala, women are expected to follow their husband's directions following a disaster.



- Women assume the 'double-burden' of work, being responsible for income-generation and domestic duties. This is used as an excuse to legitimise men's exclusion of women from DRR activities.

Discrimination against women is particularly prevalent in the attitudes of community figureheads, husbands, other members of village disaster preparedness teams, and local and national government officials.

However, the women of Jenggala have found support from a number of other sources in their community including the village head, their parents, members of women's groups and some male heads of village disaster preparedness teams. The approach of actively seeking to engage men with strategic positions in the village has helped to create this small, but crucial, support network, and identify those men who do want to listen to women's voices. Similarly, having quotas for women's participation has ensured that women do have the opportunity to participate at some level.

## CONCLUSION

The women of Jenggala village have had to contend with various forms of gender inequality in order to improve the success of DRR activities. In negotiating with the holders of authority and power, such as husbands, community leaders, and traditional social institutions, the women faced many challenges. Some of these were overcome, some continue to reduce the effectiveness of the village's disaster risk reduction activities and prevent women's participation.

Success has been seen in women's ability to gain control over their livelihoods and increase their assets. By engaging in activities which generate and diversify income sources, household vulnerability to disaster-induced loss of livelihoods was reduced. Additionally, the knowledge and skills the women learnt through participating in DRR meetings and training will be vital if, or when, a disaster occurs in Jenggala.

The empowerment women achieved through these activities better enables them to contribute to the future disaster resilience of their village. This has also led to incremental positive shifts in men's attitudes towards women and the importance of their role in village DRR is increasingly recognised, although it is still early days and it will take time to achieve a fundamental shift in gender relations.



*A focus group discussion with women, led by Oxfam staff in Dedaye township in the Delta region of Myanmar. (Oxfam)*

# PUTTING WOMEN AT THE CENTRE OF DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

## MYANMAR CASE STUDY

Men and women in Myanmar have, in principle, equal rights and women play a role in all spheres of society. However, gender discrimination is still widespread. There are very limited opportunities for women's leadership at all levels. Gender-based violence, mostly against women, is widespread, particularly in conflict areas. In the aftermath of cyclone Nargis, Oxfam set up a programme in Dedaye Township, which aimed to restore primary production and income levels, establish social safety nets, and promote alternative skills-based livelihoods options. The programme took two main approaches: to identify and address vulnerability to risk and to foster the development of women's livelihoods. This both directly benefits women, who are among the most vulnerable members of the community, and improves the capacity of the whole community to withstand natural hazards.

## INTRODUCTION

Cyclone Nargis struck southern Myanmar in May 2008, sweeping through the Ayeyarwady delta region and the country's largest city, Yangon, causing widespread destruction. Buildings, infrastructure and communications were severely damaged and flooding was widespread. The estimated number of people affected was as high as 2.4 million, with an official death toll of 77,738 and 55,917 missing.

The consequences of the cyclone were extremely severe for the families in the region who rely on farming, fishing and casual labour to generate an income. Oxfam conducted its first assessment in Dedaye Township, one of the areas of the Ayeyarwady region, in September 2008. From the assessment, we found that farmers and fishers lost up to 60% of tools, equipment and inputs needed for their livelihoods activities. In addition, indebtedness increased as interest rates went up after the cyclone, discouraging many borrowers.

## WOMEN AND DISASTERS

Men and women in Myanmar have, in principle, equal rights and women play a role in all spheres of society. However, gender discrimination is still widespread. For example, the higher attainment of women at university level in Myanmar is contradicted by the lower levels of adult literacy, with significant illiteracy among ethnic minority women. There are very limited opportunities for women's leadership at all levels. Gender-based violence, mostly against women, is widespread, particularly in conflict areas.

Oxfam believes that gender inequality in disasters essentially reflects gender relations in society. Owing to different life experiences, women and men differ in how they experience, respond to, and recover from disasters.

Oxfam mainstreams gender into all its programmes to promote gender equality. Oxfam recognises that weather-related destruction of livelihoods often affects women more than men. Moreover, as could be seen in Dedaye Township, women's participation is essential to increase community resilience to disasters as well as to aid recovery when disasters do occur.

Therefore mainstreaming gender into disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies offers the opportunity to re-examine gender relations in society from different angles and enhance gender equality in socioeconomic development.

## PROMOTING WOMEN'S LIVELIHOODS AS A DRR STRATEGY

In the aftermath of cyclone Nargis, Oxfam set up a programme in Dedaye Township, which aimed to restore primary production and income levels, establish social safety nets, and promote alternative skills-based livelihoods options.

