

ADVANCED CENTRE FOR ENABLING DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Pilots Brief 1

Information: A Lifeline for Vulnerable Communities

Because poor communication contributes to the disaster vulnerability of poor communities, the Advanced Centre for Enabling Disaster Risk Reduction (ACEDRR) at the DHAN Foundation undertook four pilot projects that explored ways to share knowledge and establish communication systems to save the lives of poor people in disaster situations.

Often in disasters, the people most affected are the very poor people living in the far reaches of rural areas. Because they are hard to reach by any means of communication, disaster responders often say that these people live in the “last mile.”

One way to reduce the disaster risk of people in the last mile and to mitigate the impacts of hazards on their lives is to establish reliable information systems. These are systems that will get the right information to the right people, at the right time.

The Advanced Centre for Enabling Disaster Risk Reduction (ACEDRR) of the Tata-Dhan Academy has commissioned four pilot projects that examine communications for disaster risk reduction.

Though Tamil Nadu is one of India’s more developed states, literacy rates in some parts of the rural areas are low. For example, in Kottampatti, literacy rates average 67 percent. In some areas of Ramnad, only 41 percent among the women are literate. In these areas, communication infrastructure is poor.

More importantly, many people do not rely on the information sources they do have because they feel the content is not applicable to their daily lives and needs.



YOUR NEIGHBOUR'S VOICE: REDUCING VULNERABILITY TO DISASTERS THROUGH COMMUNITY RADIO

by Elizabeth Stevens, Oxfam America

Manoj Prabhakar's radio address on water management is delivered flawlessly, and when he steps out of the studio, he is congratulated warmly—especially by his grandmother, who puts her arms around him.

Manoj is 13, and his audience is the village of Mangalamapatti, India. The studio is an information centre—a single room that serves about a hundred purposes for five communities, and the machine used for sound editing is the only computer in town.

This is community radio, where a village fashions the programs it wants and needs, and fast-talking DJs and advertisers need not apply.

Diverting floods and planting trees

The Advanced Centre for Enabling Disaster Risk Reduction (ACEDRR) of DHAN Foundation, an Oxfam partner, has helped launch a pilot community radio project to serve around 100,000 people in rural settlements of Madurai district, because they see its potential in improving disaster response and risk reduction at the village level.

When emergencies like floods and fires strike remote communities, friends and neighbors are the first responders. Notifying a village quickly of an emergency in a neighboring community can make all the difference in how effectively help is mobilized. And localized weather and flood forecasts can help natural hazards from becoming community disasters.

“If we get information about rain upstream, we will take some precautions” says Sethurajan, a farmer whose community has a reservoir for irrigation purposes. “We'll open the sluices to divert the flood; we'll cut off the big bunds to divert the route so excess water can be drained off.”

But in communities that struggle with the everyday disaster of poverty, anything from a poor crop to the loss of a farm animal to a serious illness can create a household emergency, so villagers are eager for information about anything and everything that can improve the security and well-being of their families.

Men seem enthusiastic about radio shows on outbreaks of livestock diseases and on the latest agricultural techniques. One suggests that local radio could help revive kudi maramaithu, the ancient practice of careful community maintenance of the village reservoir and water works.

Women, says a radio enthusiast named Vijja, like programs about health, legal matters, and the importance of tree planting. “We get a lot of information about our daily lives,” she says. “As women, we are happy about that.”

Radio: It is practical

The radio is a medium that ensures that almost everyone has access to information, no matter what their age and reading level.

“I'm illiterate, but I'm learning so much,” says Manoj's grandmother Podai amma.

Although televisions here are widespread—gifts from the state to households in even the smallest, poorest villages of Tamil Nadu—they're not as practical as radios in that you have to stop what you're doing to watch TV.

“With radio,” says Sethurajan, “we can keep on working.”

Young women take the lead

Each radio station has an operator—a person who functions as the primary producer and announcer. The operator gathers ideas for program topics, carries out research, interviews guests, edits sound tracks, and ensures that the program reaches its target audience. The job has generally fallen to young women—to their delight.

“Through this job I'm learning so much and getting exposure to so many things,” says Bhuvaneswari. “I'm learning, so I'm happy.”

