



BANGLADESH RED CRESCENT SOCIETY
বাংলাদেশ রেড ক্রিসেন্ট সোসাইটি



Community Driven Cyclone Recovery in Bangladesh: A Case Study



May 2025

Introduction

When Cyclone Remal made landfall in Bangladesh on 26 May 2024, it left behind a trail of destruction that affected over 4.6 million people across 19 districts. Homes were flattened, water sources contaminated, and essential infrastructure such as latrines and healthcare facilities crippled. In the face of this devastation, the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS), in partnership with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), launched an emergency appeal covering immediate emergency assistance and later the recovery phase.

This case study highlights the recovery efforts in two of the hardest-hit districts, Pirojpur and Khulna. The BDRCS, with support from the IFRC, implemented a community-driven approach centred on conditional cash grants for shelter, water sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and livelihoods.

From the onset, the response was guided by Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) principles, ensuring that affected individuals were not just recipients of aid but active participants in shaping the support they received. As the emergency phase concluded, the BDRCS transitioned into an integrated recovery programme that placed community voices at the heart of decision-making. The programme upheld transparency and trust through participatory planning, open communication, and consistent feedback mechanisms. This approach not only strengthened the relevance and effectiveness of the response but also empowered communities to lead their own recovery with dignity and resilience.

This case study documents the recovery experience, challenges, and lessons learned, demonstrating how placing affected communities at the heart of humanitarian efforts can enhance dignity, resilience, and local ownership.

Community at the Core: Driving Recovery Through Participation

Rather than delivering aid through a top-down model, BDRCS prioritized a participatory approach that placed communities at the heart of the recovery process. This began with the formation of Community Development Committees (CDCs), that served as the primary interface between the humanitarian response and the affected population. In both Pirojpur and Khulna, CDCs were formed through participatory processes, either through elections or community consensus, ensuring local trust and fairness. These committees were not merely advisory; they were empowered to make decisions, oversee implementation, and ensure accountability.

The CDCs became the backbone of the recovery effort. They facilitated beneficiary selection, monitored construction quality, resolved disputes, and ensured that the voices of the most vulnerable were heard. Their legitimacy, derived from community trust and

democratic selection, enabled them to mediate conflicts and make difficult decisions about resource allocation tasks that are often fraught with tension in post-disaster contexts.



“The election was participatory, in front of everybody. Due to my honesty and being a known figure, everyone selected me to solve problems during support disbursement.”

Zakir Ali
CDC President, Chandipur, Pirojpur

Inclusive Participation: Women and Marginalized Voices Through Community Engagement

A feature of the Cyclone Remal recovery operation was its emphasis on inclusive participation, with a strong focus on empowering women and engaging marginalized groups. Recognizing that women often face the impact of disasters yet remain underrepresented in recovery processes, the programme created deliberate spaces for their involvement. In Pirojpur, women took the lead by forming informal purchasing groups, a collaborative initiative where they pooled resources and shared knowledge to negotiate better prices for construction materials. These efforts increased economic efficiency and challenged traditional gender roles, promoting women's leadership and strengthening community solidarity.

One convincing example is Hasina, a widow who lost her home. Identified through community discussions, she received financial assistance, technical support, and manual labour through collective community action. Her journey from displacement to becoming a poultry farmer illustrates how community-driven engagement can restore dignity, build resilience, and promote independence, especially for those too often left behind in conventional recovery models.

Participation and Choice: Community-Driven Cash Programming

In the Cyclone Remal recovery operation, cash-based programming was more than just a financial tool; it became a mechanism for community participation, empowerment, and trust-building. By shifting from traditional in-kind aid to conditional cash grants, the

programme enabled affected families to make decisions tailored to their specific needs, environments, and priorities. This approach honoured community voices and promoted autonomy, as households discussed shelter options, sourced materials locally, and even contributed their own labour or savings to improve outcomes. Such inclusive decision-making fostered a strong sense of ownership and dignity among participants.

The cash modality also encouraged collaboration, with many beneficiaries forming purchasing cooperatives to negotiate better prices and coordinate construction efforts. These are some clear signs of community-led innovation. While some initial concerns about misuse of funds appeared, the programme's transparent disbursement system using mobile money helped dismiss doubts and gradually built community trust.



“There were rumours inside the community where people at first thought corruption may happen, but finally, everyone received the exact amount committed.”

CDC Leader

This transformation from suspicion to trust was a testament to the power of transparency and consistency.

