

## Coping with Riverbank Erosion Induced Displacement

### Summary of Key Issues

Riverbank erosion has a devastating impact on the lives and livelihoods of the affected people. Although the people affected by riverbank erosion deal with their condition with courage and fortitude and develop survival strategies based on indigenous knowledge, a lot can and should still be done to improve their lives and livelihoods. There are various phases through which the affected people must struggle and a variety of coping mechanisms that they employ. Women are also adversely affected by riverbank erosion and the burden of displacement falls disproportionately on them. Instead of attempting to alter the course of nature it is time to address the institutional mechanisms needed to help the affected people to cope with displacement and their material and social loss. Institutional responses have been analysed and this paper recommends that a concerted effort be made by the Government of Bangladesh and the civil society institutions in addressing the plight of the affected people. Creative programmes need to be developed to cater to the needs of this marginalised group. There should also be increased emphasis on promoting a rights based approach so that the affected people can stake a claim on the state.

This policy brief is based on a study titled *Coping with Displacement: Riverbank Erosion in Northwest Bangladesh* by C R Abrar and S N Azad. The study was commissioned by RDRS, Bangladesh and was supported by the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation, Dhaka.

#### Background

Each year tens of thousands of people in Bangladesh are made internally displaced through riverbank erosion. The northwest region is particularly prone to such erosion and is also one of the most economically depressed regions in the country. Riverbank erosion contributes immensely to the process of marginalisation of a large number of people, displacing households and adversely affecting their social and material circumstances.

Riverbank erosion does not draw the attention of the policy makers or the civil society in the same way that other natural disasters do, although experts say that more than 500 kilometers of riverbank face severe problems related to erosion. Between 1982 and 1992, 106,300 hectares of mostly agricultural land was lost to erosion around the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Middle Meghna rivers.

About 1 million people are directly affected by riverbank erosion each year and landlessness in these areas could be as high as 70%. Affected households are frequently forced to settle in more disaster prone areas where displacement can occur several times. On average each of the households studied were displaced 4.46 times.

A majority of the affected households do not have access to institutional support and are generally overlooked. Suitable

intervention strategies need to be developed that address the problems of the affected people and take on board the different coping mechanisms adopted by affected households and communities. Impoverishment and marginalisation are exacerbated by five consequences of riverbank erosion (a) loss of income (b) lack of adequate land (c) inadequate food production (d) high rates of unemployment and (e) lack of livelihood options.

#### Defining Characteristics of Displaced People

The Abrar and Azad research (2003) was based on in-depth interviews with 200 respondents who had the experience of displacement in the preceding 6 months. The majority were illiterate with large families. As in other rural areas of Bangladesh agriculture was widely practiced by the affected households before their displacement due to riverbank erosion.

There were several categories of people affected by riverbank erosion as defined by their place of residence. Each category had varied access to land, education, sanitation, communication facilities and institutional support. This affected their experiences of coping strategies differentially.

#### Impact of Displacement: Gains and Losses

Those affected by riverbank erosion lost out in many ways, both in material terms as well as in social terms. Some lost family members; others lost homes, crops, land, trees, poultry and livestock. In general there was a reduction in assets, savings and income. Lack of access to employment was reported as the single most important loss in the post-displacement situation.

Displacement brought about major changes in family structures, particularly through labour migration. Violence also increased within families and this led to increased divorce, while lack of income caused some male members of households to abandon their families. Other negative ramifications included loss of privacy and insecurity for women and children and psychological problems. In some areas, access to education was affected.

In many cases, however, there was improved access to clean water, health care and education after movement and some experienced an improvement in income and livelihood.

#### Coping Mechanisms and Survival Strategies

Riverbank erosion is very unpredictable. It can cause vast and rapid destruction or at times can be deceptively slow process contributing to state of denial. This hinders strategising for movement. The residents of the riverbank were, in some cases, able to read the flow of the river and predict the likely places that would be washed away. On average people moved 4 days prior to the washing away of their homes. Some moved as early as 90 days in advance while others had no chance to make an advanced move.

#### Short term coping mechanisms

The households experiencing riverbank erosion first send away their women members and children to safety. Those that had access to boats and manpower could move their belongings while others would lose everything. Households in most cases extended help to one another.

