



From Silence to Strength:

A case study to amplify community voices and build community resilience in Paikgacha, Khulna, Bangladesh

By Bangladesh Red Crescent Society

Context

Paikgacha upazila, in Khulna District, sits on the frontline of Bangladesh's climate crisis. Surrounded by tidal rivers and canals, communities struggle daily to access safe drinking water. Saltwater intrusion has seeped into farmland, turning once-fertile rice fields into barren land and leaving families without reliable harvests. Repeated cyclones - Sidr, Aila, and Amphan among them - have destroyed homes, breached embankments, and displaced thousands, isolating villages from markets, schools, and health centers for weeks.

These challenges have not affected everyone equally. Women often bear the heaviest burden, walking long distances to collect scarce and frequently unsafe water. As crops fail and income sources

collapse, many men migrate for work, leaving women to manage households alone in increasingly fragile conditions. Older people, persons with disabilities, and single mothers face even greater obstacles, and their perspectives are often overlooked in community discussions and planning processes.

Amid these challenges, the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) has worked alongside these communities, supporting their efforts to cope with disasters, improve access to safe water, and participate more actively in planning for their own safety and wellbeing. Together, BDRCS and community members continue to strengthen the spaces where local voices can influence the programmes designed for them.



Location: Paikgacha, Khulna

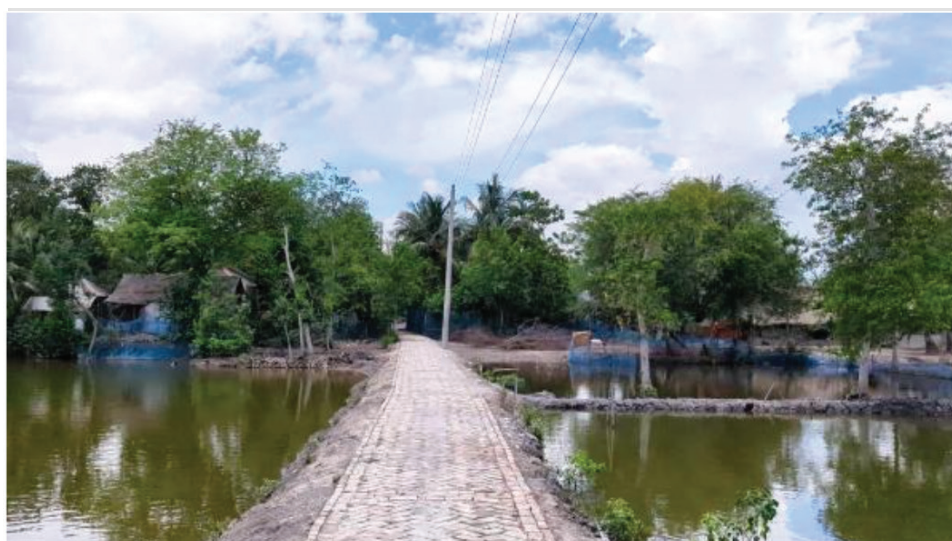
DRR Initiatives

The Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) has launched several transformative initiatives tailored to the specific needs and

challenges of coastal communities. One of these is the Coastal Disaster Risk Reduction (CDRR) Program – Phase III (2022–2025). The project focuses on three main objectives: strengthening institutional response readiness, enhancing community disaster preparedness, and building capacity for effective service delivery.

In Paikgacha, Khulna, the programme has centred on supporting alternative, women-led livelihoods (such as homestead gardening and poultry), prioritizing essential infrastructure repairs (including roads and bridges), and strengthening early warning systems. CDRR Program – Phase III has recently been extended as the Coastal Disaster Risk Reduction & Climate Action (CDRRnCAP) initiative. At the same time, the ongoing Climate Resilient Clean Cities (3C) Project addresses urban risks by targeting more than 2,435 households - over 12,000 people - in slum communities in Wards 21 and 22. This project places particular emphasis on integrated solid waste management and WASH improvements.