In traditional villages where young women are kept close to home, the level of independence this job requires sometimes raises concerns among parents, but when operator Amutha Rani completes a program and joins an admiring crowd in the village square, her mother looks on with unmistakable pride.

“The community respects the operators,” says a young woman named Raji, who speaks from experience. “Everyone should be a community operator.”

The essence of community radio

The afternoon's programming ends with music. It's a song about poverty, and the words and melody are sad, but the woman's voice is beautiful, and listening to her in the village square at the close of the day is a lovely experience. Only a few of us know who's singing—our Oxfam colleague Mareeswari, who made this recording earlier in the day—but word spreads quickly.

“This is the difference in community radio,” says ACEDRR director Sangeetha Rajadurai. “Everyone is curious to know whose voice they're hearing.”



Through this job I'm learning so much," said Bhuvaneswari, an operator at one of the village information centers in the Kottampatti block. Operators like Bhuvaneswari have produced over 90 hours of radio content, 14 of which focus specifically on disaster risk reduction.

As a result, many rural people remain out of the loop and vulnerable to disasters.

By helping villages create useful local communication systems and relevant content, these pilot projects have already lessened the vulnerability of poor people to disasters.

They have also given the professionals of DHAN Foundation a chance to implement innovations, determine their success, and share them with other communities.

Similarly, these pilots could inspire disaster risk reduction professionals across India to better use communications technology as well as traditional communications methods to create a lifeline for people in the last mile.

Community Radio

ACEDRR supported DHAN Foundation practitioners to bring community radio to the Kottampatti block of Tamil Nadu.

Instead of starting from scratch, staff worked through the social infrastructure that DHAN had already established.

For one, DHAN was already working with the farming communities in the Kottampatti block through its Kottampatti Tank Farmers Federation. Tank farmers rely on tanks—manmade ponds that collect rain—to irrigate their crops.

Secondly, DHAN has established village information centers (VICs) across Tamil Nadu. VICs are run by a trained community operator and are supplied with a computer and internet connectivity. Supported by operators, people can use the VICs to look for jobs, send and receive emails and get the news.

Kottampatti block is prone to frequent flooding and droughts. The Tank Farmers Federation, with support from DHAN, decided that a community radio station would help lessen vulnerability to these hazards.

While DHAN has established a community radio programme before, this project would be different, because it would produce specific disaster risk reduction programs. The radio would also become an early warning system through which people could receive information about oncoming hazards.

DHAN Foundation practitioners installed radio production equipment at local VICs and trained VIC operators to be the reporters on stories relevant to their villages.

Localized weather information allows farmers to take the proper precautions. “If we get information about rain upstream,” said Sethurajan, a tank farmer, “we will open the sluices to divert the flood. We’ll cut off the big bunds to divert the route so excess water can be drained off.”

“Through this job I’m learning so much,” said one young woman, a VIC operator named Bhuvanewari. Operators like Bhuvanewari have produced over 90 hours of radio content, 14 of which focus specifically on disaster risk reduction.

In the future, the programs will be broadcast from the community radio station at the Tankfed Farmers’ Federation office. But, since broadcasting licenses take up to two years to get, the VICs are narrowcasting the radio stories back into the villages by sharing programs over large speakers, audible to everyone in a two kilometer radius.

According to DHAN practitioners, locally produced content is a lifeline for community broadcasting. As producers, local people create content with minimum expense, and ensure that the content is of interest to their neighbors. When local people are responsible for the content, they feel a sense of ownership over the project that makes them more likely to maintain it.

In time, the Tank Farmers Federation will assume complete ownership of the community radio, which makes a small income by selling airtime to families for wedding announcements or other such events. Once they receive their broadcasting license, they will further promote local livelihoods by selling advertisements to micro-entrepreneurs.

This radio has already had a disaster risk reduction impact. For example, localized weather information allows farmers to take the proper precautions. “If we get information about rain upstream,”

said Sethurajan, a tank farmer, “we will open the sluices to divert the flood. We’ll cut off the big bunds to divert the route so excess water can be drained off.”