**Immediate needs** hinge on access to food, water and shelter. Post-disaster settlements were only temporary and households would soon move on. Only a very few had the resources to buy land and start afresh.

**Sale of property** and personal belongings was a common phenomenon for households trying to prepare for and survive after displacement.

**Place of re-settlement** often depended on kinship and social networks. Often groups or whole communities banded together to move. Sometimes the decision on where to shift was taken by the community as a whole or by the village elders. Other factors also impact on the choice of destination. They included cost of living, employment opportunities, NGO and available

government programmes and the continuing hope of return. Permanent relocation out of the area was not an option for most of the displaced that did not have enough resources. Many were also attached to their ancestral land and would not want to move far.

**Sources of help** were scarce and came predominantly from relatives, neighbours and friends. Only a few identified NGO support. There was no formal institutional support in the immediate post-disaster situation. In general neighbouring communities provided great help, but some original residents would look down upon the IDPs.

**Some relief materials** were supplied by government organisations and NGOs, but none of the support they received was long-term and much of it was insubstantial. Few of the affected people received immediate help from the Government. The general perception was that the government allocated relief materials, such as food and blankets, but corruption by local functionaries hindered the allocation of such relief.

#### Long term survival strategies

Credit and loans played a vital role in the community during distress situations. Many took loans from neighbours or relatives. Credit from banks was not easily accessible for most of the affected people as the ownership of land was a precondition for loans. Some NGOs ran credit schemes in the area, but these also required the ownership of some material belonging and a permanent address. The loans were also considered inappropriate as they were of quite short term, the rate of interest was considered to be high and it was not always easy to invest in the avenues specified by credit awarding agencies.

**Occupational mobility** is an important index of the demographic changes that were being brought about by riverbank erosion. Riverbank erosion and the disruption to livelihoods of both the rich and the poor had led to a diminishing scope for employment for the whole community. Many households that once owned large parcels of land became landless and subsequently dependant on wage labour or switched to some petty trade.

**Migration** often became an important livelihood strategy for the displaced households. The depressed state of the economy and the periodic food shortages coupled with the severity of floods and erosion, left little choice. At peak harvesting and sowing seasons there were major rural-rural labour flows from the affected areas, while others moved to the city for long-term employment. Families left behind were vulnerable and the female-headed households have to rely on remittances, family networks and their own employment.

**Affiliation to institutions** such as government organisations, NGOs, and Community Based Organisations was scarce. The remoteness of their current areas of shelter often made it difficult for NGOs to reach the affected people. Female members of households were affiliated to NGOs more than their male counterparts.

**Community Based Organisations** were set up in some areas and savings schemes were mobilised. But women were unable to join those schemes or set up their own due to a lack of income.

**Suggestions** for long-term Government support and management ranged from the building of bridges and embankments to setting up industry in the area and providing agricultural subsidies and support. A number mentioned that they needed long-term development and employment more than relief.

#### Impact on Women

The ultimate burden of managing households through the many phases associated with riverbank erosion fell disproportionately on women. General vulnerabilities such as food insecurity, lack of access to safe drinking water and health affected the women in gender specific ways. Women also faced more social problems in the post-displacement situation than their male counterparts. Female-specific problems included meeting demands for dowry that led to early marriage, lack of privacy, sexual abuse and abandonment.

During the disaster situation women often extended their support to men in their tasks, but received little support in return. In post-displacement situations women's tasks either increased, as women took on paid work, or decreased due to loss of property, kitchen-garden and livestock. Increased vulnerability and work load led to tremendous psychological stress. The migration of male members and the loss of community life also caused problems.

Employment processes were also at work for the displaced women. Women not only gained more say in decision making at home, but traditional gender divisions of labour were often transformed in the face of uncertainties and women were able to move into the public sphere.

The women were determined to exercise their right to vote and be recognized as a specifically vulnerable group. They were increasingly becoming engaged in building social capital through collective initiatives and many were working collectively to claim entitlement to government assistance.

#### Institutional Response

There was a major gap in coordination among the various government agencies and also between the government and non-government initiatives.