Across all these initiatives, Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) principles have been central to ensuring that solutions remain relevant, trusted, and aligned with the needs of the communities they are meant to support.



Road Development by BDRCS Through Community Consultation

Embedding CEA

Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) places community members at the heart of every action, recognising them as equal

partners whose needs and priorities guide each stage of an intervention. BDRCS has integrated this approach across its strategies, policies, and procedures, ensuring communities are meaningfully heard and actively involved in shaping programmes.

In Paikgacha, CEA was embedded throughout the entire programme cycle. During assessments, staff carried out inclusive consultations, door-to-door surveys, focus group discussions and observations to build a clear understanding of local vulnerabilities. These findings directly informed planning and design, ensuring that proposed actions aligned with community-identified priorities. Beneficiary selection was finalised through further consultation, allowing residents to validate lists and ensure fairness. Throughout implementation, feedback channels such as hotlines, and complaint boxes remained active, while the Community Development Committee helped monitor progress and maintain transparency. Monitoring visits and evaluation activities included questions on satisfaction and community perceptions, enabling residents to influence adjustments and contribute to ongoing learning. In this way, CEA was not an add-on but a consistent practice from start to finish.

Following this approach ensures that programmes continually adapt based on community insights, strengthening accountability and supporting communities to become active decision-makers rather than passive recipients. As Assistant Programme Officer Iliyas Shah explains, this commitment has enabled the people of Paikgacha to take charge of their own future, turning challenges into action through a structured and inclusive process.



Creating Safe Spaces for Inclusive Dialogue

BDRCS created safe spaces for dialogue where staff used inclusive facilitation techniques, such as separate small-group discussions, female facilitators for women's groups, and circle seating to reduce hierarchy.

These courtyard meetings and community discussions were led by Ward Disaster Management Committees (WDMCs) and Community Volunteers, community-level groups that support disaster risk reduction (DRR) and broader resilience efforts at the ward level.

This approach ensured that women, men, youth, older people, and persons with disabilities could share their experiences and propose solutions, helping to capture diverse needs and capacities, an essential step in the CEA approach before programme planning.

We made sure women, persons with disabilities, and the elderly were not just present but heard in every discussion.

This kind of CEA action built trust, showing communities that their voices mattered. For many, it was their first opportunity to speak directly with local leaders and programme staff. These consultations shifted the dynamic, empowering communities to shape their own future. Communities in Paikgacha faced isolation due to poor infrastructure and economic hardship caused by declining traditional farming. BDRCS leveraged these CEA approaches to ensure that community feedback guided the entire programme, and staff, project teams, and volunteers consistently observed a noticeable increase in community acceptance of the accountability and participation mechanisms that had been established. This acceptance was a clear signal that trust in BDRCS had grown.



Turning Community Priorities into Action Plans

The community preferences and community priorities directly informed program design. When communities raised concerns about isolation and access issues, BDRCS prioritised road and bridge

repairs. Women's requests for alternative livelihoods led to training programs in homestead gardening, poultry, and duck farming.

Seeing our suggestions turn into plans gave us hope.

Kamrul Islam, a local farmer

Monthly follow-up meetings and micro-group leadership ensured transparency, with every decision communicated back to the community. This openness reinforced confidence that programs reflected community priorities. In this way the need for analysis and engagement of the community can be ensured - an important commitment of the CEA approach.



Delivering Resilient Solutions

With plans in place, BDRCS supported women with training and starter kits for homestead gardening and poultry farming. Within months, kitchen gardens began to flourish, providing vegetables for

families and for sale in local markets, while poultry flocks supplied both eggs and income.

Homestead gardening has changed my life. I feed my family and earn money from the market.

Sajeda Khanom, a community member.

This economic empowerment reduced reliance on male migration. Infrastructure improvements, including repaired roads and bridges, ensured safer access to schools, markets, and healthcare facilities, even during the monsoon season. Volunteers used mosques, loudspeakers, and household visits to share early warnings, enabling timely evacuations.

We're no longer cut off. We feel safer and more connected.

