

**Background**

Shyamnagar Upazilla of Satkhira district has been in the focus of the news media after the devastating cyclone of 2009 that wreck havoc in the sub-district on 29<sup>th</sup> May. Cyclone *Aila*, as the catastrophic event is termed by experts, perished more than 190 lives in the coastal belt of Bangladesh leaving millions of people to spend daily life in unprecedented state of misery.

The condition was not better for the ones who survived. With damaged crops, washed away livestock, uprooted houses and inundated shrimp ponds, people were left under the open sky without the most basic necessities like food, water, clothing and basic sanitation. Persistent absence of jobs for the *hand to mouth* class forced many daily laborers to migrate to neighboring districts in search for a better living.

Till date the international community, donors, NGOs and other civil society members have been continuously engaged in providing relief and rehabilitation support to the victims of the cyclone. The European Commission Humanitarian Aid & Civil Protection (ECHO), especially, has been actively funding the various schemes on providing food security, shelter, WatSan and livelihood.

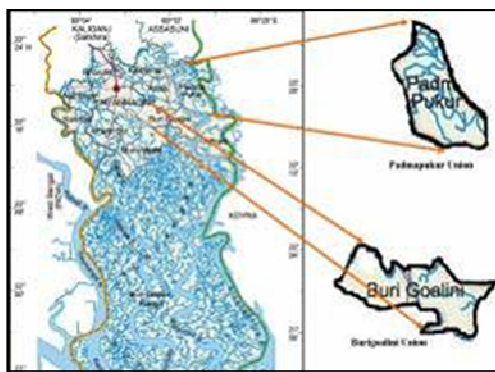
After more than three years of nurturing, the affected community is starting to return to normalcy. With money earned from various *cash for work* and *cash for training* interventions, the benefitted households are buying boats, planning saline tolerant seeds and re-building their houses. However, absolute immunity from further torments of cyclone or tidal surge is a distant dream. The people of Shyamnagar

apprehend the looming threat and are actively involved in preparing themselves to confront another *Aila*.

**Rehabilitation to Resilience**

The Sixth DIPECHO Action Plan for South Asia is one of the humanitarian projects funded by ECHO to instill a culture of disaster preparedness among the highly vulnerable class of Bangladeshi people. DIPECHO VI, as the project is commonly referred to, is being implemented by an alliance of six international NGOs, otherwise termed as the NARRI consortium.

Out of the 10 districts of Bangladesh where DIPECHO is currently in progress, ActionAid is implementing the action plan in four: Dhaka, Pabna, Khulna and Satkhira. The



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works of DIPECHO revolves around four focus areas: Capacity Building, Community preparedness, Mitigation and Responsiveness of institutions.

Keeping in line with its principle objective, DIPECHO VI is progressing to enhance the resilience of communities and institutions. In Shyamnagar, ActionAid—along with its local partner NGO, Jagrata Juba Shangha (JJS)—is involving School Management Committees (SMCs), Community based Organizations (CBOs) and Union Disaster



Management Committees (UDMCs). On the household front, the project is creating awareness among ultra poor segment with particular focus on socially marginalized women, persons with disability, elderly people and children.

### Aiming Awareness

Shyamnagar commemorated the National Disaster Preparedness Day 2012 along with the whole country on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 2012. For the dwellers of the sub-district, the day began with remembering the horror of Cyclone *Aila* but finished with the hope of greater ability to confront disasters.



### News Feature

The day began with the residents of Shyamnagar being delivered with a different newspaper. Today's daily had a special page dedicated on Cyclone Preparedness. The article focused on key measures to be taken at different stages of cyclones: Warning Phase, during cyclone onset and post disaster phase. The page also bore messages from the Honorable Member of Parliament, the Upazilla Chairman and the elected representatives of Burigoalini and Padmapukur Union.

### School Sessions

The first school event of the day took place in Kalbari Government Primary School. The children turned up early in anticipation of the occasion that was being planned by the teachers and DIPECHO staffs for the past couple of weeks.

After paying tribute to the nation and singing the

national anthem, the student set out to march on the neighboring roads in a rally chanting the slogan, *May the Disaster Preparedness Day be successful*. Subsequently, they gathered in the largest room on the school to watch a cartoon film that was developed by ActionAid in earlier phases of DIPECHO to impart knowledge of disaster preparedness.

"Students are the key to our future and if they know how to face disasters our future is pretty safe," assured Moksed Ali the head teacher of the school. "Since the children love such events, other NGOs in the area should take up similar activities for schools."

