

# After the cyclone: lessons from a disaster

15 February 2008

## Summary and recommendations

'It was dark when the water came. The wave was higher than the house. People clung to the highest trees to survive, while our village was swallowed up. So many people died – I lost my son, he was nearly four. My only brother and both of my sisters are gone. Our homes are gone too, and everything in them, even our clothes. Some of the ladies clinging to trees had their saris torn off their bodies and nothing to cover themselves for two whole days.'

Mahmouda, 28, Ketasara village, Pirojpur

Late in the evening of 15 November 2007, Cyclone Sidr struck Mahmouda's home and thousands of other villages across Bangladesh's southern coastal areas, leaving around 4000 people dead and millions homeless.<sup>1</sup> The initial response to the disaster was prompt and vigorous, but three months after the disaster the affected communities' needs – particularly in terms of housing and livelihoods – remain staggering.

Dozens of focus-group discussions and interviews carried out by Oxfam<sup>2</sup> highlighted two massive gaps in the current recovery phase of the response: the repair and reconstruction of homes and the rehabilitation of people's livelihoods. Over 1.3m people are still living in temporary shelter.<sup>3</sup> These makeshift homes are completely inadequate to withstand the monsoon rains, which are expected in May.

With planning for more permanent housing projects still in the very early stages and unlikely to be completed before the monsoon, Oxfam fears that some of the most vulnerable men, women, and children may be entirely exposed to the elements for months or even years to come.

The cyclone also killed livestock and destroyed crops, farming equipment, and fishing boats. Many communities lost both their incomes and their assets, and a quick and effective recovery depends on restoring people's livelihoods quickly.

As an agency directly involved in the humanitarian response,<sup>4</sup> Oxfam believes that swift action on the following issues is needed in order to ensure an appropriate and effective response to the disaster:

- **The government of Bangladesh and the international community must fulfil their constitutional and legal obligations<sup>5</sup> by immediately devising a more comprehensive strategy for covering the massive unmet shelter needs of cyclone-**

**affected communities.** With only a few months to go before the monsoon rains, hundreds of thousands of people remain in dire need of emergency shelter support, and many more require assistance to progressively rebuild cyclone- and flood-resistant permanent housing. Under the leadership of a dedicated government department or focal point, policy makers must consult directly with affected communities to design an appropriate mix of financial, material, and technical support packages for those who have lost homes. To effectively support this process, the newly appointed United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) shelter co-ordination team must take on a strong and visible advocacy role and proactively identify resources and actors who can help to fill the current gap.

- **The government of Bangladesh and the international community must prioritise the rapid restoration of livelihoods across the cyclone-affected areas.** They must begin to look beyond relief distributions and food aid and become more proactive in identifying emergency food security and livelihoods responses that will actually help communities restore assets and income-generation opportunities (especially in the fishing and farming sectors). Micro-finance institutions must engage constructively and flexibly in these efforts by offering to write off loans or by extending loan-repayment schedules in cyclone-affected areas as much as possible.
- **Communities' rights to consultation and information about the cyclone response must be upheld at all levels.** Recovery and rehabilitation plans cannot be drawn up without the active participation of affected communities – including vulnerable groups such as landless people – and a specific focus on the inclusion of women. At present recovery and rehabilitation planning does not sufficiently enable affected communities to play a leading role in their own future. Equally, government officials, donors, and United Nations (UN) agencies must provide a more open and inclusive forum for policy debates on appropriate recovery and rehabilitation responses. Any policy discussions should include field-based humanitarian actors such as the Red Cross Movement and non-government organisations (NGOs).
- **All actors should draw on the lessons from the first phase of the emergency to inform their ongoing and future responses.** Government officials must join forces with the UN Resident Coordinator (UNRC) to provide more strategic leadership of the response, which includes identifying additional funding sources and appropriate actors to fill the gaps. The government and donors must improve co-ordination and communication, particularly in terms of bridging the gap between traditional and non-traditional donor countries. All actors must strengthen the capacity of national NGOs operating in disaster-prone areas in terms of beneficiary selection, Sphere standards, and contingency planning.
- **The government of Bangladesh, the international community, and civil society must work together to reduce the vulnerability of those living in disaster-prone areas and slow the pace of climate change that makes the occurrence of such disasters more likely.** All actors must take seriously their commitment to 'building back better' and improving future resilience to disasters, as agreed under the 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action.<sup>6</sup> Communities must be directly engaged in the choice and management of mitigation and preparedness measures, including a revision of the draft government-donor assessment team's plan for disaster-risk management. Meanwhile, rich countries must implement the commitments made at the 2007 UN Conference on Climate Change and start delivering on pledges to set up a fund that will help developing countries adapt to the burgeoning cost of climate change.