Multimedia Content

In conjunction with the community radio project, a second team of DHAN practitioners trained VIC operators to develop a series of disaster risk reduction videos for the same Kottampatti block. With support from the DHAN team, the operators, local to each village, conducted participatory appraisals of vulnerability with their neighbors. From these sessions, VIC operators came up with five hazards that threaten the well-being of their villages: drought, flood, HIV/AIDS, mosquito-borne chikungunya, and water-borne cholera. DHAN practitioners supplied operators with handheld camcorders and video-editing equipment and trained them to use these tools.

Empowered with this knowledge, VIC operators made videos about each of the hazards that included interviews, dramatic scenes, and even cartoons to introduce the hazard, give statistical information about its relevance for this community, highlight the damage the hazard may cause and present ways to minimize the impact of the hazard: before and after it strikes. VIC operators presented the videos to their neighbors in the village for feedback, and revised them accordingly.

Now local people can view these videos at the VICs. One auto driver, Murugesan, was particularly impacted by the video on flood management, a big problem for his village.

“[By watching this video] I came to know that, the flood is also the main reason for some of the diseases spread in the village,” said Murugesan. “I could also get information like the importance of using boiled water after the flood from this CD.”

By teaching people about common hazards, these videos aim to prepare people to respond effectively. And now that VIC operators are properly trained, they will be able to continue producing videos to support them in their work.

But that is just the beginning. Since many homes in Tamil Nadu have a television, courtesy of the government, the DHAN team hopes these videos will one day become the seeds of a community cable channel. Once community cable is available, the DHAN team hopes that content could be shared across platforms; the content originally produced for video or radio adapted for use in the other medium.

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NEERKATTI SYSTEM SAVES LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS

In the same October 2008 flood mentioned above, local people, organized by DHAN Foundation into a traditional Neerkatti system for flood mitigation, mobilized themselves to respond.

In one village, some farmers had gone to their fields for the day. The heavy rains came suddenly, creating fast moving rivers that surrounded the farmers. The farmers were stranded in their fields.

The Neerkatti committee members used their mobile

phones to stay in continuous touch with the tankfed farmer's association office in Singampunari. Associates told the office that farmers had become stranded. People at the office in turn, alerted other associates, who arrived on the scene with disaster response kits.

Rescuers used the ropes provided in the kits, which DHAN Foundation had donated, to pull the farmers to safety.

The Neerkatti committee also conducted field visits in the most affected villages to assess the situation. They provided whatever support was necessary to help Tank Farmer's Federation respond to the situation immediately.

Mobile Phones for Early Warning

A third pilot project, also in the Kottampatti block, uses mobile phones to make sure tanks will not rupture and cause flash floods. In the past, these floods have destroyed crops and threatened lives.

In order to reduce the vulnerability of villages here, the DHAN Vayalagam (Tank) Foundation (DVTF) programme office team assessed 28 cascades, and 518 tanks in 2 blocks to determine and map their vulnerability, and placed tank vulnerability maps in villages, so people could see which tanks near them were most likely to rupture.

The research found that 223 of the 518 tanks had been damaged at least once, and a couple as many as five times, making these particular tanks more vulnerable.

Then the DVTF team helped community members brainstorm the best course of action, while reminding communities not to rely on the government to respond.

In the course of their research, the team decided to explore reviving the nearly extinct traditional practice of Neerkatti tank management. Neerkattis are people who facilitate facilitate proper sharing of water for irrigation among the communities.

Similar in line with the traditional practice of engaging Neerkattis for tank management and water sharing, the DVTF team promoted village-level farmers associations and defined responsibility of the village association leaders and the associates. The team gave the leaders of each association a mobile phone, so that they could alert the network of community members set up in their villages. The villagers in the network alert their neighbors and help each other evacuate and protect each other's assets.

Associates also use the phones to communicate with each other

about the conditions they are observing, since heavy rains in one area could cause tank breakages in a village nearby.

The associates can also use the mobile phones to call the DVTF office and their government representatives in the event of a problem they cannot address themselves.

While it costs money for associates to make direct calls, they also send SMS messages for free.

The associates have already used this low-cost early warning system to alert each other and their neighbors and organize themselves to take the initiative to respond. The early warning saved lives and minimized damage to houses, crops and other assets.

Traditional Folk Media

Not all means of communication have to be high-tech in order to reduce vulnerability.

DHAN Foundation employs a team of folklorists, who also completed a pilot project for ACEDRR.

