

# Bangladesh: A Sustainable and Disaster Resilient Future



## 6th DIPECHO Action Plan



**Prepared by**

Syed Shahnawaz Ali  
Programme Manager-DRR  
Islamic Relief Worldwide-Bangladesh

M. Mizanur Rahman  
Programme Officer (Monitoring, Evaluation and Research)  
Islamic Relief Worldwide-Bangladesh

Nushrat Rahman Chowdhury  
Assistant Project Officer  
Islamic Relief Worldwide-Bangladesh

**Edited by**

Syed Shahnawaz Ali  
Programme Manager-DRR  
Islamic Relief Worldwide-Bangladesh

**Published by**

Islamic Relief Worldwide-Bangladesh  
June 2012

**Special thanks to**

Niger Dil Nahar, Md. Simon Rahman, Norul Alam Raju, Abdus Samad SKS Team

**Photo**

Dr. Marfy Ryhan  
Bradley Klees  
M. Mizanur Rahman

**Design and Production**

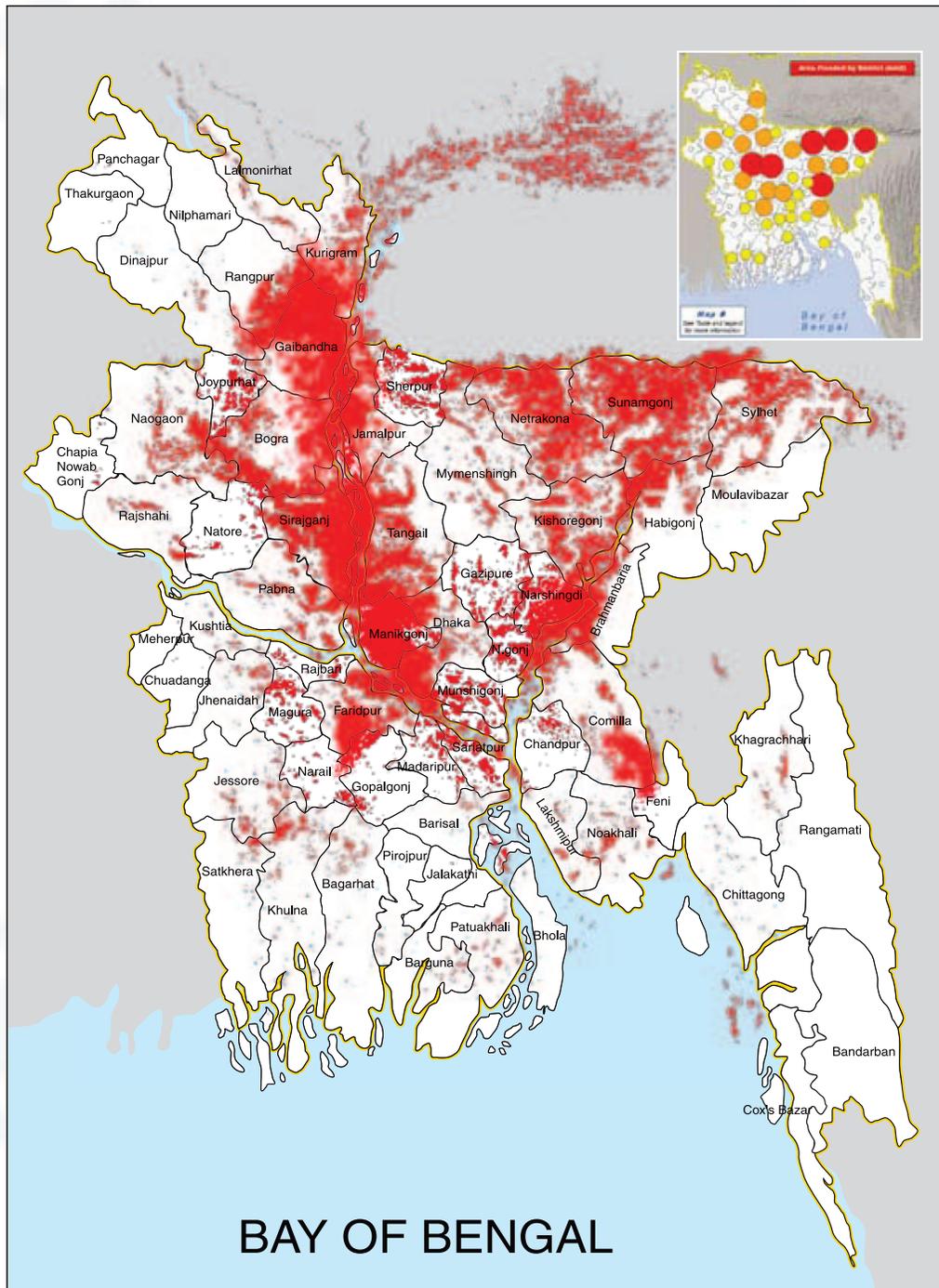
Preview  
Dhaka, Bangladesh

**Contact**

Islamic Relief Worldwide - Bangladesh  
House No: 10, Road No: 10, Block-K, Baridhara,  
Dhaka-1212  
E-mail: [info@islamicrelief-bd.org](mailto:info@islamicrelief-bd.org)  
Web: [www.irwbd.org](http://www.irwbd.org)

*This document has been prepared under the 6th DIPECHO Action Plan for South Asia implemented by Islamic Relief Worldwide-Bangladesh working under the NARRI consortium. Islamic Relief Worldwide- Bangladesh preserves the copyright of this but it can be quoted or printed with proper acknowledgement. It has been produced with financial assistance from European Commission Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO). The views expressed herein should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the European Commission Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO).*

# Flood Prone Areas in Bangladesh



## Introduction

Bangladesh is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, suffering from regular floods, cyclones, earthquakes and drought. It is estimated that in the past 20 years, 135 million people in Bangladesh have been affected by natural disasters, and while many have lost their lives or been injured, millions of others have also lost their homes, land and livelihoods.



Disasters do not only cause short-term devastation and suffering amongst the communities they hit. These also hamper the ability of Bangladesh to effectively tackle poverty, as the limited resources of government, communities and non-governmental organisations are diverted from development programmes to relief and response work.