# 1 Lessons from the emergency response

The serious humanitarian crisis that Cyclone Sidr left in its wake in November 2007 prompted an immediate national and international reaction. The Government of Bangladesh<sup>7</sup>, Bangladesh Armed Forces, civil society and hundreds of thousands of volunteers moved with speed and commitment to mobilise a massive humanitarian response to the disaster.

Planning for the emergency was already well underway before Cyclone Sidr ever struck land: early warning systems and disaster preparedness measures allowed a reported 3,000,000 people to evacuate low-lying coastal areas<sup>8</sup> and local government officials and NGOs to rapidly move contingency stocks from neighbouring districts into the areas of anticipated impact.

Following the cyclone's landfall, the government, armed forces, local civil society organisations and volunteers moved quickly to mount search and rescue operations and to distribute food, water, clothing and other emergency items to cyclone survivors. The reduced death toll compared to previous cyclones<sup>9</sup> is a testament to improved community preparedness measures and a huge credit to the 43,000 volunteers working under the government-funded 'Cyclone Preparedness Programme'.

While the immediate response to the disaster was both prompt and vigorous, Oxfam believes that some actors could and should have done more to effectively meet emergency needs.

## Coordination but no strategic leadership

Considering the inherent challenges of responding to a quick onset disaster with large-scale humanitarian needs across a massive geographical area, the coordination of humanitarian aid at the local level of the cyclone response has been reasonably effective. Local government and army officials moved quickly to establish themselves as focal points for aid agencies and other actors and form a general overview of activities within their district or sub-district (known as 'upazila'). While somewhat dependent on the personal leadership skills of individual actors, this structure generally allowed those on the ground to spot some of the more obvious gaps and avoid serious duplication in their response. It must be noted, however, that not all local officials were equally familiar with the Bangladesh Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD), and more efforts are needed to achieve an even implementation of this useful directive.

Gaps were also visible in the coordination between local and national actors, which had a negative impact on the quality of the humanitarian response. Since field-based staff and officials within national NGOs and institutions were rarely empowered to make programmatic and policy decisions (for example regarding the number of households that the agency should target or the types of items that should be part of a standard distribution package) large parts of the response remained resource-driven and top-down rather than needs based.

Above all, though, coordination at both the national and local level appears to have been hampered by a lack of a strategic focus. While the informal activation of the UN 'cluster approach'<sup>10</sup> to humanitarian coordination did allow those involved in the response to meet more regularly at Dhaka-level, the clusters themselves were not utilised by either the government or UN agencies (who generally acted as cluster co-leads) as a space for genuine policy discussions around actual needs on the ground.

There has been a long-standing confusion at the global level regarding the applicability of international coordination systems like the cluster approach in a country where the government is in a position to provide strong leadership during a humanitarian crisis<sup>11</sup>. This was certainly the case in Bangladesh, where the UN Resident Coordinator's office and the United Nations Development Programme displayed a (perhaps inherent) resistance towards assuming a more independent and impartial humanitarian leadership and advocacy role. With neither the government nor the UN stepping up to proactively identify gaps and design comprehensive responses to meet outstanding needs, activities on the ground are under serious threat of remaining ad hoc and piecemeal solutions to a serious problem with long-term consequences.

With regards to the UN system, the absence of a clearly identifiable, inclusive inter-agency coordination forum<sup>12</sup> as well as a dedicated Humanitarian Coordinator<sup>13</sup> or other high-level UN official has also resulted in missed opportunities in terms of joint planning and preparedness.

In some cases the UN country team has failed to capitalise on early successes and good ideas, for example the publication of a timely and informative UN rapid assessment report which could have been used as a tool for engaging more widely with all donors and aid agencies to devise a more coherent response strategy. In terms of preparedness, some UN agencies demonstrated good foresight and planning capacity by setting up a 'pre-qualification' process for long-standing NGO partners<sup>14</sup> before the 2007 monsoon season. Unfortunately, the UN Resident Coordinator's office did not respond adequately to proposals in early 2007 for setting up a broader 'stand-by' coordination system that could kick into action in the case of disaster, thereby missing a major opportunity to develop the kinds of tools and multi-stakeholder contingency plans that would have ensured a more rapid and equitable response. Similarly, the early deployment of experienced humanitarian staff from regional centres<sup>15</sup> did facilitate the roll-out of technical processes (for example, the distribution of funds from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund) - but it did not seem to contribute to resolving difficult questions around the UN's strategic role and responsibilities vis-à-vis government agencies in the context of a humanitarian emergency.

