Harnessing Community Capacity to Respond to Small Scale Disasters

*Bangladesh Pilot of an Alternative Funding Mechanism*

Concern Worldwide

October 2017
Context
Bangladesh is one of the most natural disaster and climate change vulnerable countries in the world. The country experiences recurring disasters at a frequency that hinders recovery and poverty alleviation efforts. As Bangladesh has one of the highest population densities in the world, severe flooding and cyclones cause devastation at a mass level, while even localized incidents can adversely impact large numbers of people.

Due to the current global state characterized by multiple large-scale crisis, there is an increasing number of demands placed on the limited pool of international humanitarian response funds. The international humanitarian funding community generally look to national governments for response to small scale, recurrent disasters, which do not trigger international appeals. However, the support provided by national governments is often intermittent and insufficient considering the need. Even when international or national funds are available for emergency response, it can take several weeks for agencies to commence interventions.

Problem Statement
Communities play the role of first responders particularly within the first 72 hours after a disaster, which is usually the minimum time taken for external assistance to arrive. Response times can be longer for remote and isolated communities. It is critical for residents of disaster prone areas to be prepared to respond immediately to local disasters with food, water and other lifesaving necessities. Current community responses to disasters are individually driven, sporadic and uncoordinated but their effectiveness could be significantly increased with the right support. However, there is a lack of effort from the humanitarian response sector or national governments to systematically strengthen these community support mechanisms to build a system of effective community-led humanitarian response in the first 72 hours of a disaster event. Existing community disaster management initiatives involve raising the level of awareness, preparedness and response capacity of community first responders but what is missing is a locally generated and controlled funding mechanism that provides communities with the financial means to respond effectively in a disaster crisis.

Concern Worldwide Initiative- The Solution
It is evident there is an unmet need for immediate and locally activated community response to disasters that foster community ownership, leadership, participation and control. To bridge this gap, Concern Worldwide piloted an initiative to establish community managed structures that raise cash funds in the pre-disaster period, and use these funds to provide immediate assistance to disaster affected people. This innovative approach involves working with existing community and local government structures to form a community response committee that mobilizes financial resources through community and local contributions. The pilot provides bottom-up, humanitarian response by empowering affected communities to lead needs based, effective and rapid response through an independent, community-led and community financed local disaster response system.

The Pilot Project
1. Background
Taking into account current community based emergency response preparedness initiatives, and the existing gaps to these approaches, Concern outlined a community led and community financed emergency response mechanism by establishing Emergency Response Committees (ERCs). The
primary purpose of ERCs is to mobilize community donations to provide rapid response to small scale natural disasters within the initial 72 hours period, which will reduce community vulnerability to disasters by improving their capacity for effective response. At the pilot phase it was envisaged that ERCs will operate at the Union level initially to provide single, once-off response to small scale disasters by providing relief to up to affected most vulnerable households. The ERCs were established over an 8 month period, after which Concern and partner NGOs (Shushilan and ASOD) rolled back their support while continuing to observe ERC functions and responses to local disasters.

2. Pilot Geographic Locations

The selection of geographic locations to pilot the initiative was based on vulnerability to disasters, and Concern’s existing presence in the areas. The initiative was piloted in two unions of the Satkhira and Lalmonirhat districts in Bangladesh, which are severely vulnerable to recurrent extreme natural hazards almost every year. Concern has significant project presence in these areas and established partnerships with local partner NGOs and communities.

1. The Satkhira district in the Coastal region faces recurrent natural disasters including tidal surges, cyclones, water logging, saline intrusion, sedimentation and riverbank erosion. With cyclone occurring every few years there is little scope for recovery by affected communities.

2. The Lalmonirhat district in the North West region is vulnerable to recurrent floods and devastating riverbank erosion every year, leading to people suffering from food and shelter insecurity, high disease burden, inadequate access to WASH, education and health facilities and productive work.

3. Steps in Formation and Implementation of ERCs

Establishing ERC
- Formal meeting with stakeholders
- Community consultation
- Establish ERC Constitution and operational guidelines
- Form ERC and an Advisory Committee by election

ERC Preparedness Phase
- Training of ERC members
- ERC monthly meetings and coordination meetings
- Funds mobilisation
- Financial system/record keeping

ERC Response
- Conduct real time situation review/needs assessment
- Beneficiary selection
- Aid delivery

Post Emergency Processes
- ERC Review meeting, including feedback to local community

Establishing ERCs
Concern arranged initial meetings with its local partner NGOs (PNGOs) and Union Disaster Management Committee (UDMC) members followed by local level community consultation meetings to analyze gaps in current emergency response initiatives and explore potential solutions, such as establishing community managed ERCs. Concern and PNGO staff facilitated a participatory process with the community to develop the concept and structure of ERCs by clarifying ERC functions and operational guidelines. In line with the newly developed guidelines, 7-10 ERC members were elected by the community in a public meeting, including an ERC Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer.
Additionally, senior and influential members of the community formed a three member Advisory Committee to provide back-up support to the ERC to facilitate their smooth operation and to assist with overcoming challenges related to ERC functions.