## Mainstreaming disaster risk reduction

In recent years there has been a growing awareness amongst those involved in disaster response work in Bangladesh, that is needed to assist those communities vulnerable to natural disasters in coordinated effort to undertake intensive disaster risk reduction work alongside relief efforts.

In September 2010, the National Alliance for Risk Reduction and Response Initiatives (NARRI) was set up by non-governmental organisations, including Islamic Relief Worldwide, who are working in Bangladesh as a way of strengthening disaster preparedness efforts through collaboration. The programme now works to build the capacity of local communities and institutions to mitigate the impact of disasters, and to include risk reduction initiatives into wider development programmes.

## Community resilience building

NARRI is working towards implementing the sixth DIPECHO action plan, which was established by the European Commission to increase the capacity of communities to cope with disasters. Under

this programme, NARRI member organisations are implementing the programme 'A Disaster Resilient Future: Mobilizing Communities and Institutions for Effective Risk Reduction' and are working with 255,700 people in ten areas of Bangladesh that are extremely vulnerable to natural disasters.

## Islamic Relief Worldwide

Islamic Relief Worldwide is an international relief and development organisation that has been working in Bangladesh since 1991 and has provided support to communities affected by numerous disasters including cyclone Aila, the 2007 floods and the 2005 tornado.

As part of NARRI's current DIPECHO funded programme, Islamic Relief Worldwide is working with communities, institutions and local government departments in six wards in Sylhet and three unions in two upazilas at Gaidandha. These activities, that include small-scale adaptation to homes, water sources and some critical infrastructures, as well as strengthening institutional arrangements for resilience, community based training and mobilisation, are benefitting 49,765 individuals.

