Water, water everywhere but... The ‘98 Bangladeshi Floods

Slum stilt houses in the outskirts of Dhaka

The author, Julian Francis is Disaster Preparedness Delegate for the IFRCS in Dhaka. He gives a first hand account of the effect of the devastating floods in Bangladesh last year and the response of flood victims, local communities and indigenous and international humanitarian agencies.

During the last two weeks of August 1998 it hardly rained in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. The floodwaters, which had been affecting up to two thirds of the country for the previous 50 days, were nevertheless still affecting the comfortable residential area in which I lived, close to Dhaka's diplomatic area. Everywhere was full of stinking stagnant water with small boats providing a 'taxi' service in my road.

Impact of the floods

Two million people in the capital had been driven out of their homes by the floodwaters. The foul very slow moving water all over Dhaka city and district were potentially lethal, as sewage had overflowed into it. The thousands camping in the flood shelters were facing horrific sanitary conditions. At least 30 million people in the country had been affected in some way and it was estimated that a minimum of 10 million would need assistance. Worst affected were the landless labourers in the rural areas and the daily labourers/slum dwellers in the towns and cities who had both been without work for a long period. Their families stranded on embankments and in government buildings had been forced to live in temporary and very unhygienic conditions.

Effects on livelihoods

A landless agricultural labourer would, normally, at this time of the year, be earning about 60-70 taka a day transplanting paddy (rice) seedling. The flood waters had put that paddy land ten feet under water making this kind of work hard to find. If he owned any animals he would have to spend his days collecting water hyacinth with which to feed them as the price of cattle fodder has doubled in the last few weeks. The fruit trees that his wife would normally tend close to their homestead would have been destroyed by the floods. Rather than go in search of the elusive relief supplies of the government and NGOs, many of these people had decided to borrow money even if the 'interest' was as much as 8 per cent per month. Many families had already resorted to panic selling of livestock so that the price of meat came down on the Dhaka markets. Forlorn and sodden pointed stacks of rice straw (normally used as animal fodder) stood in the water. It was unlikely that any of this would be of much use except to plough in to the soil for the next crop, and in any case most of the livestock had been sold or swept away by the floods.
The Relief Response

Many thousands of the worst hit people received food and medical assistance from the Bangladesh Red Crescent Societies (BDRCS). The food supplies included flattened rice (which is ready to eat), with some molasses, dal (lentils) and high-energy biscuits. These food items were distributed through the Red Crescent district units who were ably supported by members of Red Crescent Youth and other local volunteers. The BDRCS had also organised and deployed 100 medical teams, each consisting of a doctor, a paramedic and at least one male and one female volunteer. The problems they encountered included diarrhoea, hepatitis, typhoid, skin diseases and, in some places, measles. I visited Rampura Road where invaluable clean water from CARE and mouthwatering 'kichuri' from the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) were being made available to slum-dwellers who were still seriously affected by the filthy stinking waist-deep water and who were unlikely to get any work for some time to come. The food relief centre was expected to remain open for 3 or 4 weeks. To come and go between their slum houses and Rampura Road the people either waded through the sewage-ridden water and risked serious fungal and other infections or took a small boat at the cost of 3 to 5 taka each way, which they could not really afford. Only the lucky ones received a ration card from the BDRCS.

Local community response

The rice and dal (lentils), the base materials of 'kichuri', had been provided through the international appeal launched by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRCS), but the rest of the costs of the other nutritious ingredients had been borne by some fifty local Life Members of the Red Crescent. These included, salt, spices, onion, potato, pumpkin and green papaya. Local fundraising has been very vigorous in Red Crescent Units up and down the country. It is important to recognise that the bulk of assistance for the most vulnerable came from the local people themselves rather than from abroad.

