

# One year after Cyclone Sidr: fear replaces hope

November 2008

## Introduction

Long before Cyclone Sidr struck the southern coastal areas of Bangladesh on 15 November 2007, many important life-saving actions had been carried out. Thanks to early warning systems and disaster preparedness measures, up to 3,000,000 people had already evacuated low-lying coastal areas, many finding refuge in anti-cyclone shelters. Local government officials and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) quickly moved contingency stocks of relief items into areas expecting to be affected.

Nevertheless, as Cyclone Sidr tore through several coastal districts, it left enormous devastation in its wake. Approximately 8.5 million women, men and children were affected – about 4000 were killed. One and a half million homes were partially or completely destroyed. Around 1.2 million livestock were killed and 2.4 million acres of crops were ruined. Overall economic losses have been calculated at US\$1.7 billion.<sup>1</sup>

Bangladesh's government, armed forces, and countless volunteers, as well as national and international NGOs, quickly mobilised a huge humanitarian response. Several international donor governments and institutions moved quickly and generously.

Oxfam International responded in the four worst affected districts: Bagerhat, Pirojpur, Barguna, and Patuakhali. Working through local partners, Oxfam provided cash for work opportunities, distributed hygiene kits and blankets, installed or repaired water and sanitation facilities, and helped restore livelihoods. Oxfam also worked to identify issues of concern and encouraged improvements to the recovery effort.

Preparations for disaster saved many lives and the initial response was quick and energetic. However, Oxfam's experience shows that some opportunities were missed and certain actors could have done better. Oxfam also believes that serious gaps in the recovery process remain, especially regarding hazard-resilient shelter.

Over a million women, men and children are entering their second winter without safe, adequate homes. They remain highly vulnerable to ill health, malnutrition, and future disasters in a region prone to environmental shocks. Initial hopes have turned into disappointment and fear of the next cyclone. This report highlights the reasons for these concerns – and what should be done to address them.

# 1 Rebuilding communities: missed opportunities

A well-managed, properly coordinated and adequately resourced recovery strategy is essential to take into account survivors' changing needs and circumstances (such as weather conditions), and reduce their vulnerability to future shocks. This not only helps a government to fulfil its responsibilities towards its citizens with respect to their rights to safe and adequate living conditions and economic opportunities. It also helps protect precious development gains and minimise the amount of funds and resources being diverted repeatedly into costly humanitarian responses.

In spite of some severe and continuing challenges, some aspects of the recovery have progressed relatively well, such as ensuring that survivors generally had enough to eat (despite the prevailing food crisis), avoiding serious outbreaks of disease, and providing suitable water and sanitation facilities. However, serious problems have persisted in two key areas: reconstructing safe, adequate homes and rehabilitating people's livelihoods.

## Shelter: over a million exposed to unnecessary risks

Cyclone Sidr and the subsequent storm surge damaged or destroyed approximately 1.5 million homes.<sup>2</sup> The damage, loss and needs assessment prepared by the government and international donors estimated overall damage to the housing sector at US \$800 million (about 60 billion taka).<sup>3</sup> It has become clear that insufficient resources have been allocated to address survivors' housing needs and fulfil their rights to safe and adequate living conditions.

The government quickly distributed a one-time housing grant of 5000 Taka (approximately US\$ 70 or £40) to 100,000 families with fully destroyed homes in the worst affected areas. Although this helped very vulnerable families meet some urgent needs, the amount was obviously insufficient to rebuild safe, adequate homes. Most recipients interviewed by Oxfam said they had spent their grant on emergency items such as food or winter clothing for children, or on steps to restore their livelihoods such as repairing their boats and fishing nets.

During the first three months of the response, in addition to the 5000 taka grant to 100,000 families, approximately 200,000 households received emergency shelter assistance such as tarpaulins, plastic sheeting, tents or corrugated iron sheeting, with help for another 100,000 (somewhat belatedly) on the way.

Despite these efforts, however, some serious gaps in coverage remained many months after the disaster, with several affected areas seeing little shelter assistance for many months.<sup>4</sup> Emergency shelter distributions were sometimes slow to anticipate changing needs, such as the approach of heavy monsoon rains. There was also confusion about the difference between short-term, emergency shelter and sturdier types of transitional or core shelter that should follow. In several districts, local authorities prevented relief agencies from distributing emergency shelter kits to severely hit villages, arguing that these were due to receive permanent shelter support funded by foreign governments. Consequently, thousands of families received no shelter support for several months.

As a result of such gaps, delays and challenges, thousands of families spent the monsoon season (June-September) trying to stay safe, dry and healthy under flimsy

makeshift shelters composed of banana leaves, cloth, and salvaged wood and iron sheets – a serious danger to inhabitants in the event of another cyclone.