## Gaibandha: Life on the edge

Gaibandha is situated in Rangpur in northern Bangladesh and is an area that is extremely vulnerable to natural disasters, especially flooding and food shortages, known locally as 'monga.' One of the main reasons for this is that the region is intersected by numerous rivers including the Teesta, the Brahmaputra and the Jamuna which flow from the Himalayas through Bangladesh and out into the Bay of Bengal.



The presence of these rivers criss-crossing the land has led to creation of numerous 'chars', islands of sand and silt created by the river flows. Approximately five million people in Bangladesh live in char areas, which are extremely vulnerable to flooding and land erosion, putting lives at risk and keeping people trapped in a cycle of poverty.

## Food shortages in a land of plenty

The irony is that the land of the chars is very fertile that is why so many people continue to live here. Agriculture is the main source of income for the majority of the population at Gaibandha with families growing crops such as rice, wheat, jute, sugarcane, potato, mustard seed, chili, onion and garlic. However, despite this, frequent natural disasters in this region destroy these crops and hamper people's ability to make a sustainable livelihood mean that rates of malnutrition amongst char dwelling communities are some of the highest in the country.

This is because floods and land erosion repeatedly not only destroy crops, but also wash away homes, livestock, food stores, possessions and every way of making a living. And these recurring disasters do not just have devastating short-term impacts; it also means that people are unable to escape from the cycle of poverty as they are constantly displaced, and forced to use scarce resources to cope with and recover from disaster.



## The struggle to access education

As well as leaving families vulnerable to disasters, life on the chars of Gaibandha also poses other challenges. Because it is so hard to make a regular living here as a result of the repeated floods, many people, especially working men, migrate to Dhaka or nearby cities like Rangpur and Bogra in search of work. However, this leaves the most vulnerable in the community, women, children and the elderly behind to try to survive on the land.

During the rainy season boats remain the only form of transport for local people, and very often they are cut off from the outside world completely meaning they are left with no access to healthcare which can be dangerous for pregnant women, the elderly and those with chronic health problems.

Even when there are no floods many children have to walk for several hours or take numerous boats



to get to school, while during the rainy season schools are closed and are used as flood shelters. In addition, the fact that many families in this area are living with poverty means that they are often unable to afford to pay for school fees or equipment, or will keep their children home to work on the

land and contribute to the family's income. However, despite these numerous hardships river bank erosion on the mainland and lure of fertile agricultural land means that increasing numbers of displaced families are moving to the chars in the hope of starting a new life and making a living. This is putting an increasing strain on already scarce resources and is leaving even more people vulnerable to ever present disasters.

## Our work

Islamic Relief Worldwide is working with communities and institutions at Gaibandha to assess what disasters they are vulnerable to, and to develop local strategies to prepare for, mitigate and respond to natural disasters in line with the national disaster risk reduction framework.

### *The objectives of our work at Gaibandha are to:*

- Enhance the capacities of communities vulnerable to disasters and local level institutions so that they can respond to and cope with future disasters
- Improve grassroots and community based institutions, which are the first to respond to any disaster
- Develop replicable models of adaptation to climatic hazards
- Support national government in development of appropriate policy models in DRR and Response

## Capacity building

We are meeting these objectives by building the capacity of communities and institutions such as disaster management committees, community-based organisations, hospitals, schools, businesses and local government bodies to mitigate the adverse impacts of climatic hazards.



This is done by providing technical support and training to enable them to implement early warning systems, carry out risk assessments and post-disaster needs assessments, and disseminate information about disaster risk reduction. We also carry out small scale mitigation activities such as raising homes and water sources to protect them during flooding, building sanitation facilities, constructing flood shelters, link roads and bridges.

