



**RESILIENCE-
BUILDING AND
WOMEN'S
LEADERSHIP IN
BANGLADESH**



OXFAM

RESILIENCE-BUILDING AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN BANGLADESH

1 Overview

Programme information

Name	Resilience through Economic Empowerment, Climate Adaptation, Leadership and Learning (REE-CALL)
Country	Bangladesh
Budget	11.4m
Start Date	October 2010
End Date	March 2017 ¹
Donors	Projects Direct (Oxfam), ANCP/Australian Aid, H&S Davidson Trust, UK Department for International Development (DFID), Oxfam affiliates

Problem analysis

Bangladesh is often devastated by natural hazards linked to climate change – more than almost any other country. The impact on economic sectors such as agriculture, livestock, poultry and natural resources is severe. Floods, cyclones, tidal surges, flash floods and other extreme and slow onset events are affecting people's lives and livelihoods more and more. Vulnerable women and men are hit the hardest – in particular those living in Char (river islands), Haor (wetlands) and the coastal zone.

70 percent of the rural poor depend heavily on agro-based livelihoods and 60 percent of the labour force is involved in agriculture. Furthermore, the private sector fails to acknowledge, or invest in, the costs of implementing climate-smart measures and fails to consider the impact of climate change on small producers.

Over the last decade, Bangladesh has made significant progress in poverty reduction and other social development indicators, yet 31.5 percent of the population still lives below the poverty line (Household Income Expenditure Survey 2010),² while 12 percent still live in extreme poverty. Poor people's exclusion from policy making processes is both a cause and consequence of this, leaving people powerless over decisions that affect their lives.

Poor women face specific challenges. Their mobility and participation are highly restricted by patriarchal social norms and they have fewer opportunities for education after adolescence. They have limited access to and ownership of land and productive assets. Their knowledge and information about market access is also limited, and due to policy restrictions they do not have much access to capital, which all constrain market opportunities. In addition, women's unequal and unpaid care responsibilities limit their income-generating opportunities and make it harder for them to play a role in the wider community. According to government estimates, around 80 percent of women face domestic violence, and 47 percent of girls are married before the age of 16.³ The traditional patriarchal system – further exacerbated by growing fundamentalism – influences informal culture and national laws. Low levels of women's participation in decision making processes, including at the local government level, only perpetuate the cycle of discrimination and marginalization.

Brief programme description

The REE-CALL programme aims to strengthen community resilience to climate change by fostering economic empowerment and inclusive leadership. The programme targets highly vulnerable people: 225,000 households in 14 of the worst-affected districts of the three most vulnerable agro-ecological regions of the country – Haor, Char and the south-west and south-central coastal regions.

The programme recognizes the complex, interrelated issues of poverty and lack of agency that make women and men more vulnerable to climate change and less able to build resilience. It helps communities anticipate and cope with climate and disaster-related challenges better, recognizing the need for a holistic and integrated approach that tackles economic empowerment, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation (CCA), rights and entitlements, and women's leadership.

The programme aims to ensure that women and men most at risk of disaster and climate change in Bangladesh can thrive in spite of shocks and change. As such, it seeks to achieve the following four interconnected outcomes:

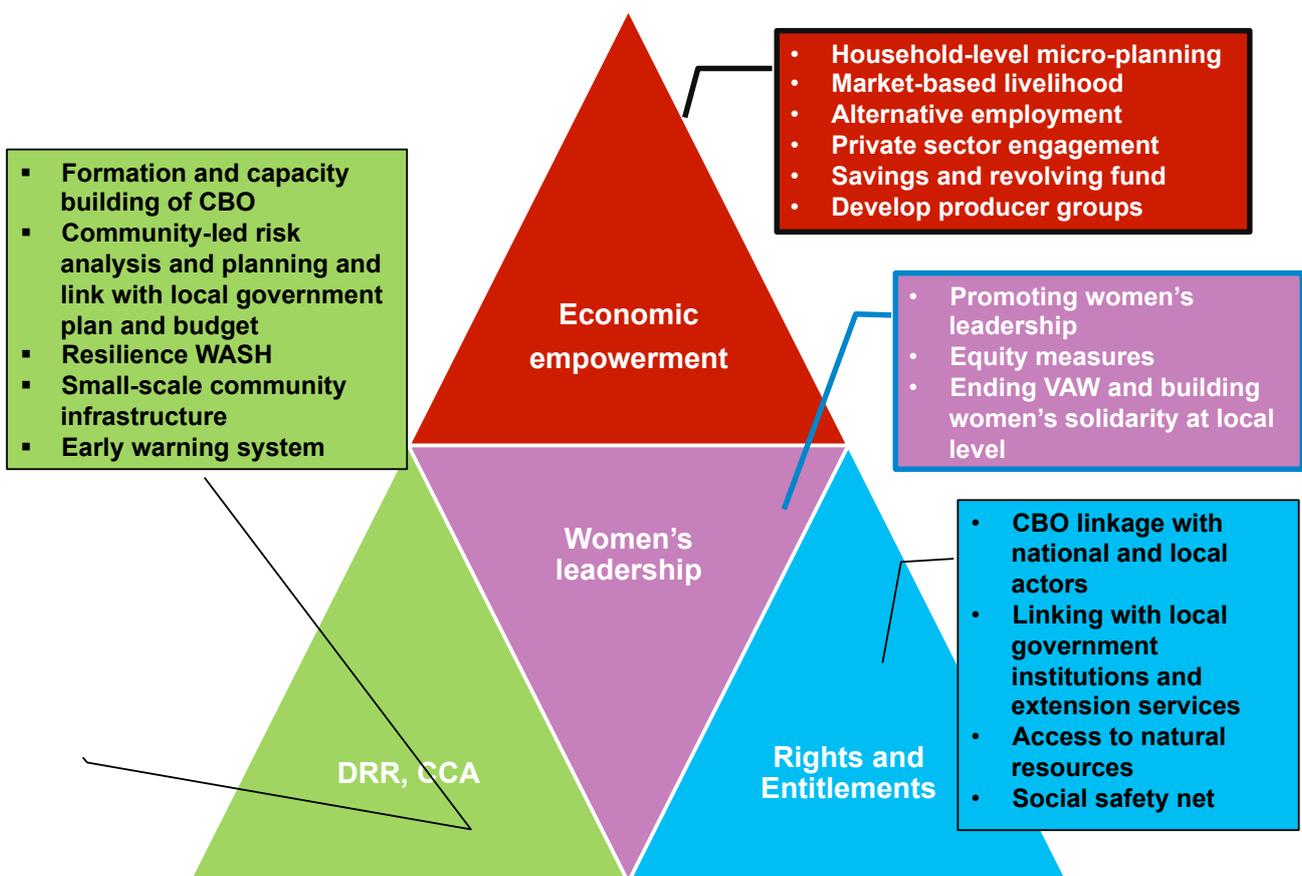
- **Better preparation:** Community-based organizations (CBOs) and local government institutions are able to anticipate possible impacts of climatic and non-climatic changes and disasters, and are taking appropriate measures to address these. Measures include setting up food and fodder banks to reduce transitory food insecurity during lean periods; resilient water and sanitation support mechanisms; activating disaster management committees; maintaining flood or cyclone centres and raising awareness about early warning systems; and engaging women and poor people in decision making processes, while also holding local duty-bearers, especially local government institutions, to account.
- **Sustainable income and employment options:** Created for women and men through access to services, natural resources and markets. This will be achieved by giving women more control over their income and better access to markets and credit facilities; recognizing, reducing, and redistributing care work; sensitizing the private sector to engage with women and smallholder producer groups; and helping men and women to access and use modern technologies.

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• **Better use of policy and legal frameworks:** Effective implementation of policy and legal frameworks (national to local) in key areas – agriculture, DRR, CCA and natural resource management. The programme will also support community members to increase their awareness of, and ability to influence, DRR and CCA policies, frameworks and budgets. Meanwhile CBOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) will establish and maintain effective relationships with duty-bearers.

• **Claiming rights and entitlements and promoting leadership:** Using individual and collective action to ensure vulnerable households claim their rights, while promoting transformational leadership by women and marginalized people. The programme will support women to understand their rights and how to claim them, while securing better access to, and control over, land, resources and time.

REE-CALL: Transformation into framework



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2 Achievements and challenges

Achievements to date

Over the past seven years, REE-CALL has achieved some impressive successes, documented by internal and external reviews. An evaluation conducted in 2015 revealed the income of targeted households had increased by 500 percent. Households also had greater access to loans – up from 0.1 percent to 18.3 percent. Their saving status had increased from 0.06 percent to 87.5 percent, and access to safety net programmes rose from 1.5 percent to 46.8 percent.

An internal 'most significant change' (MSC) review (currently being finalized) revealed four significant changes – increased income; enhanced leadership; an improved water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) situation; and increased knowledge, skills, awareness and decision making.