Given the frequency of cyclones and related hazards in Bangladesh, the need to rebuild stronger and safer communities resilient to such hazards has been clear and acknowledged. The government has pursued a policy to help vulnerable families rebuild safer homes with cyclone-resistant cores – a positive approach in principle.

According to the government, however, around three in every four families whose houses were damaged or destroyed had the resources to rebuild without assistance.<sup>5</sup> Oxfam's experience in the four worst affected districts suggests that this figure has proved too optimistic and should be reassessed. This should not be surprising as the majority of affected families were poor and many had lost their few assets and livelihoods too.

Nevertheless, the government and donors have targeted a total of 78,519 households (approximately 400,000 people) with official assistance to help them rebuild so-called core shelters that would be hazard-resilient. Even this minimalist approach leaves a gap of 276,278 families – approximately 1.38 million women, men and children – who were judged unable to rebuild adequate homes but who will still not receive official shelter support.

Additionally, landless people have faced particularly challenging obstacles despite being among the most vulnerable families affected by the disaster. Although many have lived on state-owned (*khas*) land for up to 20 years, they possess no officially recognised title to their damaged or destroyed property. Consequently, landless survivors – whose humanitarian needs are at least as great as any other affected group – were entirely ignored by the housing policy. Meanwhile, the legal question mark hanging over their location has posed a problem for those who might be able to help.

"I used to have a large home. I don't own my land – I'm living on *khas* land. With our small income, do we buy land, or feed our children? If someone gave us a house on this government land, [the police] might evict us. The house we have built from banana leaves and bamboo doesn't protect us from rain. But if anyone gave us a plot of land and a house, we could work and then feed ourselves better with the money we earned.

Shah Banu Begum,  
Khetha Chira, Modbaria, Pirojpur

In recent months, the Bangladeshi authorities have begun taking some positive steps to address the needs of landless people. A small number of organisations (such as Action Aid and the British and Swiss Red Cross societies) have been allowed to build several hundred shelters for landless people on *khas* land. The government is also planning 1000 barrack-style homes (funded by Japan) to house 10,000 landless people. However, a more comprehensive, permanent housing solution suitable for landless women, men and children is ultimately required. The government needs to be more proactive in identifying landless families and allocating suitable *khas* land to them.

Meanwhile, progress towards rebuilding safe core shelters for those families fortunate enough to receive official support has been patchy. By October 2008, a third of these core shelters had been completed while a surge in activity in the two months before the cyclone anniversary has brought this figure to just over half. However, this figure disguises huge variations in progress, with some agencies having completed hundreds

or thousands of core shelters whereas others, including projects funded by some major bilateral donors (such as India and Saudi Arabia) have progressed much more slowly.

Reasons for these variations in performance are unclear. Although construction costs have soared, labour shortages have occurred, and weather conditions have sometimes been adverse, none of these would adequately explain why some housing projects have progressed much faster than others of comparable size. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggest the main difficulty lies in mobilising the necessary financial and other resources. If this is so, the actors involved should learn suitable lessons about strengthening institutional capacities, and adopting the most appropriate policies and mechanisms for coordinating and delivering aid projects.

The overall result is that one year after the cyclone struck, over a million women, men and children are still living under weak, makeshift shelters. As they enter a second winter, these families have little protection from cold, wind and rain. Parents tell Oxfam they fear for their children's health. Women continue to suffer from a lack of privacy, compromising their health and hygiene. Many aid agencies have tried to complement government efforts by targeting the most vulnerable families. The scale of housing needs, however, is so huge that their efforts fall well short of officially estimated requirements.

What is urgently required, therefore, is for shelter assistance to be extended on the basis of actual need, supported by the international community with sufficient resources. This would realise families' rights to safe, adequate housing, as well as fulfil national and international commitments to enhance the resilience of vulnerable communities at risk of disaster.

## Restoring livelihoods: lifelines to recovery

Hundreds of thousands of families that depended on agriculture, fishing and casual labour lost both their incomes and assets as a result of the cyclone. Over 1.2 million livestock and nearly 2.5 million acres of crops (equal to 95 percent of the cultivated area in the worst affected districts)<sup>6</sup> were lost when Cyclone Sidr swept inland from the Bay of Bengal. Damages and losses in the agricultural sector alone totalled US \$437 million (30 billion BDT).<sup>7</sup>

The early restoration of livelihoods and productive assets is an essential step towards the recovery of disaster-affected communities. This has been particularly important and urgent for an affected population that is heavily dependent on farming and fishing at a time of soaring food prices in Bangladesh and around the world.