## Preparing for disasters

In addition, we help communities to prepare for disasters, providing them with the skills and equipment needed to carry out an effective disaster response. This includes training community volunteers to carry out search and rescue, providing first aid, and ensuring the delivery of water, sanitation and hygiene services. We also provide training at the local government level to increase their ability to assess damage after a disaster and respond appropriately.



## Knowledge sharing

Finally, in order to ensure that these activities are sustainable we carry out knowledge sharing and awareness raising activities amongst local communities, disseminating good practice through community-led events, through mass media awareness-raising.

## Community mobilisation

With the technical support and guidance from Islamic Relief, there are now 625 volunteers in 25 Village Development Committees, who are all determined to make a positive change in their communities.

Every VDC is now developing monthly plans at their meetings, which outline the activities they need to undertake to improve the resilience of their communities to disasters and are also setting up local health camps, vaccination camps and awareness raising campaigns with their own initiatives.

These activities are also being replicated across the region as communities learn from each other and access further support from Islamic Relief, and as community awareness and engagement with disaster risk reduction activities spreads.

## Adaptation

Besides the soft activities like awareness raising, community mobilisation, risk assessment, advocacy and capacity building, the sixth DIPECHO action plan is also focused on implementing small-scale adaptation activities in the three working unions of Gaibandha. The table below shows what Islamic Relief Worldwide has achieved already.

These activities are having a significant impact on the ground and are currently serving as a model for other communities who wish to collectively replicate them within their own villages. The success of these activities has also encouraged local governments to invest in disaster risk reduction in these areas and have already invested in local Village Development Committees who are engaged in local risk reduction.

Activities	Number	Beneficiary covered
Plinth height raising	183	998
Tube well	50	1450
Latrine	183	998
Wooden bridge	2	12000
Flood shelter	1	1250
Boat transfer	3	25000

## Interview

### “The dream of building safer communities”

**Name:** M. Mizanur Rahman

**Job role:** *Monitoring, Evaluation and Research, Islamic Relief Bangladesh*

#### **What is the aim of Islamic Relief’s project at Gaibandha?**

This project aims to building disaster resilient communities by empowering local people and institutions through conducting awareness-raising, mobilisation, capacity building and preparedness activities.

#### **Where is this work taking place?**

The project targets the communities most vulnerable to disasters.

At Gaibandha, there are 118 chars which are home to some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in Bangladesh. These areas are particularly prone to natural disasters such as floods, river erosion, drought and cyclones, which wipe out their assets and push them into deeper poverty.

***How does IR assess what support the communities it works need?***

We carried out a comprehensive risk assessment which fully engaged the local communities. Islamic Relief Worldwide trained local people from each union to lead the risk assessment process and then supported them to develop structured action plans, and assisted in their implementation.

In each village a Village Development Committee has been set by SKS, the implementing partner with support from Islamic Relief Worldwide. They continuously assess the risks and needs in the community, and develop monthly action plans that raise awareness amongst, and engage with, individuals throughout the community.

***How do you ensure the needs of vulnerable groups such as female-headed households or people living with disability are met?***

The project has incorporated the needs of vulnerable or marginalised people throughout the activities we conduct. Working with technical partners such as Handicap International and HelpAge International, we increase understanding of their needs but also ensure that they are fully involved in planning and implementing the disaster response plans. This is how IR has tried to make cohesive society where excluded people will get their proper care and respect, and in the same time will utilise their skills for the benefit of the community as a whole.

***What has been the greatest success of the project so far?***

IR started working with the dream of building safer communities in this disaster prone area where there was hardly any external support for the poor people living here by integrating disaster risk reduction activities into their daily lives.

There are a number of successes that the project has achieved so far but the most noticeable is the leveraging of local resources by the community people and local government for local, community-based disaster risk reduction at Gaibandha. And already within eight months across three unions twenty million taka (198,019 EUR) has been invested by the community people and local level government in risk reduction initiatives.