Cross-cutting issues like gender and protection (for example the protection needs of female and child-headed households living with relatives or host families) appear to have fallen through the cracks as clusters have limited themselves to discussing the more technical and practical aspects of the response.

## Communication gaps between donor countries and government

Many multilateral and bilateral donors have given generously during the first phase of the response but have struggled to coordinate assistance – both with each other and with the government.

In part, this appears to be the result of the poor sharing of information and a lack of established communication channels between donors belonging to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's 'Development Assistance Committee' (OECD-DAC) and other countries who fall outside of this group. The latter have provided a significant proportion of overall emergency assistance (the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's contribution of US \$100 million alone represents more than 53% of the total humanitarian budget)<sup>16</sup>, but have generally chosen to stay outside of traditional coordination mechanisms or discussions. Government officials and Dhaka-based

donors have told Oxfam that they have little or no information on the timeframe within which these substantial bilateral pledges are being spent or which activities they are funding.

## Assistance still failing to reach the most vulnerable

Targeting the right people for relief assistance was another major challenge in the cyclone emergency response. Interviews with cyclone survivors and aid workers suggest that – while the vast majority of people did receive some level of assistance – relief distributions were not always benefiting the most vulnerable (such as female and child-headed households, or elderly and disabled people).

In part, this may have been the result of people's needs outstripping available resources: more resources were probably needed to reach communities especially in the four worst affected districts of Bagerhat, Barguna, Patuakhali and Pirojpur<sup>17</sup>. However, due to the information gap between national policy-makers and field staff, those leading the humanitarian response did not pick up on additional needs early enough to allow donors to respond with more emergency assistance. A disaster risk reduction approach in vulnerability, capacity and risk analysis carried out beforehand could have helped by providing the baseline to feed into response decisions.

In light of financial and material constraints, NGOs delivering the assistance often found it difficult to select beneficiaries for relief. This seems to have been a particular challenge for NGOs who had previously carried out development work in the same villages. A strong developmental approach meant that staff sometimes struggled to develop (and explain to communities) the new selection criteria that was required for an equitable emergency response, whereas a participatory disaster risk reduction approach could have identified and targeted the most vulnerable to disaster beforehand.

Considering the fact that the vast majority of assistance programmes in Bangladesh are implemented by local actors<sup>18</sup>, international donors and aid agencies have not invested adequately in strengthening these frontline responders in disaster-prone areas. More efforts are needed to build these organisations' capacity especially in terms of beneficiary selection, the application of international quality standards such as the Sphere standards<sup>19</sup> and effective contingency planning.

## 2 Urgent priorities for the recovery phase

Three months after the cyclone, survivor's needs have changed but not necessarily diminished. Dozens of focus group discussions and interviews carried out by Oxfam with communities in the worst affected districts have consistently highlighted two massive gaps in the current recovery phase of the response – the repair and reconstruction of homes and the rehabilitation of people's livelihoods.

### Massive shelter needs as the monsoon rains approach

Nearly 1.5 million homes were destroyed or damaged as a result of the cyclone and the subsequent storm surge<sup>20</sup>. The damage, loss and needs assessment prepared by the government and international donors places the overall damage estimate to the housing sector at a staggering US \$800 million (just under 60 billion BDT)<sup>21</sup>.

To its credit, the Government of Bangladesh acted immediately after the disaster to provide families with fully destroyed homes in the worst affected areas with a one-off 'housing grant' of 5000 Taka (approximately US\$ 70 or GBP £40). Carried out with remarkably speed and efficiency, this distribution proved to be an innovative way of supporting extremely vulnerable families. It was clear, however, that the amount was insufficient to allow families to actually rebuild their home and most people interviewed by Oxfam report having spent their cash on other emergency needs such as food or winter clothing for children, as well as self-recovery such as the repair of boats, fishing nets and other livelihoods assets.

The government has argued that around 77% of families whose houses were damaged or destroyed will have the means to rebuild on their own<sup>22</sup>. However, Oxfam's experience in the four worst affected districts suggests that this figure may be overly optimistic and that the vast majority chronically poor people (who have lost not just their homes but also incomes – see next section) have practically no coping capacity to rebuild their homes, let alone improve the quality of construction.

