

Promoting Rights-Based Disaster Risk Reduction in North Bihar

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Background

The flood-prone rural communities of north Bihar are among the state's most vulnerable areas. And the Dalit inhabitants of villages in this area, whose only source of income is daily wage labor that disappears during several months of flooding every year, live permanently on the wrong side of self-sufficiency. Even when earning, they do not make enough to feed their families, and during flood season they have no alternative but to fall prey to manipulative moneylenders, entering a debt cycle from which they cannot recover in the remaining months of the year. In these conditions this population is traditionally bereft of both the resources and the will necessary to prepare for future disasters.

Scope of the Project

Following a vulnerability assessment survey conducted in 2009, in 2010 IDF initiated a project targeting 3,000 households (out of a total population of 5,000 households) in 10 villages in the Katra block of the Muzaffarpur district in north Bihar. The initial phase of the project was carried out over one year.

Goal

The goal of this project was to build capacity within Dalit communities to reduce their vulnerability to disasters and hazards, live more sustainable and dignified lives, and assert their rights and entitlements.

Objectives

- To establish an exclusive network of NGO partners to advocate for disaster risk reduction (DRR) in north Bihar.
- To strengthen the community-based structure in the target communities through the formation of self-help and other key groups.
- To enable the marginalized and deprived communities in the target villages to reduce their risks and vulnerabilities to floods through community action.
- To create a replicable and sustainable DRR model at the regional level in collaboration with the NGO network partners.

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Activities

SHGs

Twenty self-help groups (SHGs) were formed in the 10 target villages, specifically to address the issue of DRR. Meetings were held every two weeks, focusing first on the rationale for disaster preparedness and subsequently on practical measures the groups could implement, such as encouraging each family to put together a safety kit containing essential items such as food rations, valuables, documents, flashlight, rope, and so on. In addition, capacity-building sessions were held for SHG representatives to teach them how to take advantage of available government social welfare schemes, notably the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), which guarantees 100 days of employment (or, failing that, an unemployment allowance) to all workers.

Village disaster management committees (VDMCs)

A new village disaster management committee (VDMC), comprising 10 to 15 members, was established in each village. In addition to SHG members and other activists, each VDMC contained one teacher, one Anganwadi (government health center) worker (AWW), one accredited social health activist (ASHA), one auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM), one Panchayat Raj Institution (PRI) member, and one rural medical practitioner (RMP). Meeting monthly, the VDMCs began by conducting focus group discussions and social and resource mapping to determine community needs and existing resources, such as safe storage areas. They then held contingency planning sessions to develop an action plan for use in the next flood, setting up subcommittees focusing on education, health, and social welfare aspects.

Capacity-building sessions for all VDMCs provided training in first aid and other DRR-related measures. VDMC members were also taken to the Tarumitra Ashram biodiversity center to learn about options for climate change adaptation, such as cultivating yams as an emergency food supply and experimenting with medicinal plants to treat diseases that commonly arise in the wake of flooding without delay.

Lok sahyog sthal

One *lok sahyog sthal* (LSS), or information center, was set up for all 10 villages. The LSS was planned as a resource open to the whole population, containing all the materials and data from all meetings and training sessions on DRR, as well as information on available government DRR benefits.

Rescue teams

Rescue teams of four to five people were established in each village. Each team comprised three to four swimmers and one first aid provider. All teams underwent special training and executed mock drills, as well as attending capacity-building sessions. Teams were provided with life jackets and public address systems, as well as elementary first aid kits that they were then required to resupply themselves.

Grain bank

A community-supported grain bank was established in a suitable location in each village. Grain was purchased using funds collected for this purpose at SHG meetings.

Mission DRR

Mission DRR, a network of nine NGO partners including IDF, was established to share information about their respective DRR projects, assimilate best practices and strategies, and advocate for policy changes in the process of DRR implementation at the state level.



Meeting monthly, the network focused on a rights-based approach and the importance of strengthening the capacity of Dalit communities, especially women, to mitigate flood-related losses. The network also conducted a pre-monsoon workshop, evaluating the previous year's experience to determine which measures—including some traditional ones—had worked and which had not. Sessions on advocacy and policy were held

to help the network partners work with state agencies to translate their disaster mitigation and management policies into action and to become familiar with existing checklists and guidelines for action before, during, and after flooding.

Outcomes

Following is a selected list of outcomes of the intervention for the reported year:

- 20 SHGs, drawn mainly from the Dalit population, were formed in the target villages for the primary purpose of focusing on DRR.
- VDMCs were formed in all 10 target villages.
- An LSS was established and provided a platform for discussions and exchange of information in relation to government welfare schemes.
- A disaster management resource bank was created containing a wealth of relevant information and guidelines.
- The rescue kit provided at the village level was put to effective use during the flood period, specifically the emergency childbirth kit ensuring safe delivery for women.
- About 100 civil society organizations joined Mission DRR.

Achievements and Challenges

The major accomplishment of this project was its success in reframing DRR as a fundamental issue of rights and inclusion, rather than a problem to be solved simply through mechanical measures. Mission DRR was effective in communicating its rights-based message on DRR to

important stakeholders such as journalists, representatives of donor agencies, contacts in government line departments, Bihar Inter-Agency Group members, and intellectuals. In addition, women who participated in the project were able for the first time to take on real responsibilities for their families and gained confidence in their overall abilities, well beyond issues related to DRR, as a result. The LSS materials proved a useful community resource in increasing awareness of government welfare schemes. The main challenges encountered during the project were the difficulty of working with some of the stakeholders who automatically participated in the VDMCs by virtue of their positions, and the resistance of some SHGs to focusing on disaster preparedness rather than thrift and credit activities that would bring more immediate tangible benefits.

Case Study

Traveling upstream

Forty-five-year-old Kishore Pasawan, a member of the scheduled Dusadh caste, lives in the village of Siswara in the Katra block of the Muzaffarpur district, which is surrounded by the Baghmata and Lakhandevi rivers that seriously affect life in the region during the monsoon months of June to November. He earns his livelihood from working on leased farmland, which makes him extremely vulnerable to the recurring floods that destroy the crops. His wife and four children, who study in the government school in the vicinity, are dependent on him.



During the monsoon season Kishore, along with everyone else, has been dependent on the sorely inadequate number of boats to ferry him up to two kilometers upstream to a dry place where he can defecate, find work, purchase food and medicine, and fetch fodder for livestock. In such conditions people have no option but to defecate standing in the river itself.

After hearing about the formation of the VDMC and its role in DRR at community meetings held by IDF project staff, Kishore expressed interest in becoming a member. At the next monthly VDMC meeting, members decided that in order to be better prepared for the next flood season, they would ask the block authorities to provide a boat. They met the block development officer (BDO) three times, but with no results.

Subsequently, Kishore led VDMC and SHG members to meet an influential local leader, Shri Vishwanath Singh, with whom they shared their concerns. They then put pressure on the BDO, who suggested that to solve the problem, the village should purchase a boat and the government should make weekly payments of Rs 200 each to two people for rowing the boat. Kishore soon found a secondhand boat for Rs 12,000, and its arrival caused great excitement amongst the inhabitants of his hamlet and those nearby, who would now have a mode of

transportation to meet their basic needs. For the remaining months of the monsoon season the villagers at last had a reliable way of traveling upstream.

Despite his initiative in bringing relief to hundreds of families, the government still has not repaid Kishore the money he laid out for the boat. With support from VDMC members, Kishore is now mobilizing his fellow villagers to force the government to fulfill its obligations to him and scores of other villagers in the Katra block whose payments are a year overdue.