



A Collective Stand for Resilience:

A case study to amplify community voices and build community resilience in Madarganj, Jamalpur, Bangladesh

By Bangladesh Red Crescent Society

Context

In Madarganj Upazila of Jamalpur District, Bangladesh, life is shaped by the immense force of the Brahmaputra River. Each year, seasonal floods destroy homes, wash away crops, and sweep livestock into fast-moving currents. Families rebuild on fragile, flood-prone soil, only to experience the same devastation again just months later.

Floods routinely interrupt children's education for weeks at a time, while older people and the sick struggle to access health services as rising waters cut off entire villages. Women bear particularly acute burdens, often wading through waist-deep water to collect safe drinking water or protect their children during sudden evacuations.

For decades, humanitarian aid reached Jamalpur only after disasters had already struck. Decisions about relief and recovery were made far from the communities themselves. Assistance was often distributed through blanket approaches that overlooked the most vulnerable, including widows, persons with disabilities, and households headed by older people. Despite their resilience, the people of Jamalpur had few structured opportunities to influence or shape the programs intended to support their recovery.

Resilience Initiatives

To address these challenges in vulnerable areas such as Madarganj Upazila, the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) has provided sustained support through a series of complementary resilience programmes:

- The Integrated Resilience Programme (IRP) (2018–2021) established a strong multi-sectoral foundation, strengthening disaster risk reduction, water and sanitation, and livelihood systems across Jamalpur District.
- Building on this work, BDRCS has continued its engagement through the Reinforcing Rural Resilience Programme (RRRP), implemented since July 2021. Under the RRRP, flood-focused interventions include the construction of flood-resilient homes, tube wells, and sanitation facilities on raised plinths, alongside support for women-led livelihoods designed to withstand recurrent flooding.
- In parallel, Charpakardah Union in Madarganj was selected for community resilience development under the Sustainable National Societies and Resilient Communities (SNSRC) programme, also launched in July 2021. Through this programme, more than 21,000 community members have demonstrated increased disaster preparedness and resilience.

Across all these initiatives, Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) has been a core approach, ensuring that programmes were shaped by community priorities and remained accountable to the people they are intended to serve.

Embedding CEA

Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) places community members at the centre of every action, recognising them as equal partners whose diverse needs and priorities shape each stage of an intervention. BDRCS has fully integrated this approach into its strategies, policies, and procedures, in line with wider Movement commitments.

"CEA is not something we do separately, it is the way we design, deliver, and evaluate every program."

Md. Anwar Hossain, Assistant Programme Officer, Jamalpur



Community consultation facilitated by BDRCS.

Building Inclusive Community Networks

The first step was to put in place systems where no family would be left unheard. To achieve this, BDRCS staff and volunteers formed micro-groups based primarily on neighbourhood proximity, ensuring that members shared geographical and social connections for easier communication. Each group included households from diverse backgrounds, including women-headed families, older people, and persons with disabilities, to promote inclusiveness. Group leaders were selected through community discussions in which members

nominated individuals they trusted to represent their concerns and relay them to the Ward Disaster Management Committees (WDMCs).

Through courtyard meetings and focus group discussions, as part of a participatory needs assessment, people described their struggles in detail. Women emphasised the repeated destruction of crops and the need for small-scale gardening that could survive flooding. Older people highlighted the lack of safe sanitation and drinking water during the rainy season. Youth called for stronger preparedness training to help keep children safe during emergencies.

“We have eight micro-groups with leaders. I inform the leaders, who then inform their group members. That way, no family is left out.”

Kamrul Hasan, Community Volunteer

The feedback collected was not simply documented; it directly shaped programme plans in real time. When communities highlighted the need for flood-resilient housing, BDRCS prioritised the construction of raised plinths for homes, latrines, and tube wells. Women’s requests for alternative livelihoods were incorporated into plans for homestead gardening and poultry farming. Concerns about fairness in aid distribution led to measures such as publicly displayed beneficiary lists and open community consultations. These discussions ensured that communities were directly involved in shaping priorities, selection criteria, and programme design.

“Seeing our ideas reflected in plans gave us hope. It felt like the program belonged to us.”

Farida Khatun, Community Member

The transparent planning process not only aligned activities with people’s priorities but also demonstrated accountability by showing how each voice influenced final decisions. In practice, communities often raised several needs at once. Instead of decisions being made externally, BDRCS facilitated open discussions where community

members determined together which initiatives should come first and which could follow later. Simple prioritisation exercises — such as ranking proposed activities with cards and group dialogue — helped guide these decisions.

Reaching consensus was not always easy. Different groups had different priorities, yet the discussions fostered mutual understanding and strengthened collective decision-making. This participatory approach ensured that planning and design reflected not only community needs but also community-led choices, clearly demonstrating how CEA was embedded in practice.