Local people are keen to take ownership of the work and replicate what they have seen to work. For example, they have recently built some model houses using methods that aim to keep families safe during floods. Seeing the benefits of this work, many other people are now replicating the model and making adaptations to their homes on their own initiative.

***What part of the project do you feel most proud of?***

I have made several field visits to Gaibandha and the changes are very clear to me. People are acting as agents of change in their communities and after learning from us what techniques they could be employing to keep themselves safe during a disaster, and are quick to roll these out throughout the community.

For example, people have bought boats, organised health and vaccination camps, set up Village Development Committees and strengthened their homes. Because these activities have been led and implemented by the communities themselves they are sure to meet their needs and are more likely to be sustainable.

## Case study: Rumana's dreams for a better future

Rumana Begum and her husband Mohammad Abdur Rahman make a living by growing crops in the chars at Gaibandha. In the past 15 years Rumana, her husband and two daughters have had to move house three times. On the last occasion, her house was destroyed when the river bank was eroded away. Since then she and her family have spent the rainy season with relatives, and returned to their home in the char during the dry season.

However, moving around so often was seriously affecting her daughters' education, and she was desperate for a permanent solution that would mean they could live in their home all year round.



As part of its disaster risk reduction work at Gaibandha, Islamic Relief Worldwide assisted Rumana and her family by raising her home to ensure that it would not be flooded during the rainy season, while also providing them with a tube-well for safe drinking water and sanitation facilities to improve the health of the family.

Rumana was actively involved in this work helping to prepare the new plinth for her home, as well as preparing her land with support from Islamic Relief Worldwide to prevent it from eroding during the floods and to ensure that the family's crops are not destroyed. Being involved in the work in

this way has increased Rumana's confidence and allowed her to dream of a better future for her daughters.

"I will not let anything happen to my daughters," Rumana said. "I have succeeded to secure housing for my family and now my daughters will continue their schooling,"

## Case study: Supporting the most vulnerable

Saleha lives alone in ModdhoUria, a village at Gaibandha district. When her husband died 20 years ago she had to raise her six children all on her own. Life was very difficult and more than once she lost all her possessions and her home in the floods that are regular occurrence in this area.



Now Saleha's children are all married and live with their own families and this elderly woman continues to isolatedly live in the chars, working in the fields, sewing and making puffed rice in order to scrape enough money together to survive.

However, recently Saleha's life took a turn to the better when her home was reconstructed by Islamic Relief Worldwide as part of its disaster risk reduction programme at Gaibandha. In order to protect her house from flooding, it has raised onto a plinth and a new tube-well and sanitation facilities have been built close to her home with access that is suitable for elderly members of the community.

Previously floods would destroy Saleha's house nearly every year, and moving and reconstructing her home was becoming more difficult the older she got. Now with these amendments to her home she should have a permanent residence and should be able to better cultivate her land to grow enough food to support herself.

## Case study: Joining hands, reducing risk

Char Kabilpur is a village of 620 households at Uria Union of Fulchari Upazilla. The village has no access to healthcare, education or a market, and during the rainy season the village is virtually cut off from the outside world by the flood water, preventing people from getting any of these basic services.

Islamic Relief Worldwide is working with the inhabitants of Char Kabilpur with support from its local partner SKS Foundation, to help them cope with the impact of the frequent floods that affect the village.



Md. Abdul Baqi Khan is a social worker and a member of Char Kabilpur's Village Development Committee that was set up with the support of Islamic Relief Worldwide. When Islamic Relief Worldwide asked Md. Abdul Baqi Khan what his community's greatest need was he was quick to respond; transport as with no roads and no boats available in the village, during the rainy season people are unable to access healthcare and children are unable to get to school.

While the individual families in Char Kabilpur were unable to afford their own boat, with support from Islamic Relief Worldwide they joined under the Village Development Committee and pooled their resources to purchase their own community boat. Everyone gave what they could afford, and within a month they had the necessary funds.