**ERC Preparedness Phase**

ERC members received ongoing capacity building training from Concern’s PNGO staff on community mobilization, fundraising, communication and coordination, conflict mitigation and basic financial management. PNGO staff also attended field meetings and training sessions to further develop the ERC concept by providing support to address operational gaps. The ERC held monthly meetings to make decisions and share updates regarding fundraising and disaster situation monitoring, and to coordinate with local stakeholders. ERC members and Advisory Group members approached local businesses, notable individuals and community members to donate to the ERC fund to provide independent and immediate emergency response after any disaster.

**ERC Fundraising and Funds Management**

- ERC members seek donations from potential donors by explaining the importance of zero hour community response and the role of the ERC to facilitate this.
- An ERC account is opened at a local bank with the ERC Chairperson and Treasurer as signatories on the account. Donations collected by ERC members are discussed and approved at ERC meetings and deposited into the ERC account by the ERC Treasurer.
- Updates on fundraising activities and the status of the ERC bank account are shared monthly at ERC meetings by the ERC Treasurer.
- Unspent funds in the ERC account are rolled over to the following year for future response.

**2016 Emergency Response**

During the initial pilot phase, Lalmonirhat experienced a natural disaster while there were no emergency situations in Satkhira. As a result, only the pilot ERC in Lalmonirhat had the opportunity to provide small-scale response to provide relief to river eroded households. Heavy floods in August 2016 caused significant damage in Lalmonirhat and led to river bank erosion in late November, which left many families completely landless and without access to shelter, food or WASH facilities. The newly established ERC in Dowbari Union of Lalmonirhat did not initiate an immediate response considering this as a slow onset disaster. However, when the river bank erosion affected a number of extremely poor households, the ERC initiated a response specifically targeting the most vulnerable households.

At the time of the crisis, the ERC had successfully raised BDT 72,000 from community donations. The ERC conducted a situation review and selected 20 households based on the selection criteria in their operational guidelines, including female headed households, households with members having disabilities and the extreme poor. Although the ERC constitution allows for up to 80% of ERC funds to be utilized for emergency response at a given time, the ERC response was limited in scope due to the cautious approach of the ERC who were providing disaster response for the first time.
The aid delivery package was determined based on the needs assessment and included an unconditional cash grant of 500 BDT, locally available ready to eat food like prepackaged biscuits and puffed rice, and packets of oral saline. In total, 12,000 BDT (10,000 BDT in cash grants and 2,000 in food and oral saline) was disbursed to 20 households (approximately 100 people benefited) in Lalmonirhat, providing immediate relief to some of the most vulnerable community members. The ERC distributed aid packages to selected beneficiaries in a public gathering. The ERC maintained a register of beneficiaries and list of distributed items. Beneficiary thumb prints were also recorded upon receipt of aid.

2017 Emergency Response
On 9 July 2017 monsoon rains triggered flooding in Dowbari union of Lalmonirhat. Those affected experienced a shortage of food, lack of safe drinking water, safe shelters and disrupted livelihoods. The ERC organized a meeting on 12 July and formed 4 teams to conduct rapid needs assessments of the affected areas, and select beneficiaries in line with ERC policy. Based on the assessment findings, the ERC decided to provide emergency response of unconditional cash grants of BDT 500 to 130 of the most vulnerable affected households, which was distributed in a public meeting on 15 July.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Lalmonirhat ERC Account Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amount deposited (BDT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016_Q2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016_Q3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016_Q4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017_Q1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017_Q2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017_Q3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 shows the Lalmonirhat ERC account activity, with funds deposited into the account per quarter, and account expenditure for the emergency responses undertaken in August 2016 and July 2017.

**Post Emergency Processes**

After delivering the emergency responses, the ERC held review meetings attended by UDMC members, to appraise the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of their response. Beneficiaries expressed their gratitude for the assistance provided by the ERC. The timely assistance provided by the ERC, particularly when no other external assistance was available, was greatly appreciated by beneficiaries and the broader community.

**Key Learnings**

1. The pilot ERC in Lalmonirhat have demonstrated the potential of establishing community financed mechanisms to successfully respond to local disasters in a short period of time. However, external investment is required to establish and facilitate the process and sustain the initiative in the long run.
2. The duration of the initial pilot was insufficient for all pilot ERCs to experience a disaster incident in their local area and provide emergency response. A second phase of the pilot should be over a 3 year period to realize the full potential of ERC and to assess the effectiveness of the mechanism.
3. Initial consultation with and engagement of local power structures is very important when establishing ERCs to ensure ERCs are viewed as complementary actor, rather than a competitor, to provide local emergency response.
4. Several rounds of discussions with community and the engagement of local leaders helped to reduce community concerns about ERC processes and effectiveness.
5. Fundraising processes and transparency mechanisms must be well planned and well communicated to all members of community. Local knowledge is particularly important to design an effective fundraising strategy.
6. The challenge of ensuring that ERCs adhere to the humanitarian principle of Impartiality, particularly during beneficiary selection needs to be mitigated by (i) orienting ERC members on core humanitarian principles (ii) establishing an agreed upon beneficiary selection criteria and (iii) verifying beneficiary lists by the Advisory Committee.
7. Significant capacity building support needs to be invested into ERCs to build the confidence, skills and knowledge of members to engage in fundraising from individuals and villages.

**Conclusion**

Concern’s pilot of the ERC initiative, and the initial emergency responses delivered by the Lalmonirhat ERC in 2016 and 2017, has just begun to test the potential of community led and community financed response to localized disasters. It is important to further test the idea over a wider geographical area for at least three years to better assess the effectiveness of the concept.