Community-Led Decision Making

With strategies in place, community-led planning shifted into community-led action as BDRCS worked closely with communities to turn ideas into action. Families rebuilt homes on raised plinths, allowing them to remain dry during seasonal floods. Tube wells and sanitary latrines were installed on elevated platforms, ensuring access to safe water and sanitation even in flood season.

Livelihoods were reimagined as women received seeds, tools, and training to establish homestead gardens on raised beds. Poultry cages were introduced to protect chickens and ducks during floods, securing a sustainable source of income and nutrition.

“Before, floods destroyed everything we planted. Now, vegetables grow year-round, and we can sell them in the market.”

Nurjahan Begum, Community Member

Preparedness efforts were also strengthened. Volunteers organised drills in schools and communities, teaching families how to evacuate quickly and safely with children and livestock. Early warning systems — using loudspeakers and door-to-door visits — ensured that people had the time and information they needed to protect themselves.

Concerns over aid distribution were addressed by publicly displaying beneficiary lists and involving micro-group leaders in monitoring. This helped create a fairer and more transparent process.

“Now, when relief comes, we know who it will reach and why. That has reduced tensions in the community.”

Abdul Karim, Community Elder

Feedback and Accountability

Monitoring was community-driven, with multiple feedback channels ensuring that concerns were heard and addressed throughout implementation. Complaint boxes were placed in public spaces, hotline numbers were widely shared, and micro-group leaders continued to serve as links between households and Ward Disaster Management Committees (WDMCs).

One clear example of accountability in action came during a road construction project. A landowner feared the new road would encroach on his land. Instead of pushing forward, the BDRCS team and WDMCs re-measured the land with the landowner present, ultimately proving his land was unaffected. With his written consent secured, the project proceeded smoothly.

“When we planned a road, one person objected. We re-measured, proved his land wasn’t affected, and gained his consent in writing.”

Md. Anwar Hossain, APO, Jamalpur

Such practices demonstrated that feedback was not symbolic, it directly influenced decisions and outcomes, reinforcing trust and legitimacy.

Collective Learning and Reflection

CEA also created space for collective learning and reflection. Communities recognized that blanket aid distributions had given way to more targeted, needs-based support, ensuring resources reached those most at risk. School based preparedness sessions ensured children gained the knowledge to protect themselves, while the formal inclusion of persons with disabilities in Ward Disaster Management Committees (WDMCs) marked a step toward inclusive leadership.

“CEA brought us together to decide who needs help most. Now, everyone is included.”

Farida Khatun, Community Member

The transformation was not just in infrastructure or livelihoods but in the relationship between people and the institutions supporting them.

“CEA showed us that our voices can change decisions. We trust because we are heard.”

Rahim Uddin, Community Member

Monitoring and learning continued beyond distribution, with communities reflecting together on what had changed and what still needed attention. Follow-up visits, group discussions, and satisfaction checks helped identify gaps and successes, particularly in longer-term activities. Feedback trends were reviewed and discussed with community leaders, leading to adjustments in targeting and delivery. This ongoing learning reinforced the value of CEA, showing communities that their experiences and opinions continued to shape decisions over time.



Community members working together to build the embankment.

Key Lessons

Some community members were initially hesitant to voice opinions or complaints, fearing it might affect their eligibility for future support. To address this, BDRCS organised orientation and awareness sessions to explain that feedback — whether positive or critical — was essential for improving programme quality. In cases where limited literacy made written tools such as complaint boxes difficult to use, verbal feedback was encouraged through micro-group leaders and courtyard meetings. Seasonal flooding and communication barriers also slowed information flow and follow-up visits, but these challenges were reduced through closer coordination with WDMC members and local volunteers. These efforts not only enhanced transparency but also strengthened community ownership and trust in the process.

Some key lessons have been listed below:

1. **CEA as the Foundation:** Embedding CEA across every stage of programming turned people from recipients into decision-makers, making resilience initiatives more effective and locally owned.
2. **Feedback Strengthens Trust:** Feedback channels like complaint boxes, hotlines, and micro-group discussions ensured issues were addressed in real time, building confidence in BDRCS and reducing community tensions.
3. **Inclusive Planning Works:** Actively involving women, persons with disabilities, and older people in decision-making led to more practical and equitable solutions for housing, water, and livelihoods.
4. **Community-Driven Prioritization:** By deciding together which initiatives should be implemented first, communities ensured that

the most urgent needs were addressed while maintaining ownership of the process.

5. **Sustainable Livelihoods Build Resilience:** Women-led homestead gardening and poultry farming provided a reliable income and food security, even during recurrent floods.

Way Forward

1. **Community-Led Monitoring Teams:** Train local volunteers to use simple checklists to monitor flood infrastructure (e.g., raised plinths) and report findings to BDRCS, empowering residents to hold programs accountable and suggest improvements.
2. **Seasonal Feedback Event:** Organize annual community fairs where residents share flood experiences and propose solutions through discussions or visual displays, directly informing livelihood and infrastructure interventions.



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