Tens of thousands of people are still living under makeshift shelters of straw, banana leaves, cloth, and plastic or salvaged iron sheeting. With no real protection against cold, wind and rain, parents fear for the health of their children and are telling Oxfam that the only thing they can do is try to let them sleep in the drier corners of the shacks. Women in particular are suffering from the deprivation and lack of privacy that they are experiencing due to the loss their homes, latrines and female bathing areas.

Aid agencies have tried to complement government efforts with the distribution of emergency shelter items such as plastic sheeting, tarpaulins and corrugated iron. In addition, Oxfam and others are rebuilding thousands of latrines and women's bathing areas. Unfortunately, figures compiled by the national shelter cluster demonstrate that the combined emergency shelter efforts of all actors still fall short even of government-estimated needs.<sup>23</sup>

The cluster's overview of government and donor plans for the longer-term rebuilding of houses paints an ever more worrying picture. While donor countries such as India and Saudi Arabia have made generous pledges of bilateral aid for cyclone housing programmes, the sum total of pledged contributions stands at a mere 61,959 houses – 260,000 houses short of the government-estimated need.

Efforts to reach the most vulnerable have also been hampered by a persistent confusion about the difference between 'emergency shelter' assistance (such as the bundles of roofing sheets that Oxfam distributes) and assistance for 'transitional' or 'core shelter' rebuilding (which should follow initial emergency distributions). In several districts, authorities have prevented Oxfam from distributing emergency shelter kits to a number of totally destroyed villages with the argument that these have already been selected for a rebuilding programme funded by one of the foreign governments. With planning for the bilateral housing projects still in the very early stages and unlikely to be completed before the expected start of the monsoon rains in May, Oxfam fears that some of the most vulnerable men, women and children may be entirely exposed to the elements for months or even years to come.

Estimates produced by a shelter cluster working group on land<sup>24</sup> confirm that a significant proportion of cyclone survivors – and certainly one of the most acutely vulnerable groups – are landless people. Having experienced the highest degree of losses to their homes and assets most of these families continue to live illegally on what remains of the land outside of the river embankment. As a result they are facing a particularly uncertain future in terms of housing assistance. It is crucial that

government take a proactive strategy to support landless people both in terms of addressing their short to medium-term shelter and livelihoods needs and accelerating existing land reform initiatives<sup>25</sup>.

According to Oxfam's field staff, all cyclone-affected families are expressing a fervent desire for constructing sturdier and better houses than they had before the cyclone - but even those who have some capacity to rebuild without external assistance do not have enough money to purchase the required materials.

"People are trying to salvage the pieces and putting them back together, but generally their living conditions are less safe now than they were before the cyclone – they are building back worse, not better! I have not seen a single house that has been built back to be stronger and more resistant to future cyclones or storms."

- Oxfam field worker in Patuakhali district

The Government of Bangladesh and the international community must urgently respond to the massive needs by allocating more funds to provide both immediate shelter solutions that will see people through the rapidly approaching monsoon season and longer-term assistance to support families in reconstructing and improving damaged or destroyed housing (see also section 3). Considering the high number of affected people and the limited capacities of government and aid agencies to implement large-scale construction programmes, officials should consult directly with communities to explore options for expanded financial, material and technical support to those who have lost homes. This will almost certainly require the creation or reinforcement of a dedicated government department that can act as a focal point for overseeing and implementing the reconstruction of cyclone-damaged housing.

The shelter cluster, which has worked hard since November 2007 to provide a clearer overview of emergency and transitional shelter needs, must continue playing a leadership on behalf of the sector following the recent departure of the International Federation of the Red Cross as a cluster convener. Having formally assumed the responsibility for coordination of the shelter response, the newly appointed UNDP shelter coordination team must also assume a decisive and visible advocacy role especially in terms of proactively identify resources and actors who can help to fill the current gaps. In addition, the team must support shelter cluster members by continuing to employ a capable and experienced technical adviser.

## Lost incomes hampering self-recovery

Travelling at wind speeds of 250km per hour, Cyclone Sidr killed over 1.2 million livestock and destroyed nearly 2.5 million acres of crops (this represents 95% of the cultivated area in the worst affected districts)<sup>26</sup>. Damages and losses in the productive sector are estimated to be nearly US \$500 million (30 billion BDT)<sup>27</sup>. A large number of communities that previously relied on agriculture, fishing and casual labour for their livelihood have lost both their incomes and assets as a result of the cyclone. There is no doubt that a quick and effective recovery from the impact of the cyclone will depend significantly on how quickly these people's livelihoods can be restored.