A few kilometers away, Neeldumur Secondary school was engaged in a similar fanfare. Considering the age of the grown up children, however, two more events were added to the day's schedule. A brief orientation from the head teacher, Mr. Suresh Mondol focused on the prevalent

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issues of fatalism and the importance of awareness among students.

This was followed by an Essay competition on the topic "Disaster Preparedness." The results revealed that students were obviously preparing for weeks in advance for the exam and gave the teachers a very hard time selecting the three best essays. A total of six essays from two sections of students were awarded by the School Management Committee.



“Of course I have been reading about preparedness in various billboards, but what I learned during the past two weeks for the competition was absolutely different,” explained the eighth grader, Sadia, after being awarded for the best essay.



“I’d always want to remember what I learned from writing this essay, and when I grow up, I’d help my family prepare for storms,” committed Mushfiq, the winner from the tenth grade.

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### Community Events

As the sun approached the zenith, the community people were visiting in a Disaster Fair that was arranged in Pakhimara Cyclone Shelter of Padmapukur Union of Shyamnagar. The fair was open to all and the Honorable chairman graced the occasion with his presence towards the end.

The fair focused on creating awareness about ideal behavior during the three phases of cyclones: Early warning, cyclone onset and post disaster. Portable stoves, candle, oral saline, pressed rice, match box, etc. were at display along with a brief description placed adjacent to the items explaining how to preserve and use them. In addition, various pictures were on display portraying how community people should organize and



prepare themselves to confront disaster threats better.

“This is a far better way of helping people than doing just relief and rehabilitation works,” informed the honorable chairman of Padmapukur, Mr. Amzadul Islam. “The people are learning how to save themselves. They didn’t know it during *Aila* so they suffered. Since they know it now, I believe the losses are going to be lot less.”

The fair was followed by a pot song (traditional Bengali song with images rolling behind the performers to better convey the message being sung). A local artist was involved who has been staging pot songs for years now. With his group, he customized a song that specifically addressed the key issues of disaster preparedness.

The show went on for around 45 minutes and the response was overwhelming. “I arranged a community announcement yesterday because I feared not too many people will turn up,” confessed Abdul Baki, the project officer of JJS. “But when the drums started beating, people simply flooded in from all directions. I arranged some volunteers but even then we had difficulties managing the crowd.”

Towards the end of the show, the community people requested the partner organization to organize more shows like this. They explained that they attended various trainings on disaster preparedness but learning in the form of a pot song was very entertaining. ActionAid assured the people

that more shows are coming up and will hopefully be staged on the largest play ground of Padmapukur.

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### Community Radio

A radio show was earlier recorded to be aired on the Preparedness Day. The only community radio of Satkhira district *NALTA Radio 99.2 FM* stepped forward to take the initiative. Throughout the show, a discussion between a moderator and the chairmen of Padmapukur and Burigoalini Union focused elaborately on the transition of Shyamnagar from a relief dependent area to a resilient one. They spoke in detail about the roles of NGO and civil society towards creating a resilient community; one which prioritizes Disaster Risk Reduction over Emergency response.

“With the help of DIPECHO we carried out Community Risk Assessment and learned that we need a lot of non-structural measures like creating awareness and building coping capacity,” explained Nazrul Islam the honorable chairman of Burigoalini. “I hope DIPECHO will also be in Shyamnagar next year with even better activities.”

“We usually broadcast programmes on issues like agriculture, WatSan, fisheries, health and others,” informed Abu Sufian, the production manager of Radio Nalta.

“This is the first time we have had an opportunity to air something on disaster preparedness. We wish DIPECHO conducts a long term Community Radio programme on disasters so that all the people under our radio network coverage can benefit.”

### Local TV cable

*Shyamnagar Cable Operator* manages the provision of cable TV network to all the households of the area. To be a part of the National Disaster Preparedness Day, the operator agreed to telecast a cartoon film multiples times throughout the day. The cartoon depicted the story of a school girl *Laily* who travelled with a fairy to various disaster prone places and advised people on taking preparedness measures.



“Cartoons are usually fun for children only, but when I saw *Laily* even I got interested,” said “Sanjit Ray, the manager of *Shyamnagar Cable Operator*. “Next year I hope DIPECHO makes something for adults as well.”

### Concluding Remarks

The people of Shyamnagar have so long been dependent on relief aid that it was impossible to picture them standing on their own feet. “These people have no steady livelihood so I would always think that they will never respond to non-relief based activities of DIPECHO,” recalled Abdul Baki, the project officer of DIPECHO from JJS. “However, when I saw how enthusiastic the community people were today, my mind totally changed. If DIPECHO continues here for a few more phases, the people of the sub-district will become absolutely self-reliant *Inshallah* (God Willing).