Oxfam's projects in Dedaye Township took two main approaches: to identify and address vulnerability to risk and to foster the development of women's livelihoods. This both directly benefits women, who are among the most vulnerable members of the community, and improves the capacity of the whole community to withstand natural hazards.

## PCVA AND ACTION PLANS

Before any intervention, Oxfam works with villagers to carry out assessments and create action plans. First Oxfam staff asked villagers do a 'Participatory Capacity and Vulnerability Assessment' (PCVA). During the PCVA process, all community members talk about and agree what strengths they have, who are the most vulnerable people in their community, and what hazards they face (*see box: 'The Gender Clock'*).

The PCVA process builds a profile of the village physically and socially. Typically, through conducting the PCVA, it reveals that villagers think that women, old people, disabled people, children, and poor people are the most vulnerable. Villagers also find that women do have contributions to make to the village as a whole and have capabilities that are different from those of men. These capacities add to the diversity and increase the total resources available in the village. In addition, the PCVA process can highlight the degree of risks when facing natural hazards. Through this improved understanding of the risks, of who is vulnerable, and of their capacities, the villagers can start to create an action plan.

### The Gender Clock

In Myanmar society, men and even women themselves do not always see the value of the work that women do, such as taking care of the household, cooking, cleaning, washing, and engaging in small-scale trade. Oxfam has taken a unique approach to getting men and women to understand the value of what each sex does: men and women sit in separate groups and list what they do in a twenty-four hour period from waking up till going to sleep.

Activities such as going out to the fields, cooking a meal, doing chores, sitting in a teashop, and even watching the latest instalment of a Korean television series may come up in the twenty-four hour descriptions. Once completed, men and women exchange their 'clocks' and put a monetary value on each of the listed activities.

There is much laughter and joking, but usually there is also a moment of insight when both men and women realise that women's work actually has a high financial value. Even though women often do not earn money, it becomes clear that women contribute a lot with their services. Thereby, women themselves begin to see the monetary value of what they do. In sum, the gender clock fosters change in people's attitudes towards women and their value in the village.

A common element to the DRR action plans is the focus on infrastructure accessible to both women and men, e.g. building a stronger bridge or improving the structure of a village school so it can be used as a refuge in case of a natural disaster.

Oxfam reviews the action plans that the villagers develop to ensure that these plans help to reduce the vulnerabilities of women and other vulnerable people. For example, in a village where the action plan calls for repairing embankments Oxfam encourages the villagers to repair those of the most vulnerable people first. As part of the strategy to promote greater gender equality, Oxfam chooses women rather than men as representatives of their households. In this, women can become the main beneficiaries with control over money and decision-making.

## LIVELIHOODS PROJECTS

Oxfam's livelihoods projects focus on encouraging women to take on new responsibilities, both in farming and in business.

In Myanmar farming activities are divided according to sex. Men are responsible for most of the duties, and women have a vital role through their tasks of weeding and transplanting seedlings into fields. Given this cultural reality, Oxfam has found that it may be self-defeating to insist on having a set percentage of women being involved in some livelihoods programmes. At the same time, Oxfam has been able to help some villagers create opportunities for women to earn money in non-traditional ways (*see box: 'Machinery Rental Programme'*).

## Machinery Rental Programme

In one community, Oxfam assisted women to set up a business to rent out agricultural machinery. The women were faced with a lot of resistance at first, but their business became accepted as soon as the villagers realised that the women do not have to know how to run agricultural equipment in order to rent it out.

## GRAIN BANKS

Grain banks are an effective way to improve the food security of a village, especially in the aftermath of a disaster when food resources are scarce, whilst also promoting greater equality between the sexes. Oxfam encourages villagers to form committees or farmer 'user groups' consisting of at least 40% women, thereby ascribing women a more vital role with regard to the development of the village.

Through managing grain banks, women become critical to their running and also improve their management skills. In addition, there is a greater chance that the whole family will be less vulnerable to malnutrition when women are given control over food security. Women's Income Generation Group Oxfam has also set up a Women's Income Generation Group (WIGG) and encourages women to consider alternative ways of income generation. For example, raising piglets is been a popular livelihoods option in Myanmar.

However, in practice the high costs connected to raising piglets mean that women cannot save much over the course of a year. Working through the WIGG, women have been encouraged to discuss alternative options, such as collective action and group saving. They found it effective to set up a group and collectively provide feed for the piglets.