The review also found that the CBO component was considered one of the strongest approaches implemented by the programme – REE-CALL helped community members form their own CBOs. Although these varied in performance, they did create space for joint discussion, decision making, and action (such as facilitating savings and access to loans), and for holding local governments to account. These structures have also boosted women's confidence and participation levels. Furthermore, the CBO approach also constitutes a measure of sustainability. Several have pursued formal registration as legal entities, are recognized by local government and are expected to continue mobilizing communities to claim their rights.

Oxfam has also successfully engaged with the private sector, pioneering an innovative insurance product that helps communities deal with climate uncertainty. The Flood Insurance Product has proven that a model in which the private sector can shoulder the risk is workable, despite the need for some improvements through additional piloting. Overall, the experience of engaging with the private sector was encouraging because businesses have shown interest in supporting human development. Although communities still do not have strong power in the market, REE-CALL's capacity building interventions have helped CBOs understand the market and diversify production, so they are better able to negotiate with the private sector.

Specific challenges

The programme's mid-term review (MTR) and MSC exercise found that REE-CALL has made the least contributions in addressing DRR and CCA, despite it being one of the programme's objectives. When it comes to anticipating future risks, communities have shown limited knowledge and capability. This may be because people have prioritized present and short-term risks over future risks, but it may also be due to programme staff lacking sufficient resources to bring about change.

In future, Oxfam will ensure programme teams are better trained on climate change, especially climatic and non-climatic shocks, so they can support awareness-raising and capacity building within communities, therefore helping them anticipate and mitigate the effects of climate change. Oxfam has also collaborated with the Climate Change Unit of BRAC University, sharing knowledge and evidence to adjust and validate the REE-CALL framework. Recognizing that climate-related measures support the programme's overall goals of empowerment and sustainable livelihoods, the design of the next phase of REE-CALL will concentrate more on the social and governance elements of empowerment, with a particular focus on women.

Lessons learned

Moving from relief-focused and direct implementation to empowerment interventions and influencing requires a shift in policies, practices and partnerships.

Achieving impact at scale requires strong links between programme delivery and influencing diverse stakeholders including government and business organizations at different levels (local, national, international), through demonstrating efficient service delivery models and promoting business models which create social impact.

Shifting power structures is a long-term process that requires institutional and policy change as well as change in social norms and practices.

Documenting the impact of information communications technologies (ICT) will require strong and context-relevant monitoring tools and guidelines.

Climate issues can be an entry point to fostering community empowerment and sustainable livelihoods.

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3 Partnerships and links with other programmes

Partnerships

In previous phases of the programme, Oxfam primarily worked with smaller NGOs and CSOs at local level with experience in community mobilization. Their capacity for national-level influencing is, however, limited. As the programme grows, Oxfam must revisit the partnership strategy and align it with REE-CALL's ambition. For its upcoming phase, REE-CALL will require different types of partnerships that will help achieve change at scale, which includes working with stakeholders in policy making and policy implementation processes.

The programme has already started moving in this direction, forming partnerships with PRAN Dairy (a leading dairy company in Bangladesh), BRAC University (with its Climate Change Resilience Study Centre), BIID (a leading consulting firm in ICT), and Bangladesh Livestock Research Institute (a government agency).

Links with Oxfam programmes

The REE-CALL programme has links with Oxfam's GROW campaign, working at the macro-level for policy reform on agriculture production. The programme also fits under Oxfam's regional priority in Asia of building resilient communities, and supports Oxfam GB's strategic programme frameworks, particularly around women's economic empowerment. Several components and approaches of REE-CALL can be shared for learning and replication, such as the CBO approach, engagement of the private sector in poverty alleviation processes, resilience programming in rural and urban settings, women's economic leadership and innovative insurance products.

Innovation

Within REE-CALL, Oxfam has sought to pilot a monitoring and evaluation approach that would allow women's perspectives on changes in their lives to be documented, analysed and integrated into project management and learning. It also provided an opportunity to learn more about how mobile technology can be used for monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEAL) beyond quantitative surveys.

As part of this effort, 26 tablets with 3G connections were distributed to women's groups in 16 districts. Groups were taught how to post stories, pictures and quotes on Facebook. During an assessment in 2015, 81 percent of the women interviewed felt the project had increased their skills, confidence and power. Almost all groups said they had linked with local authorities, putting pressure on them to address immediate problems.