To date, only very few of the cyclone-affected families have been able to replace their lost assets. The majority of fishermen have not returned to sea since the cyclone struck, and communities consistently express their desire for support that could help to restore their incomes and their dignity.

Food security needs are significant and may intensify during normal lean periods in the months leading up to the main fishing (Feb-Mar) and harvest (Aug-Sept) seasons. The World Food Programme (WFP) has led the food security cluster in calling for relief distributions (including the government 'vulnerable group feeding' programmes) to continue for more than 2.2 million people until at least May 2008.

It must be stressed, however, that food aid is not the only – and not always the most appropriate – way to meet urgent food security needs. For example, Oxfam feels that the clusters may have missed an opportunity for improving some people's food security by not advocating for more seed distributions in January 2008 for cyclone-affected farmers who may have been in a position to benefit from the current winter cropping season. Any decision to provide food, cash, a combination of both or other assets such as seeds, tools, or livestock must be based on an objective market assessment and reliable data on actual food availability. The fact that 95% of local markets are functioning again after the cyclone and food is available on the market (albeit at high prices)<sup>28</sup> indicates that some cash-based responses may be appropriate within this context, also in terms of contributing to the recovery of local traders and economies. Oxfam and partner's own experience with cash-based emergency programming confirms that cyclone-affected communities perceive cash to be an effective contribution to a dignified self-recovery.

"Having an income is very important – before the cyclone, both men and women were able to work in the fields, but now all of our crops and tools are destroyed, our cows were killed and we have no money for seeds. The fishing families lost their boats and their nets. If we have no income how can we survive? I am optimistic for the future because we think we can rebuild our lives, but we need some support to do that. If we could just have a few of the items we lost to help start over, our lives will be alright."

- Asma, 30, Bogy village, Bagerhat

Loans and credit are a major source of income for many rural Bangladeshis, and families often have one to three loans at any one time. Most poor communities in the cyclone-affected areas were already carrying debt loads before November. Following the cyclone, some micro-finance institutions took the decision to temporarily suspend the repayment of loans – but communities are already expressing a fear that current grace periods (which range from three months to six months) are not long enough for them to begin repayments. Micro-finance institutions must follow the government's advice<sup>29</sup> and engage constructively in recovery efforts by offering a flexible approach and writing off loans in cyclone-affected areas as much as possible.

In addition to their pre-cyclone loans, many households have also been forced to take out new loans for immediate survival. Oxfam has received many reports of private moneylenders charging exorbitant interest rates (sometimes more than 100%) or taking advantage of those who lack the financial literacy to understand the implications for loan repayments.

Special efforts will be needed to ensure that sufficient amounts of credit are offered by micro-finance institutions and banks at low or no interest rates to facilitate the recovery of those affected by Cyclone Sidr. In order for credit to reach the most vulnerable, these institutions may need to extend their support beyond the existing client base.

## No consultation, little information

As with most disasters, the vast majority of recovery efforts from Cyclone Sidr are likely to be initiated by survivors themselves. Meaningful government and donor

support during the current recovery and longer-term rehabilitation phase will only be achieved with the effective participation and consultation of affected communities. Providing timely and regular access to information about the cyclone response is a crucial part of enabling communities to drive their own recovery.

Existing treaties and human rights law, as well as the 'Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters' endorsed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee' (IASC), commit the international community and the Government of Bangladesh to upholding people's right to information and consultation during a disaster response.

"All communities affected by the natural disaster should be entitled to easy accessible information concerning: (a) the nature and level of disaster they are facing; (b) the possible risk mitigation measures that can be taken; (c) early warning information; and (d) information on ongoing humanitarian assistance, recovery efforts and their respective entitlements. They should be meaningfully consulted and given the opportunity to take charge of their own affairs to the maximum extent possible and to participate in the planning and implementation of the various stages of the disaster response."

- IASC Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters, General Principle V

Regrettably, Oxfam interviews with affected communities reveal that they have received little or no information about government and international recovery and rehabilitation strategies. Meanwhile, ad hoc media reports on donor pledges – in particular any news regarding the reconstruction of houses – are followed with a high degree of interest and have contributed to raising communities' expectations. Across all of the worst affected districts, families have been busy repairing and raising plinths as a foundation for the homes that they are hoping to obtain under some sort of reconstruction package. Sadly, it is not clear to anyone whether plans for such a package actually exist.