Abdul Sattar, a community member

Adaptations based on community feedback resulted in tangible positive impacts for residents of Paikgacha. Community members reported feeling safer and better able to access essential services that had previously been out of reach.



Community-Driven Monitoring

Monitoring was community-driven, as both BDRCS and community representatives jointly tracked progress during project implementation. Community members participated in regular review meetings and could raise feedback at any time through various channels, including complaint boxes, hotline numbers, and micro-group leaders. This ensured that concerns were addressed promptly and that communities remained actively involved throughout implementation.

“The feedback boxes made us feel valued. Our complaints ensured aid reached those who needed it most.”

Shanti Rani, a community member.

When traditional aid distributions overlooked some vulnerable households, communities reported the issue through these feedback mechanisms. In response, BDRCS revised the selection process and

shared the eligibility criteria, along with the names of selected beneficiaries, with Paikgacha residents. Community members were then invited to review the list and confirm that those most in need were included, reinforcing fairness and accountability.

CEA also fostered continuous learning. School-based sessions taught children about disaster preparedness, helping to embed resilience in the next generation. Ward Disaster Management Committees (WDMCs) included persons with disabilities as formal members, strengthening inclusive leadership.

“We now have a person with a disability on our WDMC, ensuring everyone’s needs are considered.”

Iliyas Shah, APO, Paikgacha, Khulna Unit

As communities reflected on their experiences, they recognised how they had moved from being aid recipients to becoming agents of change. They described this shift as stemming from the opportunities they had to share their opinions, provide feedback, participate in discussions, engage in decision-making, and take forward community-led actions. Rina Begum, a community member, captured this shift:

“CEA turned our struggles into strength. We’re building a future we trust.”

Rina Begum, a community member

By mainstreaming CEA approaches throughout each stage of the programme, Paikgacha residents have become leaders in their own resilience, driving inclusive solutions through dialogue, feedback, and collective action. From rainwater harvesting to women-led livelihoods, they’ve transformed challenges into opportunities. With BDRCS as a facilitator, Paikgacha now stands as a model of community-led change.

Key Lessons

Implementing CEA across all stages was not without its challenges. At first, some community members were hesitant to share feedback openly, fearing it might affect their access to support. BDRCS addressed this by organising awareness sessions explaining that all feedback—both positive and critical—was welcomed and would help improve project outcomes. Because written feedback tools like complaint boxes did not align well with community preferences and communication practices, verbal feedback through micro-group leaders and community meetings was encouraged instead. Additionally, logistical constraints and difficult terrain caused delays in monitoring visits, which were later resolved through better coordination with local volunteers. These experiences helped strengthen mutual trust and improved the effectiveness of community-driven monitoring.

- 1. CEA as the Foundation:** Embedding CEA across all stages made the resilience work more inclusive and effective. This meant making the CEA minimum actions mandatory throughout every phase of the programme cycle assessment, planning and design, implementation, and monitoring, ensuring that CEA was consistently integrated from start to finish.
- 2. Feedback Drives Impact:** Accessible feedback channels such as complaint boxes, hotlines, and micro-groups enabled communities to raise concerns and suggest improvements in real time. As a result, aid distributions became fairer, overlooked households were included, and infrastructure projects, such as roads and bridges, were adjusted based on community needs, ensuring greater relevance and sustainability.
- 3. Inclusion Builds Resilience:** By actively involving women, persons with disabilities, and older people throughout the programme cycle, BDRCS ensured that diverse perspectives shaped priorities and decisions. This inclusive approach not only strengthened the relevance of the interventions but also helped create solutions that were more sustainable, equitable, and responsive to the needs of those most often left out of planning processes.
- 4. Visible Pathways of Change:** Community priorities drove each stage of decision-making, with BDRCS facilitating the process and

helping transform local insights into concrete actions. This clear chain, from community voice to implemented solutions, led to measurable improvements in livelihoods, health, and access to services, demonstrating how community-led approaches can deliver tangible, lasting change.



Contact information

For more information on this case study please contact:

Email: info@bdracs.org; feedback@bdracs.org

Call hotline: 16226