

WOMEN AT THE FRONT LINE - reducing disaster risk

Women play a primary role in providing assistance to their family and the community in disaster prevention activities, as well as during and after disasters. However, the crucial role women play in sustaining household and community economies and social networks is not often fully recognised. Gender equality is, thus, an important aspect in disaster risk reduction. Without it no sustainable risk reduction can be achieved.

GENDER AND DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Cordaid wants to mainstream and further intensify a solid gender sensitive perspective in its disaster risk reduction objectives. Implicit to Cordaid's community managed disaster risk reduction programme people are involved that reflect the composition of the community: men, women, young people, elders and more. Still, getting women involved appears at times challenging. If women are present in certain committees, this does not necessarily mean that they are actively contributing. The challenge then remains to assure women are actually actively participating.

One solution that Cordaid has implemented is to set up separate women's committees. Amongst themselves, women often feel more comfortable to raise their voice. A representative of the women's committee, for example an older, powerful woman, can then reflect the opinion of the women when discussing disaster risk reduction with other village committees.

CASE STUDY DIRE DAWA, ETHIOPIA

In 2006, Cordaid started its community managed disaster risk reduction in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. This town, situated along the river, suffers regularly from flash floods, which increase in frequency in the last decade. This leads to loss of lives, livelihoods and displacement.

The town is surrounded by hills. Cordaid's local partner JECCDO worked with men and women in the Genda Ada neighborhood, situated at the river bank, to better prepare for flooding.

Mrs Safo Alisho (50), living in one of the four target communities: *'The devastating floods of August 5, 2006 that came at 3:00 in midnight, spared my children but took away our farm which was our only means of livelihood. We had nothing to feed our children, let alone send them to school. My husband could not endure seeing his children go hungry and so he disappeared. This worsened my problem, but I decided to remain with my children until death does us part. Then, I began to sell vegetables in the nearby market for other traders but the profit from this could not feed me let alone my seven children.'*



The CMDRR process in Dire Dawa consisted of several activities. First, there was capacity building of riverine communities, consisting of training them in CMDRR and making a risk assessment and action plans with them. Through this process, the communities' attitude changed. They now felt more joint responsibility for communal vegetation on hills. Efforts were undertaken to conserve the environment and saving groups of women were established to improve the economical resilience of the community. The hills were rehabilitated by the community. The rehabilitation of the hills in its turn helped to diversify people's livelihoods to make them more resilient to the floods.

Safo: 'CMDRR project helped us to organize ourselves into Self Help Groups (SHGs). In our saving group, which has 20 members, we meet once a week, save money and take out loans. We built stone bund terraces and planted seedlings and transferred them to the hill. And within two years, we managed to rehabilitate the hills that we had left ragged and barren. The terraces kept the water from running down the hills thereby preventing erosion and allowing water to percolate. 'The CMDRR project gave me and 50 other victims of the flood training on how to fatten sheep and goats and support our livelihood in the process. They also gave us four heads of sheep. I fattened the sheep and sold two of them for 1300 birr. With the money, I began to buy tomatoes in large boxes and sell at retail price right there in the market. I found this profitable; I could then feed my children and managed to send them to school.'

Another risk reduction measure was the creation of a community based flood early warning system. This system consisted of mobile communication with upstream communities on information about rainfall or floods occurring upstream. Also, measures were taken to reduce the runoff water from the hills. The water was diverted to farms. Through this, vulnerability to flood was reduced. A regional forum was established that works with upstream as well as downstream communities.

Because the community now became more organized and more united, lobby with the government for support was more feasible. The government was invited and visited the areas in which the CMDRR process was going on to see how the communities had improved their situation through their own efforts. This motivated the government to discuss DRR plans and options with the community. The municipality supported the construction of a 420 m long flood retention wall to protect farms along the river.

Women play a vital role in all disaster risk reduction interventions in their community. They are now empowered to save themselves and their livelihoods in times of disasters.

About Cordaid

In emergency situations, the poorest are often the most vulnerable. **Cordaid** (Catholic Organisation for Relief and Development) believes that the people hit hardest by disasters know best where the threats are, what they can do about them, and what support they need to better protect themselves. Thus, Cordaid works with local organisations and authorities to support communities to identify disaster risks themselves - both from natural hazards and man-made hazards (e.g. conflict) - and to work on preventive and mitigation measures. This community managed disaster risk reduction (CMDRR) approach, increases communities' resilience, prevents or mitigates disasters and safeguards their lives and livelihood assets. For more information, visit www.cordaid.nl.