Even international actors like Oxfam who have a presence in both the affected districts and the capital city have found it difficult to access information about national recovery plans and engage with policy-makers about community needs. Most of the early recovery assessments carried out by government and UN officials at the beginning of December have still not been released for consultation two months later, and communities' needs are likely to have changed significantly by the time these documents are eventually shared. Neither government nor UN officials have demonstrated a genuine desire to include key humanitarian stakeholders such as the Red Cross Movement and NGOs in their ongoing consultations and meetings<sup>30</sup>. Meeting agendas and timetables are driven heavily by the availability of Dhaka-based managers and are often called at very short notice, making it difficult for field-based actors to attend. Both the UN Resident Coordinator's office and the United Nations Development Programme exhibit signs of a UN-centric approach to coordination of the humanitarian response, as evidenced for example by the persistent confusion around the concept of the IASC which has been misunderstood to be composed exclusively of UN actors<sup>31</sup>. Government, donors and UN agencies must make a more proactive effort to include the Red Cross Movement and NGOs in the strategic coordination mechanisms for recovery planning and in the development of longer-term strategies and plans.

Past experiences with disaster in both Bangladesh and other countries<sup>32</sup> have shown that – unless affected people are involved in project designs and management – the impact of donor and government interventions are likely to remain limited. The Government of Bangladesh and international donors such as the World Bank and

Asian Development Bank must therefore increase their efforts to create opportunities and processes for seeking out the views of communities.

### 3 Reducing vulnerability to disasters

While it's impossible to prevent a natural event such as Cyclone Sidr from occurring, Oxfam believes that governments can and should do more to stop avoidable disasters by reducing the vulnerability of those living in disaster-prone areas and slowing the pace of climate change that makes the occurrence of such disasters more likely.

#### Empowering communities to prepare for the future

The exact path taken by Cyclone Sidr across the Bay of Bengal three months ago may have been inevitable, but the level of destruction and devastation that it caused was not: unlike their counterparts in wealthier nations, neither the coastal region's chronically poor and marginalised people nor their frail houses made of corrugated iron, low-quality timber, and straw ever had much of a chance of emerging unscathed from Sidr's heavy winds and storm surge.

Considering the country's high level of vulnerability to natural disasters (which include regular occurrences of floods, tropical cyclones, tornadoes, and tidal bores), the government and international donors must take seriously their commitment to 'building back better' and improving future resilience to disasters as agreed under the 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action.

In addition to reconstructing people's homes, government officials and donor countries must ensure that communities are involved in disaster preparedness strategies at all levels. Communities have a clear idea of their needs and how to cope with disasters, not just in terms of saving their own lives but on identifying ways for protecting their livelihoods (for example by moving livestock to higher areas). They must be directly engaged in the design and management of warning systems (including choice of message dissemination) and the construction of locally appropriate infrastructure such as multi-purpose cyclone shelters and well-maintained embankments.

"There is no cyclone shelter in the village – the nearest one is far away (approx. 4kms). When the cyclone hit, most of us took shelter in the sturdier houses, in one building there were about 500 people ... If we could make recommendations to the government, we would tell them to build more cyclone shelters, with enough space for both people and livestock, and to make sure that warnings are announced on microphones in all villages, not just in the market, so that the women can also hear them in their homes."

- Women's focus group discussion, Ketasera village, Pirojpur

The recently drafted joint government-donor assessment team's plan for disaster risk management must be radically revised to ensure the involvement of communities and avoid the mistake of wasting substantial resources on a large number of potentially inappropriate and unsustainable construction projects. More efforts must be invested into implementing the government's Standing Order on Disasters and designing a clear plan on how to work with the Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme to activate the Disaster Management Committees at district, upazila and village or 'union' levels who could lead on community-based disaster preparedness such as cyclone planning. These committees should have a broad membership that includes community representatives such as fishermen and farmers.

In addition, the government must accelerate its efforts to tackle chronic vulnerability by guaranteeing access to essential services including health, education, water and sanitation.