The folk media team worked with communities to determine vulnerabilities. Then they put together traditional storytelling, puppetry, and drumming shows on topics of disaster risk reduction. For example, before their performance in Ramnad, they spent a day getting to know people and learning about the risks people face. They used this information to write their script. The actors also invited community members to join them in shaping and painting the hand puppets used in the performance.

The next day, the actors returned, in full dress and with drums. With a rousing and funny call-and-response that let neighbors know that the show was for free, actors enticed people out of their houses and into the audience.

The actors performed a skit that, while mostly entertainment, touched on a couple of serious themes from discussion the day before: boiling drinking water and using latrines.

Because Tamil Nadu has never discarded its folk traditions, people are familiar with the concept of street theater. However these performances were different in that actors worked with communities to develop their content, and the content had a very specific disaster risk reduction message.

In other projects, DHAN's performers played a key role in a campaign targeting drug and alcohol use in which more than 80 percent men were able to beat their addictions. They also ran a

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groundwater awareness campaign that resulted in important improvements to a government policy in Tamil Nadu.

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Some Major Cross-cutting Issues

ACEDRR used these pilots to revive traditional cultural methods for communicating issues around disaster risk reduction, as with the folk media and Neerkatti practices. At the same time, they introduced new technologies like the radio, internet and video.

Whether projects introduced new technologies or revived ancient traditions, DHAN practitioners sought and earned community input at all stages of their projects.

Because local people had a say, the media content available to them is relevant to them. The federation, clusters and self-help groups of DHAN's people institutions were critical in achieving this goal.

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ACEDRR's pilots integrated media for disaster risk reduction into DHAN's ongoing development programs. By relying heavily on existing infrastructures, ACEDRR was able to maximize limited resources. And by making certain projects—in particular the community radio project—financially viable, projects can even become lucrative for villages that run them.

These steps will help ensure that the programs and their benefits will be sustained long after these pilot projects have ended.

These projects are useful for any disaster risk reduction practitioners interested in meaningful ways to talk to vulnerable communities about how to reduce their risks, or else sustainable ways to give villages the communications infrastructure and systems that will save lives during the next disaster.

Recommendations

Community-based content is key. Practitioners who want to improve communications systems in rural areas should use community-based content and traditional forms of media to get local people actively involved in the process.

Use previously established institutions. Practitioners should maximize resources by working through previously established social institutions, and should use communications programs to strengthen those institutions. One way to do this would be to start the process of transferring ownership to a community group as a program begins.

Project Summaries

Community Radio for Disaster Management

Objectives

- To create awareness on alternative and sustainable livelihoods by highlighting success stories and best practices in those lines among drought and flood prone villages.
- To help the farming community realise and take responsibility for conservation of tanks (water bodies that are used as drought mitigators and flood moderators) by disseminating radio programmes for information and education.
- To enable the communities to tell, share and preserve their own stories by themselves, on their village and environment.
- To discuss the issues and challenges concerning their development and find out collective solutions for ecologically sustainable development.

Methods

- Trained operators at village information centers (VICs) to capture audio and do reporting.
- Installed audio capturing and editing equipment at VICs and Tank Farmers' Federation office.
- Supported Tank Farmer's Federation to apply for broadcasting license.
- Supported operators to create 90 hours of community radio, 14 hours on disaster risk reduction.

Outcomes

- Community operators have produced 90 hours of radio programs on best practices and new initiatives in drought and flood mitigation strategies.
- The pilot has established a strong board of governance among the community and a sound management system for production and dissemination.
- DHAN practitioners have trained a team of 20 local volunteers in radio and internet technologies.

Lesson Learned

- Radio is relevant during disasters, as experienced in a recent flood (see box).

- A radio project can successfully encourage the participation of women by employing women and working through organized women's groups.
- Active involvement of panchayats and government departments are critical to success of a radio program.
- In this village, and villages like it, audio dissemination has more reach than other potential early warning systems.
- Simplified technology can make it easy for the community members to become the producers of radio.
- Community radio can become sustainable by generating revenue through audio services.

What is next?