Now, 150 children use the new boat every day to get to school, while older people use it to take their goods to market or to

undertake work further away. While in a medical emergency people are able to get to a health clinic, which has been especially important for pregnant women and elderly people.

The community retain ownership of the boat, and a small fee is paid for each trip which covers the cost of the boatman's salary and the upkeep on the boat.

The way in which the inhabitants of Char Kabilpura came together under the guidance of the Village Development Committee and with support from Islamic Relief Worldwide, has served as a model for other villages which are experiencing similar problems. The Village Development Committee is now committed to solve other communal problem by working together as one unit for a common cause.

### Case study: Advocating support for all

60-year-old Toyen Uddin lives in Char Ratonpur at Gaibandha where he supports his family by working as a shopkeeper. Nine years ago after a short illness Toyen was forced to have his left leg amputated. This has restricted his ability to work and prevented him growing crops, and during the rainy season it is very difficult for him to move around. In addition, many people in the community have shunned Toyen as many believe that disability is caused after the individual has done something bad.

Most of the time Toyen is house-bound and he has few people to help him move around. This experience has been isolating and made him afraid of what will happen if there is another disaster.

However, Toyen has a strong desire to be involved in community activities and after meeting staffs from Islamic Relief Worldwide and its partner SKS Foundation, he volunteered to become a member of the newly formed Village Development Committee, advocating for the rights of people living with disabilities to ensure their needs were met during and after a disaster.

Toyen now leads a group of other villagers teaching them about disasters and how they can keep themselves and their families safe. Recently he participated in a disaster

preparedness rally that was organised by Islamic Relief Worldwide, standing up for and advocating for the needs of disabled persons during emergencies.

In addition, Toyen has been provided assistance to adapt his home and sanitation facilities so that they are suitable for his needs and has been provided new equipment by Islamic Relief Worldwide to help him with his mobility so that he can attend other disaster risk reduction meetings further away, allowing him to continue to be an active voice for people living with disabilities in the chars.



## Case study: Learning how to stay safe

Mobarat Ali Mondol lives in a char of Haldia Union at Gaibandha with his paralysed wife. He has been living in this area throughout his life although he has had to move and re-build his home numerous times after it was destroyed by flooding.

As well as repeatedly losing his home, his livestock and his food stores to flooding, Mobarat has also lost much of his land due to river erosion and he now does not have enough to grow the crops he needs to make a decent living. It forces him to work as a day labourer.

"If my home and yard were protected from the floodwaters, I would not suffer in this way," said Mobarat. He explained that every rainy season he is scared that his house will be destroyed again and he does not know where he and his wife will take shelter, how he will ensure she is safe from danger, how they will eat and how he will save his lives, stock and possessions.



Mobarat is now a member of the Village Development Committee set up with the support of Islamic Relief Worldwide and has recently taken part in training on Disaster Preparedness. Here he learned how he and his fellow villagers could prepare for disasters in advance to keep themselves safe during a flood and what to do if another disaster happens so that everyone remains safe.

As well as assisting the local community to assess their own needs and come up with their own solutions to help them reduce the impact of flooding, Islamic Relief Worldwide has also raised the height of Mobarat's home and those of his neighbours too. "Whatever the height of water is," he said. "I will be safe within my home now."

Taking the lessons he learned from this initiatives, he is now hoping to plant more crops in a raised area by his home, with the confidence that it won't be washed away during the next floods. "It is comforting," he said, "that in the eleventh hour of my life, my struggle against the floods has come to an end."



## **ISLAMIC RELIEF BANGLADESH**

House: 10, Road: 10, Block: K, Baridhara, Dhaka-1212  
Bangladesh, Tel: 88 02 9893458, 8819392

E-mail: [info@islamicrelief-bd.org](mailto:info@islamicrelief-bd.org), Web : [www.irwbd.org](http://www.irwbd.org)