Furthermore, generating income through other livelihoods options was considered. Raising ducks turned out to be more practical for the women and promised to be more profitable: the duck eggs could be sold and by pickling them their market value could be increased. The WIGG also provided information about other income generation models for women such as soap and candle making or growing mushrooms.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### • BENEFITS

The DRR action plans are widely beneficial to villagers and authorities alike. Community members can show their plans to local authorities, who can provide the villagers with the permissions needed. With such successes, the villagers develop greater confidence to negotiate with local authorities. This is a significant change in an environment where villagers usually believe that local authorities will not respond to their needs.

Furthermore, Oxfam has found that the implementation of the DRR action plans succeeds best when the projects make use of local expertise and local labour. Sharing the local knowledge and expertise with relevant government ministries such as the Ministry of Agriculture can be an effective way to spread it to other regions and also helps to improve the skills of ministerial staff.

Oxfam's experience with grain banks and the agricultural machinery rental venture show that, while at times it is necessary to accept cultural realities, such sensitivity does not preclude implementing projects that place women in positions of central responsibility. By encouraging women to take up leadership positions in the various committees formed, other women in the community may aspire to similar positions. As the proportion of women who make decisions increases, the role of women as decision-makers in society becomes more visible and acceptable.

### • CHALLENGES

Oxfam has found that denial about the reality of the situation of women is common among male leaders. They believe that they represent and understand women and men equally, even though there is a strong tendency for women to be less involved in committees and organisations than men, especially in decision-making.

Cultural practices also present a challenge. For example, gambling is common among women in Myanmar, which opens up the possibility of financial assistance being misused.

Another challenge is the lack of a wider perspective among the villagers. Oxfam elicits ideas from women and other vulnerable populations about what to do to improve their livelihoods. Yet, some of these ideas may be of limited practical use or not in their long-term interests.

When looking at long-term changes in women's position in society, men may not always appear to resist programmes like the ones Oxfam carries out. However, there can be difficulties when trying to promote women to take positions where men have decision-making power. In addition, women who have found their way to such positions, e.g. on committees, are often related to powerful local men. Oxfam is therefore concerned with inadvertently spreading the influence of some men by promoting the participation of women.

A continuing challenge in working with WIGGs is the size of the group: in a large group each woman receives only a small share if the profits are divided equally. However, financial profit is not the only goal of these programmes. As women come to have greater earning power and control over money, the power relations in the communities are changing, and women gain more power over assets and decisions.





*Women and men attended the “Living with Floods” IEC club in My Duc village, Phuoc Loc commune, Tan Phuoc district, Tien Giang province, VANGOCA project, 2007. (Bui Kim Huu/Oxfam)*

# PARTICIPATORY DISASTER PREPARATION AND MITIGATION PROJECT

## VIETNAM CASE STUDY

Oxfam in Vietnam has supported and implemented emergency response projects as a reaction to a range of natural disasters, including floods, droughts, typhoons and landslides, as well as implementing community-based disaster preparedness projects in a number of provinces. The project’s primary socio-cultural impacts were achieved through enhanced participation, particularly by women. It provided participatory methods training and support to leaders at village, commune, district and province levels and created opportunities to incorporate this in government practice. The project contributed particularly to human capacity development and increasing capacity to resist environmental shocks.

## INTRODUCTION

The Mekong delta is a highly flood-prone region, and floods occur on an annual basis, often lasting for three months or more. The government's strategy is one of 'living with the floods', recognising that the annual floods make up an important part of the life cycle of the region. However, families living in the most flood-affected communes with limited or no resources face real risks even during 'normal' flood times. Floods impact on security, health, livelihoods, educational opportunities, food security and income generation and affect men, women and children differently.

Even though Vietnamese institutions already have some capacities, improvement in community-based disaster management, disaster assessment and the understanding of humanitarian standards is both possible and desirable.

Oxfam in Vietnam has supported and implemented emergency response projects as a reaction to a range of natural disasters, including floods, droughts, typhoons and landslides, as well as implementing community based disaster preparedness projects in a number of provinces. At the national level, Oxfam is currently working to improve coordination amongst other agencies and departments and advocating for the incorporation of Sphere standards and gender equality into humanitarian responses.

## PARTICIPATORY DISASTER PREPAREDNESS & MITIGATION

### Project in Dong Thap and Tien Giang

The VANGOCA (Vietnam–Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement) programme was negotiated between the Governments of Vietnam and Australia, to make available AusAID funding for disaster management programmes in the Mekong delta.