Unfortunately, relatively few affected households were able to restore their livelihoods and sources of income quickly. Most fishermen were still not able to return to sea safely at the start of the main fishing season (February-March), while farmers struggled for months to acquire seeds, tools and other essential materials to resume vital agricultural production. These failures aggravated the severe food security situation, prolonged vulnerable families dependency on external support, and deepened levels of debt.

The government initially tried to address these issues through various measures, including encouraging credit institutions to offer soft or interest-free loans to cyclone-affected communities, running food aid programmes, distributing seeds, and subsidising essential food items. Although such measures helped many vulnerable families survive, their impact on restoring livelihoods in ways that reduced people's longer term vulnerabilities, dependency and debt levels was limited.

The government's launch of its 100 Days Employment Programme<sup>8</sup> in September 2008, paying 100 taka (US\$1.45) for a day's work, has been a positive – albeit belated – extension of support for vulnerable families not covered by existing social safety nets.

The (informal) food cluster, led by the World Food programme, successfully managed to provide food aid to the most vulnerable households despite the concurrent food price crisis. Average market prices in Bangladesh for key food items such as rice have more than doubled from 2007 levels, despite official efforts to stabilise prices through subsidies.

However, survivors' food security could also have been improved through greater use of seed distributions in January 2008 for cyclone-affected farmers, thus supporting affected communities' livelihoods at the same time – killing two birds with one stone. Significantly, markets were quickly functioning soon after the cyclone, and food was on sale, albeit at very high prices. This indicates that cash-based support (rather than food-as-aid) would not only have helped to feed affected families but also boosted local commerce-based livelihoods.

Following support from Bangladesh authorities and NGOs, but in large measure owing to the efforts of farmers themselves, the main *boro* rice harvest in April 2008 turned out surprisingly well. However, the sheer scale of the current food crisis means that chronic food insecurity in Bangladesh is set to continue – and may become worse because of factors such as climate change. Oxfam field staff report that many survivors have grown deeply frustrated and bitter at the lack of support to rebuild their livelihoods sustainably. Many have left to find work in other areas in order to feed their families.

The lesson, again, is clear. The quick restoration of livelihoods (with enhanced resilience to hazards) helps people to help themselves, thereby restoring their dignity as well as their means of income. This reduces the risk of deeper debt and enables people to tackle their own vulnerabilities, thus contributing to a wider strengthening of their communities through revived economic activity.

## Funding - lives saved but much more needed

Many multilateral and bilateral donors gave generously during the relief phase of the response, pledging a total of US\$213 million (of which \$191 million had been received by November 2008). This valuable support enabled the Bangladeshi authorities as well as national and international organisations to rescue survivors, protect their health from subsequent hazards such as disease and hunger, and begin to rebuild shattered lives and communities.

However, it has become clear that an adequate level of financial resources required to achieve a comprehensive response to the disaster – including measures to rebuild stronger, safer communities – has not been effectively sought and has not materialised.

According to the joint assessment by the government and international experts, damage and losses to the housing sector resulting from Cyclone Sidr amounted to nearly 58 billion taka (US\$845 million). The money allocated by the government and international donors to restore the housing sector, on the other hand, has totalled just under 8.6 billion taka (US\$126 million) – barely a seventh of what was required.

Consequently, the essential longer-term task of rebuilding stronger, safer communities at risk of future disasters has no hope of success unless sufficient funds are allocated to enable construction of permanent, hazard-resilient shelters for all those who need it, as

well as encouraging the development of sustainable, hazard-resilient livelihoods for disaster-prone communities. The international community should support the government to allocate resources commensurate with these essential needs as soon as possible.

| <b>Top six donors</b>           | <b>Sum (US dollars)*</b> | <b>Percentage of total</b> |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| Saudi Arabia                    | 100,000,000              | 46.9 %                     |
| Central Emergency Response Fund | 19,692,303               | 9.2 %                      |
| United States                   | 19,539,676               | 9.2 %                      |
| European Commission (ECHO)      | 12,233,034               | 5.7 %                      |
| Kuwait                          | 10,000,000               | 4.7 %                      |
| Netherlands                     | 9,460,591                | 4.4 %                      |

*\*Figures from UN OCHA 1st November 2008*

## **2 Before the storm**

### **Preparedness - reducing the scale of disaster**

Bangladesh is one of the most hazard-prone countries in the world, experiencing frequent tropical storms, floods and earthquakes. Cyclone Sidr was, in fact, the second major disaster to hit Bangladesh that year following large scale floods. Climate change is making matters worse as global warming increases the intensity of tropical storms, changes in rainfall patterns raise the risk of floods, and rising sea levels erode and inundate coastal areas. Climate change experts predict Bangladesh is set to lose one tenth of its rice production and one third of its wheat output over the next 50 years.<sup>9</sup>

After several major disasters in recent decades, especially those caused by cyclones and floods, the Bangladesh authorities have instigated many valuable disaster preparedness measures to help vulnerable communities prepare themselves. Among the most important disaster preparedness measures has been the construction of 2500 anti-cyclone shelters and the setting up of communal early warning systems. About 43,000 volunteers carry out valuable work under the government-funded Cyclone Preparedness Programme.