## Tackling the direct threat of climate change

Scientists concur that the ferocity and frequency of hazard events such as cyclones, hurricanes, and earthquakes have increased<sup>33</sup>. Two thirds of South Asia's disasters are climate-related, and global warming will increase the frequency, severity and unpredictability of disasters caused by the weather. Few countries in the world are at a higher risk of climate change than Bangladesh, where experts estimate that more than 50 million people could be made homeless by rising temperatures and sea levels.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has pointed out that farming and fishing communities will suffer some of the worst impacts of climate change, and Bangladesh is thought to be under acute threat of losing one tenth of its rice production and one third of its wheat production over the next 50 years<sup>34</sup>. 'Climate migrants' already account for at least one third of the impoverished people who are flooding from rural areas to seek work in the city of Dhaka<sup>35</sup>, but at present there is not enough support for them to diversify their livelihoods.

At the UN conference on climate in Bali, Indonesia in December 2007, rich countries agreed to set up a fund to help developing countries adapt to the burgeoning cost of climate change. However, with estimated costs exceeding \$50 billion annually, those rich countries have to start delivering serious sums money soon for those pledges to be meaningful before the potential costs soar further.

## 4 Conclusion

Cyclone survivors have demonstrated a remarkable resilience in the face of disaster – but their capacity to cope with the enormous challenge of rebuilding their lives must not be overestimated. The Government of Bangladesh and the international community have a legal and moral responsibility for ensuring that their needs do not fall off a crowded humanitarian and development agenda now that the media spotlight has begun to shift elsewhere. Doing so would not only deepen the country's poverty and suffering – it would also leave open the door for the next disaster to result in an equally or more deadly humanitarian crisis.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Situation Report from the Disaster Management Bureau (Ministry of Food and Disaster Management), 27 November 2007.
- <sup>2</sup> Interviews and focus-group discussions with cyclone-affected communities, aid workers from national and international NGOs, government officials, donor countries, and UN agencies were carried out by Oxfam to inform this briefing note during January and February 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> Estimates by the government and shelter cluster show that 264,958 families (or 1,324,790 people) remain in need of transitional shelters and do not have any capacity to cope on their own.
- <sup>4</sup> In partnership with national NGOs, Oxfam has been delivering humanitarian assistance in five of the most severely affected coastal districts (Bagerhat, Patuakhali, Barguna, Pirojpur, and Shariatpur).
- <sup>5</sup> Both international human-rights law and the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (Paragraph 15) commit governments to the provision of basic services including shelter.
- <sup>6</sup> Governments have committed to take action to reduce disaster risk, and have adopted a guideline to reduce vulnerabilities to natural hazards, called the Hyogo Framework for Action. The Hyogo Framework assists the efforts of nations and communities to become more resilient to, and cope better with, the hazards that threaten their development gains ([www.unisdr.org/hfa](http://www.unisdr.org/hfa)).
- <sup>7</sup> Under a unique system of transfer of power, Bangladesh has been run by a so-called caretaker government and under emergency rule since January 2007. The caretaker government has announced that it plans to hold democratic elections before the end of 2008.
- <sup>8</sup> 'Press conference on Bangladesh cyclone' posted on Reliefweb, <http://www2.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/SIRU-79435H?OpenDocument>
- <sup>9</sup> The Cyclone Sidr death toll of approximately 4000 people is 35 times lower than the one from Cyclone Gorky in 1991 and 125 times lower than the one from Cyclone Boha in 1970.
- <sup>10</sup> The cluster approach is a renewed effort on the part of the UN system to fill identified gaps in humanitarian response, ensure accountability with strengthened leadership and clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and to bolster coordination and synergy of efforts. In Bangladesh, the government and the UN Resident Coordinator's office agreed to set up six clusters (food security, WASH, health, shelter, logistics and early recovery) in November 2007 to facilitate the coordination of the Cyclone Sidr response. Somewhat confusingly, cluster leads continue to argue that there has merely been an 'informal' rather than a 'full' activation of the approach, though few can explain what precisely this means.
- <sup>11</sup> See for example the Cluster Approach Evaluation Report commissioned by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), November 2007.
- <sup>12</sup> Some have argued that the 'Disaster & Emergency Response' (DER) sub-group of the Local Consultative Groups in Bangladesh has the same function and should be considered a facto in-country Inter-Agency Standing Committee. Unfortunately, there is little evidence to demonstrate proactive efforts on the part of the DER to reach out to those directly involved in the cyclone response and organise regular high-level meetings between heads of IASC actors.
- <sup>13</sup> In Bangladesh, the UN Resident Coordinator also acts as the UN country team's official Humanitarian Coordinator. Oxfam has consistently raised concerns about the threat that this 'double-hatting' of UN officials presents to an impartial humanitarian response, see for example Oxfam Policy on humanitarian coordination,

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[http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict\\_disasters/downloads/oi\\_hum\\_policy\\_coordination.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict_disasters/downloads/oi_hum_policy_coordination.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> This process (which allows UN agencies to allocate money more quickly to certain approved actors on the basis of pre-disaster audits) has shown itself useful during both the summer floods and the November cyclone in terms of enabling a more timely and effective emergency response.