Within the VANGOCA framework, Oxfam GB implemented a five-year project on Participatory Disaster Management, in collaboration with the Department of Planning and Investment (DPI) in Dong Thap province and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) in Tien Giang province from May 2006. The project aimed to reduce the risks relating to floods for rural men, women and children in these two flood-affected provinces. Project activities focused on 24 communes in five districts, with a population of approximately 265,000 people.

The project had five main component objectives:<sup>1</sup>

- Building knowledge, skills and resources to mitigate, prepare for and respond to floods in 24 flood-affected communes.

- Enabling the Committee for Flood and Storm Control (CFSC) to facilitate a more targeted, coordinated, timely and effective response to floods.
- Reducing the incidence of flood-related diseases affecting people in the project area.
- Improving flood-time food security, and the income of selected poor and vulnerable households.
- Ensuring effective and timely programme management and coordination.

## ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The project's primary socio-cultural impacts were achieved through enhanced participation, particularly by women. It provided participatory methods training and support to leaders at village, commune, district and province levels and created opportunities to incorporate this in government practice. The project contributed particularly to human capacity development and increasing capacity to resist environmental shocks.

### Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation through IEC clubs

The project supported local communities to be better prepared for an emergency response and raised awareness of disaster preparedness and mitigation within communities. Information, Education and Communication (IEC) clubs organised interactive group discussions in all targeted villages, ensuring the participation of men and women, children and old people.

Households and IEC volunteers demonstrated high levels of confidence and enthusiasm as a result of increased access to information and greater awareness and know-how on disaster preparedness, flood-related diseases, and sanitation issues. One of the key achievements is that an effective network of IEC volunteers and clubs has been built at village level: they are enthusiastic and continuing their work after the end of the project.

#### **"Half the burden, double the happiness"**

Phạm Văn Hoàng from Tân Thuận village, Thanh Binh district, Đồng Tháp province, got involved in disaster preparedness and mitigation activities when the VANGOCA project came to his area. Hoàng was active in attracting new members to the Living with Floods IEC Club and promoting the contents to change people's behaviours regarding disaster preparedness and mitigation. Hoàng himself gained valuable information and knowledge from joining the club's thematic training.

He was particularly influenced by the themes “Flood-time clean water resources protection” and “Hygiene and health of women”. Through the training Hoàng started to realise the significant role that women play in the family. He began to promote gender equality in his community, especially with regard to women’s roles in disaster preparedness and mitigation.

But Hoàng’s behaviour really changed when his daughter had her first baby. His wife went to care for their daughter, leaving no time for housework. So Hoàng took on the tasks his wife would normally do, like cooking, cleaning and taking care of the family. Until then Hoàng had not truly understood the burden and difficulties of a woman’s role in the family. *“If I was to become a woman, I don’t think I’d be able to make it, to effectively manage my life even for a day”*, he reflected.

Moreover, Hoàng realised that household responsibilities present a huge barrier to women’s involvement in the community. Therefore, Hoàng decided to help his wife with the housework and take on certain chores. He also encouraged his wife to get involved in social activities, and she has gradually become an active member of the community.

## PROMOTION OF GENDER EQUALITY

During implementation of the project, women were encouraged to participate in all activities, such as training workshops on communitybased disaster risk management and IEC campaigns. The project set a criteria of at least 30 per cent women’s participation in every activity. In reality, some activities such as IEC campaigns and swimming training achieved more than 50 per cent participation.

Women’s participation was about more than numbers, however, and emphasised supporting women to make their voices heard and building their capacity to ensure that they could participate in a meaningful way. Women built their capacities through participation in project activities and also had opportunities to participate in training on leadership and management skills. There was specific training on gender equality for both men and women at commune, district and provincial levels.

The participation of women in project activities was greatly appreciated by the project management board, Provincial CFSC, Women's Union and communities. This is in spite of the fact that gender inequity still remains evident in rural areas where traditional stereotyped roles and divisions of labour between men and women perpetuate inequality. The project activities have validated the importance of incorporating the views of women and poor people in disaster management action plans.

### **"Any woman can do the same, if she has determination"**

Huỳnh Thanh Đào is the vice president of the Women's Union in Phuoc Lap town, Tan Phuoc district, Tien Giang province. She enjoys meeting people in the community and encourages them to take part in community activities. Đào got married at 19 and had her first baby at 20. She had only finished 9th Grade at school and was financially dependent on her husband which resulted in many arguments between the young couple. By chance, some older women in the village became aware of Đào's literacy and nominated her to become the secretary of the Women's Union. That was in 2001. She gradually participated more frequently in the Union's social activities.