Such steps have been supported and complemented by disaster risk reduction and preparedness measures carried out by many national and international organisations. For example, Oxfam International and Bangladeshi partners such as BRAC have worked to strengthen and diversify vulnerable people's livelihoods.

Some UN agencies displayed good foresight and planning by conducting pre-disaster audits of NGO partners<sup>10</sup> before the 2007 monsoon season. Those agencies were later able to allocate money more quickly to approved partners when disaster struck, thereby encouraging a faster and more effective emergency response.

The results of years of preparedness work have been remarkable. If we compare the three biggest cyclones to hit Bangladesh in the past four decades, we can see that the

death tolls have plummeted over that time. Whereas the Bhola cyclone of 1970 killed around 500,000 people, Cyclone Sidr – the second strongest tropical storm ever recorded to hit Bangladesh<sup>11</sup> – left approximately 4000 dead.

As a result of these measures and early warning systems, up to 3,000,000 people had already left their homes in vulnerable coastal areas for safer places and structures. Local government officials and NGOs were able to move contingency stocks of relief items quickly to areas likely to be affected. Combined with the rapid relief effort that followed, these preparedness measures helped to save hundreds of thousands of lives.

| Cyclone | Year | Fatalities (approximate) |
|---------|------|--------------------------|
| Bhola   | 1970 | 500,000                  |
| Gorky   | 1991 | 138,000                  |
| Sidr    | 2007 | 4,000                    |

The figures are all the more remarkable when one considers that the country's population has doubled in that time. Besides hundreds of thousands of lives, carrying out disaster risk reduction measures have saved huge sums of money too, since preparedness normally costs a fraction of what an emergency response does.

However, there remain significant limits to the successes achieved so far, as shown by the partial or total destruction of more than 1.5 million homes, the loss of 1.2 million livestock and two million acres of crops. Until such critical issues are addressed holistically, each future shock will once again leave thousands of families homeless, destitute, dependent on costly humanitarian responses, and vulnerable to the next hazardous event.

Additionally, the aftermath of Cyclone Sidr demonstrated that many local organisations – through whom most humanitarian assistance in Bangladesh is channelled – need greater investment by international donors and aid agencies to achieve good humanitarian assistance standards (such as the Sphere standards<sup>12</sup>) and effective contingency planning.

The lessons are clear. If successfully demonstrated principles of disaster risk reduction (including climate change considerations) are appropriately expanded to cover areas such as homes and livelihoods, and if the capacities of local organisations to respond effectively are strengthened, then vulnerable communities will be better prepared to withstand environmental shocks at much less cost to themselves and others.

To achieve these goals, the government and international donors must take seriously their commitment to “building back better” and improving disaster resilience in accordance with the 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action.<sup>13</sup> Key to the success of such efforts is the involvement of disaster-prone communities in the design and management of risk reduction measures such as early warning systems, multi-purpose cyclone shelters and well-maintained embankments.

The government and donors also need to significantly increase efforts to tackle the iniquitous social and economic conditions that make some people – such as women, the very poor, and socially marginalised groups – especially vulnerable to disasters.<sup>14</sup> In accordance with the constitutional rights of Bangladeshi citizens,<sup>15</sup> such efforts should guarantee inclusive access to essential services such health, education, water and sanitation as well as expand economic opportunities.