Participation and Transparency: Community-Driven Communication

Effective communication and feedback mechanisms rooted in community participation were central to the success of the operation. BDRCS employed a multichannel communication strategy that was designed with a strong understanding of rural information flows. This included mobile phone notifications for direct communication, public postings in community spaces like mosques and markets for transparent beneficiary validation, twice daily community meetings for consultation and problem-solving, and printed pocket cards/stickers with hotline numbers to ensure broad accessibility.

These communication efforts were complemented by robust feedback and complaint response mechanism (FCRM). Complaint boxes were strategically placed in culturally appropriate and accessible locations such as mosques, markets, and community centres, decided through community consultation. These boxes were opened in public with both CDC and BDRCS staff present, ensuring transparency and trust. CDCs acted as vital information brokers, offering practical guidance on construction quality, material

sourcing, and programme procedures. Their close engagement ensured that community members understood their rights, processes, and channels for raising concerns.

The system's effectiveness was evident in real-life problem solving. For instance, when a vendor overcharged a beneficiary, the issue was promptly addressed through collaborative efforts by the CDC and BDRCS, and the individual was able to recover the excess payment. Such examples demonstrate how participatory feedback systems can reinforce accountability and empower communities. However, some challenges remained, such as misunderstandings of the feedback mechanism or misuse due to internal community tensions, highlighting the ongoing need for communication clarity and trust-building.

The box is opened periodically in front of CDC and RC staff. After that, they were addressed with everyone relevant, and steps were taken to solve the issues."

Zakir Ali
CDC President



When I was overcharged for tins, the community supported me right away. They advised me to speak with the Red Crescent staff. After discussing the issue together, we all went to the market and got my money back."

Manik, Pirojpur

Remaining Challenges with Community Initiative

Despite its successes, the operation faced notable challenges. Skilled labour shortages delayed construction, prompting communities to adapt by paying advances or coordinating labour schedules. Financial constraints led many to supplement grants with personal resources or loans. Seasonal migration complicated beneficiary assessments, sometimes excluding eligible households. These challenges were addressed with creativity and resilience, as communities established informal labour-sharing arrangements, relied on family networks for financial support, and actively advocated for the inclusion of overlooked households.

Coordination with external service providers also proved challenging. In one case, a beneficiary completed shelter construction but had to wait over a month for electricity connection, highlighting the need for considering this type of collaboration from the very beginning of the planning phase. These experiences highlighted the value of systems thinking in humanitarian response - emphasizing that success relies not only on what is delivered, but also on how interventions align with and strengthen broader infrastructure and governance systems.

Lessons Learned

Community Leadership Enables Lasting Change

Empowered and accountable CDCs play a vital role in recovery and development, leveraging local knowledge to drive inclusive and sustainable progress.

Dignified Support Through Cash Assistance

Transparent and well-supported conditional cash grants empower communities to make informed decisions, promoting dignity, innovation, and self-reliance.

Inclusive Communication Builds Trust

Multi-channel FCRM ensure all voices especially marginalized groups - are heard, strengthening trust and transparency.

Participation Strengthens Social Cohesion

Meaningful involvement of women and vulnerable groups leads to more equitable outcomes and fosters unity, inclusion, and shared ownership.

Integrated Recovery Fosters Resilience

Aligning recovery with local governance and infrastructure systems enhances sustainability and bridges the gap between humanitarian response.

A Model to be Continued in Future

The Cyclone Remal recovery operation stands as a compelling example of how principled, community-centred humanitarian action can achieve sustainable, equitable, and dignified outcomes. By placing the community at the centre, BDRCS demonstrated that building back better is most effective when co-creating with those it seeks to serve.

This case study affirms that when communities are empowered as partners, not just beneficiaries, they become the architects of their own recovery and the factors of their future resilience. The lessons learned from Pirojpur and Khulna offer a roadmap for future humanitarian interventions, where trust, transparency, and local leadership are not just ideals, but operational imperatives.

Next Steps

Strengthening and scaling up the role of Community Development Committees (CDCs) beyond the recovery phase can help embed local leadership in long-term disaster preparedness and development efforts. Continued investment in inclusive feedback mechanisms and digital cash delivery systems will enhance accountability and responsiveness in future crises. Additionally, partnerships with local authorities, private sector actors, and research institutions should be deepened to bridge gaps in service delivery, foster innovation, and document evidence-based models for resilience. These steps will ensure that communities not only recover but thrive - more empowered, better prepared, and more connected to the systems that support them.

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