Food distributions

Food grains was in the country in sufficient quantity, and more than adequate supplies were in the pipeline as a result of the World Food Programme's (WFP) quickly organised procurement programme. However, despite the flexibility of the World Food Programme, their suggestions to increase the numbers on the government Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) from 300 to 1000 per flood affected Union, though accepted by the government, took a long time to implement as food supplies were not allocated and moved to Union level in time. Consequently, the number of VGF cards per flood-affected Union remained at 300 families who during August and September were each entitled to receive 16 kgs of food grains per month. In a visit to parts of the districts of Bogra and Jamalpur, I saw some distributions under the VGF scheme. What I found was that most of the distributions were quite well organised, and that the hundreds of people, mostly women, waiting in the burning sun, were clearly poor and hungry. The amount of rice available, however, was insufficient for the number of beneficiaries already identified and selected correctly by members of the Union 'Parishads'. The planned allocation of 16 kgs per family per month had gradually been reduced to 10 and then 5 kgs and at one centre allocations were of 5 or 3 kgs, depending on the size of the family. This clearly seemed inadequate for a family to survive based on nutritional guidelines, which recommend an adult maintenance diet of 400 gms of rice or wheat per day along with other commodities like pulses, oil and salt. These amounts translate into some 42 kgs per month per family. It was obvious that until sufficient work was available and/or the harvest came, there would be a lot of hungry people looking for assistance.

Recovery

After nearly 3 months, the floodwaters had gone down and the levels in the rivers were all below their respective danger levels. There were no reported diarrhoeal epidemics. People who had been homeless for many weeks were dismantling their temporary shacks perched on embankments, or vacating flood shelters and going home. Though late, rice fields were being planted, where at all possible, and at a furious pace. Though the signs were of
recovery, in areas I visited e.g. Bogra, Jamalpur and Kurigram districts, I can say that many people were still not getting enough food to eat.

**Seeds and the special role of women**

Once the floodwaters had receded people were trying to look to the future and immediately seeds of all types were being procured and sowed, especially the nutritious and fast-growing vegetables like spinach, radish etc. Many families did not have seeds as, farmers had already planted some of the seeds for seasonal vegetables in mid-July before the floods, and, most farming households do not keep seeds that have already been planted. The damp damaged many seeds, which were still in the houses during the flood. Marginal farmers were forced to sell the Aman rice seeds when they were unable to cultivate them. In many areas women have always been the keepers or guardians of seeds, and as soon as the floodwaters began to recede they started assessing the situation and sharing the seeds available between them. The cultural practice of ‘sharing’ has been crucial. The unprecedented floods have been able to demonstrate the enormous importance of local seeds and indigenous varieties. For example, the disaster has proved again the wisdom of rural women who are in favour of old Aman varieties that can be grown in flood conditions, instead of the dwarf varieties of HYV (High Yielding Variety). In preparation for the Rabi crop (winter season), the seeds they recommended were being accepted by others. The whole selection process of seed is profoundly strengthening the indigenous knowledge of the community to cope with disasters. The selection itself is a highly technical task, and impossible for the formal sector to understand and rationalise because of the subtlety of the practice and logic to meet the diverse need of the different households. The result is, there is no one single variety or one kind of vegetable for everyone. Each and every farming household has different and diverse needs. These are met through reciprocal exchange and appreciation of each other's specific needs. In case one woman has a particular variety, which she cannot plant because of standing water in her field, she offers this seed to another family. Sharing of seeds is part of the farmer's culture. They believe that if you share seeds with your neighbour and friends, the yield will be higher. If the farmers keep seeds in their stores, while other farmers have none, then it will bring misfortune to the farmers since she/he deprives others. The culture of sharing indeed ensures diversity, a system that also ensures in situ conservation. It follows, therefore, that women are likely to be very suspicious of vegetable seeds in fancy packs, even though that is the only way in which organisations can organise seed distribution.

**Reflections**

In a way I am in a privileged position to be able to look back and see if we have learnt from the mistakes we made at the time of the Bihar Famine (1966-67), the drought in western India (1972-73), the food crisis in this country in 1974 and the aftermath of the 1988 floods. There is no doubt that the government administration system now right down to Union level is much better than in 1974, but it is in the area of coordination where there is still much to do. In some Thanas and Unions there is good co-ordination between local authorities and NGOs, in others it does not exist at all, and we hear reports that NGOs still deliver relief supplies to flood-affected...
people without informing the Union Parishad or Thana officials. We must also make sure that those who have nothing and cannot access anything are not left out. Given a collective will and good co-ordination there need not be any starvation, but to ensure this a lot of people need to wake up, sit up and take notice.

The section on Seeds was taken from a report by the research and policy organisation, UBINIG on the work being done by Naya Krishi Andolan. For further details, interested readers can contact: UBINIG, 5/3, Barabo Mahanpur, Ring Road, Shaymoli, DHAKA-1207. Email: (Farida Akhter) ubinig@citechco.net

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