### 3 Recommendations

- The Bangladesh government, supported by the international community, should fulfil the rights of disaster-affected women, men and children to safe, adequate housing by immediately extending hazard-resilient shelter support to all those who need it. This should include appropriate transitional shelter assistance to help vulnerable families cope with approaching hazardous winter conditions.
- The government should immediately and proactively identify landless survivors and allocate suitable state (*khas*) land to them, while supporting the efforts of local and international agencies working towards the same goal.
- The international donor community should provide the government of Bangladesh and supporting actors with new funds to help disaster-affected communities rebuild hazard-resilient homes, restore livelihoods and strengthen essential services infrastructure.
- The Bangladesh government and international donors must take seriously their commitments to “building back better” and improve resilience to disasters (as agreed under the 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action) by increasing efforts to address underlying vulnerabilities caused by social, political, economic and physical conditions. This requires special attention to women, minorities, the very poor, low caste people and other marginalised groups.
- The government, international donors, and development agencies should systematically integrate disaster risk reduction principles and climate change adaptation measures into all development projects. Such efforts should complement an equitable international deal, under which rich industrialised countries significantly cut their carbon emissions and provide new funds to help the world’s poorest women and men adapt adequately to climate change effects.
- All actors should learn appropriate lessons from the Cyclone Sidr relief effort to improve current activities and future responses. A broader range of response tools should be deployed, such as the appropriate use of cash-based support for restoring livelihoods. Government officials and the UN Resident Coordinator should collaborate to provide more strategic leadership, including identifying new funding sources. The government and donors must improve co-ordination and communication. Donors should support capacity-building of Bangladeshi NGOs to deliver more effective and well-targeted disaster responses.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh: Damage, Loss, and Needs Assessment (March 2008), a joint study conducted by the Bangladesh government and international experts from the World Bank, the UN and other organisations, estimated the total damage and losses caused by the cyclone to be Bangladesh Taka 115.6 billion (US\$ 1.7 billion).

<sup>2</sup> Data quoted in this section relating to house damage and destruction, targeted shelter assistance and gaps are derived from the Shelter Working Group led by the Disaster Management Bureau and UNDP as stated on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2008. The most recent figures quoted here differ slightly from figures stated by the government but are broadly very similar.

<sup>3</sup> Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh: Damage, Loss and Needs Assessment for Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction, March 2008.

<sup>4</sup> In Jhalokhat district, for example, 60% of needy families (over 30,000 households) were not covered by any existing or planned emergency shelter distribution three months after the disaster.

<sup>5</sup> The government estimated that 1,143,457 households – out of a total of 1,470,419 affected households – could rebuild without external support.

<sup>6</sup> Situation Report from the Disaster Management Bureau (Ministry of Food and Disaster Management), 27 November 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh: Damage, Loss and Needs Assessment for Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction, March 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Under the 2.0 billion taka (US\$29 million) programme, one family member can be employed at 100 taka a day for up to 100 days of manual labour. Only 20 days of a month count as working days. Anyone enlisted in the programme who can not be given work immediately receives 40 taka daily for the first 30 days and 50 taka daily after that.

<sup>9</sup> UK Department for International Development (2004)

<sup>10</sup> This process allows UN agencies to allocate money more quickly to approved actors on the basis of pre-disaster audits. It proved useful during both the 2007 summer floods and the November cyclone by enabling a more timely and effective emergency response.

<sup>11</sup> Rob Gutro and Ed Olsen, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

<sup>12</sup> The Sphere Minimum Standards for Disaster Response are internationally agreed guidelines that delineate best practice and minimum standards in relief activities: [www.sphereproject.org](http://www.sphereproject.org).

<sup>13</sup> The World Conference on Disaster Reduction held in January 2005 in Kobe, Hyogo, Japan, adopted the present Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters. The framework identified five priorities for action: ensuring that disaster risk reduction is a national and a local priority; identifying, assessing and monitoring disaster risks and enhancing early warning; using knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience; reducing the underlying risk factors; strengthening disaster preparedness for effective response. For more details, see the full document online at: <http://www.unisdr.org/wcdr/intergover/official-doc/L-docs/Hyogo-framework-for-action-english.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> For more on how social, physical, economic and political factors expose certain vulnerable groups to unnecessary risks of disaster (especially in the context of South Asia) and what changes are required, see Rethinking Disasters, a report by Oxfam International (2008). Available online at: [http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict\\_disasters/oxfam\\_india\\_rethinking\\_disasters.html](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict_disasters/oxfam_india_rethinking_disasters.html)

<sup>15</sup> Article 15 of the Bangladesh constitution obliges the state to ensure the provision of basic services that contribute to “a steady improvement in the material and cultural standard of living” of its people. Details available online at: <http://www.pmo.gov.bd/constitution/>

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**One year after Cyclone Sidr:**

**fear replaces hope**, Oxfam Briefing Note, November 2008

**Oxfam India** - 2nd floor, Plot No.1, Community Centre (Sujan Mohinder Hospital), New Delhi, India, tel: +91 (0) 11 4653 8000, fax: +91 (0) 11 4653 8099, email: [delhi@oxfamindia.org](mailto:delhi@oxfamindia.org), website: [www.oxfamindia.org](http://www.oxfamindia.org)

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**Oxfam observer member.** The following organization is currently an observer member of Oxfam International, working towards possible full affiliation:

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