Đào became a member of Oxfam's VANGOCA project in 2006. In the beginning, Đào's found it difficult to participate in the activities because she didn't have much experience. However, she was able to improve her skills thanks to her own efforts, encouragement from her husband and support from other people in the town. Đào says, *"I gradually became more experienced. I became more confident in organising meetings for women in the area and also in public speaking."*

Besides improving her organisation and communication skills, Đào realised that she needed to further her education. She decided to finish her basic high school education and subsequently completed an Adult College education.

### **"Laundry is not only women's work"**

Nguyễn Thị Hạnh Tuyên and Phạm Văn Sơn are a couple and are community leaders in Tân Thạnh town, Thanh Binh district, Đồng Tháp province. They started

as volunteers in the VANGOCA project in 2006. Through the project activities, Son and Tuyen gained awareness and knowledge about the importance of disaster preparedness and mitigation as well as gender equality.

Son, the husband, took action and broke with tradition in his village by publicly showing that he - and not his wife - does the laundry. At first, this provoked questions and suspicion among the villagers. But gradually people understood that they do not have to stick to stereotyped roles and behaviours. Due to their active participation in the community, Son and Tuyen now have powerful voices. Tuyen participates in the local Women's Union and in the Living with Flood IEC Club, whilst Son holds the position of village head.

Although the VANGOCA project has ended, the couple continue their advocacy work and promote gender equality in many of the village's social activities.

### **Building Knowledge, Skills and Capacity**

The project built a good level of knowledge, skills and capacity in disaster management among commune, district and province leaders. Training was conducted with a wide range of local authorities and stakeholders from different sectors. Stakeholders in both provinces confirmed their understanding about the importance of local-level disaster preparedness, such as being ready to respond to emergencies, undertaking action planning, simulation exercises, forming emergency response teams and running training events.

The project activities influenced institutional culture and continued to meet both men and women's strategic needs for access to and control over information, influence and resources. For example, women were able to participate in and express their ideas and opinions at various community meetings related to disaster preparedness and mitigation, to which women were previously not invited.

## **"During the flood season, I no longer fear boating alone"**

Phạm Thị Tuyết Nga is responsible for population and family planning issues at the local health station in Phú Lợi town, Đồng Tháp province. Since 2006 she has been a member of the VANGOCA project and works as a promoter for swimming classes. Understanding the risk to women and children of not being able to swim, Nga puts great efforts into encouraging people in the community to join the 'teaching swimming for women and children' project.

In the beginning, Nga faced resistance from many parents who doubted the safety of the courses. Nga practically had to go to every individual family to persuade them of the necessity of swimming skills. Finally, most parents gave permission for their children to join the classes and some even proposed to run more classes in the community. One young girl, Thu, only survived the floods due to having learned to swim. She remembers: *"It was in 2009, I was out picking cork cotton when I fell. However, thanks to my swimming ability, I was able to save myself, swimming back to land."*

Nga also actively encourages women's participation in the swimming project. However, this has turned out to be more challenging than recruiting children, as husbands often present a huge barrier. For example, Vien had to overcome the objections of her husband, who was afraid that she would drown or humiliate herself in the swimming class. After Nga and other promoters spoke to him, he understood why it was important for his wife to learn to swim. Finally, Vien could join the class and now feels more protected and more independent in her work. She says, *"During the flood season, I no longer fear boating alone"*.

The swimming classes were very successful and most children and women acquired basic swimming skills in a short period of time. These positive results keep Nga motivated despite the difficulties and the currently small number of female participants in the classes. Nga admits that in order to be truly effective, the mobilisation process has to be combined with policies issued by local authorities and social groups.

**Oxfam is committed to putting women's rights at the heart of all that we do. Our vision of gender equality is that through our work many more women will gain power over their lives. This will happen through changes in attitudes, ideas and beliefs about gender relations, and increased levels of women's active engagement and critical leadership in institutions, decision-making and change processes.**

The compiled case studies illustrate the close ties between our concern for gender equality and our efforts in humanitarian crises and disaster risk reduction (DRR). The case studies collected here do not claim to be comprehensive, but simply reflect some recent Oxfam experiences in Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar and Vietnam.

They are examples of how natural hazards like cyclones and floods affect women differently from men. Analysing the efforts Oxfam has undertaken in these countries shows which steps are possible and desirable in overcoming the disproportionate vulnerability of women in disaster-prone areas and making use of their capacities.