<sup>15</sup> Several UN agencies, including UN OCHA and UNICEF, quickly deployed regional staff to support the initial set up of coordination and funding systems.

<sup>16</sup> See UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service:  
[http://ocha.unog.ch/fts/reports/daily/ocha\\_R24\\_E15382\\_08020907.pdf](http://ocha.unog.ch/fts/reports/daily/ocha_R24_E15382_08020907.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> BD24, 2007, Supplies still elude Sidr survivors, 21 November,  
<http://www.bdnews24.com/details.php?id=91459&cid=6>

<sup>18</sup> Only a small number of international – UN and NGO – aid agencies have directly implemented emergency responses in Sidr affected areas; instead, the majority have opted to fund local partner organisations to implement projects. Some agencies (including Oxfam) are providing assistance through a ‘semi-operational’ partnership that allows for substantial technical, logistical and administrative support to local partner organisations.

<sup>19</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>20</sup> Government reports put the number of families whose houses were damaged in the cyclone at 1,470,419.

<sup>21</sup> Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh: Damage, Loss and Needs Assessment for Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction, prepared by the Government of Bangladesh with the support of the World Bank, the United Nations and the International Development Community, February 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Government estimates argue that 1,143,457 households – out of a total of 1,470,419 affected households – can rebuild without external support.

<sup>23</sup> The shelter cluster estimates that approximately 200,000 families have already received emergency shelter assistance such as tarpaulins, plastic sheeting, tents or corrugated iron sheeting, while 100,000 families received the government housing grant (though as mentioned there are doubts about whether or not this was actually spent on housing). More than 100,000 families are being targeted for future distributions. Despite all of these efforts, there are major outstanding gaps in the emergency response – in Jhalokhat district, for example, 60% of needy families (over 30,000 households) are not covered by any existing or planned emergency shelter distribution.

<sup>24</sup> Data has been gathered mainly by UN-HABITAT from national NGOs with an operational presence in the cyclone-affected areas.

<sup>25</sup> In the longer-term, this must include establishing a clear timeframe for identifying and distributing government-owned ‘khas’ land and closing policy loopholes that favour rich landowners over landless people in the re-allocation of land.

<sup>26</sup> Situation Report from the Disaster Management Bureau (Ministry of Food and Disaster Management), 27 November 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh: Damage, Loss and Needs Assessment for Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction, prepared by the Government of Bangladesh with the support of the World Bank, the United Nations and the International Development Community, February 2008.

<sup>28</sup> See forthcoming WFP and Partners Emergency Food Security Assessment.

<sup>29</sup> BD24, 2007, Chief adviser asks NGO to go soft on Sidr survivors, 4 December  
<http://www.bdnews24.com/details.php?id=92913&cid=6>

<sup>30</sup> For example the January ‘Workshop on post-Sidr Damage and Rehabilitation Need Assessment Programme’.

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<sup>31</sup> See for example 'Minutes of the IASC inter-cluster meeting', [http://lcgbangladesh.org/derweb/cyclone/Cyclone\\_coordination/2007-12-20\\_%20IASC%20Inter-Cluster%20meeting%20minutes.pdf](http://lcgbangladesh.org/derweb/cyclone/Cyclone_coordination/2007-12-20_%20IASC%20Inter-Cluster%20meeting%20minutes.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> For example the 2005 Mozambique floods. Extensive World Bank studies concluded that a "lack of community participation and inappropriate designs were identified as major weaknesses in the shelter/housing response to the 1998 floods." See ALNAP-Provention: [http://www.odi.org.uk/alnap/publications/pdfs/ALNAP-ProVention\\_flood\\_lessons.pdf](http://www.odi.org.uk/alnap/publications/pdfs/ALNAP-ProVention_flood_lessons.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Dissanaïke Tharuka, 2006, In the Wake of Disaster, Report, Himal South Asian, November, Volume 20, No. 9

<sup>34</sup> Department for International Development (2004) op.cit.

<sup>35</sup> IRIN, 2007, Global: Drowning in urban disaster, IRIN, 18 September

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