#### Government

The government's initiatives included (a) relief distribution (b) Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) and Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programmes that target destitute women, (c) allocation of khas land (d) settlement programmes targeting destitute women and (e) public health management.

The above programmes are often inadequate, disorganised, ineffective and adhoc and thus there is much scope for improvement in all forms of government interventions. There is also the absence of any effective resettlement policy.

#### NGOs

Very few national NGOs have specific programmes targeting those affected by riverbank erosion. Most of the national and local level NGOs concentrate on credit schemes, but some also work on health issues.

Recently, Oxfam, CARE and RDRS (a national NGO) have developed well coordinated plans for programme intervention. NGOs need to enhance their activities significantly in respect to social capital building.

There are also some social, economic and organisational impediments for effective institutional response. The frequent devastation of communities and their associations makes them unreliable investments. NGOs need to devise innovative strategies to deal with this.

#### Policy and Programme Recommendations

**'We can't fight against the forces of nature; we have to develop strategies to fight the consequences'**

**The Government of Bangladesh** should include riverbank erosion in its five year plan and in its framing of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. It should also develop a national habitat policy that would ensure the shelter needs of the tens of thousands of people displaced each year. A database needs to be developed to assess the magnitude of the erosion and the number of people affected.

Local government organisations should play the lead role in all phases. Decentralisation of power and increased responsibility and accountability to local government bodies is an important aspect to reduce vulnerability and provide a quicker and more efficient response. Local level institutions should also have a special budgetary allocation to mobilise resources.

Efforts should be made to coordinate all aid and development interventions.

#### Needs Based Policy Recommendations.

##### Phase 1: Preparation

- Early Warning System: Regular monitoring at critical periods and the use of local knowledge.

##### Phase 2: Disaster Management

- A rapid response team to provide logistical support.
- Evacuation announcements and assistance provided in advance of major disaster.
- Designation of relocation sites well in advance to allow preparation of necessary infrastructures.
- Emergency medical supply and mobilisation of appropriate health care providers.

##### Phase 3: Rehabilitation

- Re-settlement advice, linking settlement with income generating activities and skill development.
- New housing that is easy to dismantle and shift.
- Agricultural aid including marketing support.
- Credit schemes and support services for off-farm activities.

##### Phase 4: Livelihood Management

###### The Government should:

- Introduce insurance schemes at soft premiums to minimize the affects of loss of property.
- Develop a banking policy that addresses the needs of the affected people.
- Develop the health care facilities and services in the erosion prone areas and introduce a pilot boat based roving hospitals.
- Introduce mobile schools and teachers.
- Offer skill development training, the erosion prone areas and introduce a pilot boat based roving hospitals.
- Introduce mobile schools and teachers.
- Offer skill development training.

###### NGOs should:

- Consider writing off and/or deferring the payment of debts (depending on severity of situations) of the affected households as a measure of their sectoral responsibility programme.
- Get involved in providing flexible credit schemes that take into account the ground realities that riverbank erosion affected households face.
- Reorient their activities to target men, women and children in education and skills development.
- Introduce low cost irrigation management schemes
- Encourage the participation of the ultra poor and affected people during idea generation.

#### Rights Based Policy Recommendations

Affected people should be encouraged to demand access to education, health care, water, sanitation, and work opportunities as a matter of right, not as charity by the state.

- The government should create an enabling environment through necessary framework and changes to facilitate affected people to establish their rights and seek redress.
- A coalition of civil society institutions and individuals needs to be formed to engage in advocacy and mobilise support for the rights of the affected people.
- Rights-based awareness raising initiatives should be organised especially information on rights as accorded by the law.
- Rights should also include the right to be consulted and to participate in policy development, the right to be informed and the right to access credit.
- People's organisations need to be created to help the displaced transform their strength into political capital.

Institutions need to begin seeing the mitigation process as a matter of right to the affected people. They need to be viewed as agents rather than simply subjects of rehabilitation programmes. Only by constant promotion of their rights, can their interests be protected.

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#### Further Reading

C R Abrar and S N Azad 2003 *Coping with Displacement: Riverbank Erosion in Northwest Bangladesh*. RMMRU, RDRS and the North Bengal Institute, Dhaka and Rangpur.

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