While the pilot constituted a good initial step in documenting women's perspectives, it will need further development to deliver a strong monitoring system. Indeed, project team members estimate that Facebook posts only reflect five to 10 percent of actual changes experienced by women because of the programme. This may be because there was insufficient understanding about the different kinds of changes that needed to be posted on Facebook.

The assessment suggests including, in addition to Facebook, a qualitative thinking and guided reflection tool that will help women's groups to capture the changes they experience. Literacy, confidence, and access to, and control over, the tablet were also elements that affected who used it. In terms of choosing group participants, the Oxfam team targeted the poorest communities and project areas where Oxfam had not previously invested much in group selection, thus missing the opportunity to reflect the full benefits of ICT use. Despite these challenges, the assessment confirms that ICT can be used to track women's empowerment and that the pilot is scalable.

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4 In focus

Resilience-building and women's leadership

Women's leadership is an integral part of REE-CALL. The programme aims to help women influence decision making, therefore elevating their socio-economic status and reducing violence against them through a whole range of initiatives, some of which were introduced based on reviews and learning. REE-CALL also supported the formation of women's groups (Adda groups) within CBOs, and helped women develop adaptive income-generating activities through business start-up support, market training and creating links with high-value markets. It also supported 4,150 women to be included in local decision making bodies, fostering an environment that is more conducive to women's leadership, empowerment and gender equality.

The programme also included a focus on care work. A care analysis was conducted in 2015 using 'rapid care-analysis tools'⁴ to explore care relationships, identify women's and men's work activities, recognize gendered patterns and explore potential solutions for reducing and redistributing care work.

Thanks to these combined strategies, the programme's MTR, endline, and MSC review all concluded that the programme is enhancing women's leadership. This is evidenced through an increase in awareness, income, mobility, networking capacity, decision making skills and women's ability to influence. In terms of participation in economic activities, endline data confirms that 82.4 percent of surveyed women were involved in income-generating activities. Within established CBOs, women collectively take decisions about production; they maintain their accounting, they have opened bank accounts, and they plan to invest savings.

Women in these CBOs also analyse the market and associated risks. In addition, Oxfam saw high levels of decision making on how the money should be spent, with 46.1 percent of women making the decision themselves. Joint decision making on household income has increased as well, moving from 20.5 percent at baseline to 66.3 percent at endline. Evidence also suggests that women's voices are being heard within the household and the community. This was already noted by the

programme's MTR which confirmed that women very much value their recent productive and social engagements, and believe it is boosting their self-respect and self-esteem.

Evaluations have also noted a change in the way the community itself perceives women. Their involvement in, and leadership of, income-generating activities and their (increased) mobility are no longer seen as a problem. Instead they are actually encouraged and recognized. As social acceptance of women leaders increased, they were able to influence many key people, from family to local government and private sectors.

In many places women are becoming members of local standing committees and raising their voices in favour of their communities. They have persuaded local government departments to construct small culvers and repair roads, while securing a social safety net for disabled people, destitute women and others who were eligible.

The programme has also made important progress in addressing violence against women (VAW). Meetings with boys and girls from neighbouring schools are held regularly to raise awareness on VAW using a participatory approach. Partners also mobilize community members to act as 'change makers' who promise to condemn VAW and mobilize others to do the same (using the 'We Can' approach⁵).

However, it is important to note, that while these changes represent a significant step in the right direction, shifting power structures is a long-term process that also requires institutional and policy change. REE-CALL has been helping CBO members to lead participatory monitoring processes – including vulnerability risk assessment and social audit – to improve local-level governance, which will in turn allow them to influence decisions affecting their day-to-day lives.

In spite of this, the programme, did not manage to link these grassroots changes to national-level advocacy and influencing, which limited the impact of the programme in this phase. Therefore, this is a key area Oxfam is planning to address in the design of the next phase of REE-CALL (2017-2021).

For further information about this programme:
www.oxfam.org.uk/reecall

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Notes

¹ The next phase of the programme (REE-CALL 2021) is currently being finalized.

² Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and World Bank. (2010). *Bangladesh – Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2010*. Retrieved from <http://catalog.ihnsn.org/index.php/catalog/2257>

³ UN Women. (2011). *Report on Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey 2011*. Retrieved from <http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/asia/bangladesh/2011/report-on-violence-against-women-vaw-survey-2011>

⁴ Kidder, T. et al. (2016). *Participatory Methodology: Rapid Care Analysis*. <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/participatory-methodology-rapid-care-analysis-620147>

⁵ Oxfam. We Can. Retrieved from <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-work/gender-justice/ending-violence-against-women/we-can>

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