As of now radio programmes are recorded and narrowcasted from the village information centers. The Tank Farmers' Federation, which owns the radio, has applied for a broadcasting license, a process which can take up to two years. As soon as they receive a broadcasting license, programmes will be broadcast from the Tank Farmer's Federation office at the block level. While the radio is not financial sustainable yet, the Tank Farmer's Federation plans to attain financial sustainability in a phased manner. Currently, the Tank Farmer's Federation sells radio time to families wishing to make wedding or other announcements. Once they are broadcasting, the Federation plans to sell advertising time to local micro-enterprises.

Disaster Risk Management: Through Community-Based Multimedia Content

Objectives

- To enable community members and VIC operators to identify and develop videos for disaster preparedness and management.
- To facilitate local knowledge networking through multimedia offline content about disaster preparedness.

Methods

- Trained VIC operators in video production.
- Supported VIC operators to lead

participatory appraisal of vulnerability in Kottampatti.

- Supported VIC operators to create videos (with interview, drama and animation components) on each of the major hazards faced by villagers in Kottampatti.
- Shared these videos with Kottampatti residents for feedback and revised accordingly.
- Created libraries for the videos at VICs to allow village residents to view at their leisure.

Outcomes

- Multimedia content in video, audio and text format on drought, flood, and epidemic diseases.
- Dissemination of content through VICs.
- Adaptation of content on flood. After the feedback, some real characters were introduced in place of Macromedia Flash characters, to explain the damages.
- Pictures showing the damages and causes and community songs compiled and included in these videos.
- Cartoon character concept was attempted in chikunkunya content.
- Community question and experts answering pattern was introduced in HIV/AIDS content.

Lesson Learned

- The VIC operators have the requisite skills for assessing resources for the hazards drought, flood and epidemic diseases, developing content in various media.
- DHAN team learned the need for content through community workshops, resource consultation and group discussions.
- The VIC operators will develop the locally relevant content in their VICs. The content in different sectors developed by different operators will be organized at the hub/centre level, fine-tuning process will be undertaken and the content will be finalized.

What is next?

The content will be available in all village information centers. The VIC operators will share the evaluated content to all

VICs along with a schedule of content deployment process. The viewers' details will be made available at the VICs. The community feedback and learning will be documented.

Flood Risks and Vulnerabilities: Setting up an Early Warning System at Thirumanimuthar Sub-basin in South Tamil Nadu

Objectives

- To map the vulnerability of tanks in the Thirumangalam district of Tamil Nadu.
- To document indigenous coping mechanisms for tank maintenance.
- To reduce the vulnerability of residents of Thirumangalam to flash floods caused by tank ruptures.

Methods

- Collected the baseline of the tank vulnerability by conducting interviews with each tank community.
- Documented existing early warning systems by conducting focus group discussion at Tank Farmers' Federation and at the cascade level.
- Documented cases of interesting and inspiring coping mechanisms.
- Collected complete sub-basin maps of Palar and Thirumanimuthar with the tank memoirs for all the tanks.
- Analyzed tank vulnerability data and created tank vulnerability maps for each village.
- Supported villages to create their own tank vulnerability maintenance committees.

Outcomes

- DHAN has put tank vulnerability maps in each village and has created a tank vulnerability of the entire sub-basin.
- Communities have established early warning systems (EWS) to manage their vulnerability to tank ruptures.
- DHAN has published a document outlining the process undertaken in this pilot.

Lesson Learned

- Communities have historically engaged in local tank maintenance practices, though these have become nearly extinct.

- High-tech communication methods and rescue methods training for local people can help villages respond to the situation immediately to protect lives and community assets.

What is next?

Many of the villages involved in this pilot have agreed to revive the near-extinct Neerkatti system for tank management. In this case, villagers set up an association at the village level to make decisions about tank management. One person from each village is established as the Neerkatti. This person lives near the tanks and monitors their conditions. A Neerkatti reports these conditions back to the Neerkatti association at the village level, which determines how to respond. DHAN Foundation's tank office has distributed mobile phones to leader at each of these associations, so that the association can communicate effectively enough to respond on its own, or else notify DHAN or their local government representatives for help.

Traditional Folk Media for Disaster Risk and Vulnerability Reduction in Coastal Districts of Tamil Nadu

Objectives

- To understand and appreciate traditional knowledge and media to minimize disaster risk reduction.
- To understand the communication needs of the community, stakeholders and the service providers with special reference to disaster risks and vulnerability, study and analyze risk and vulnerabilities of disasters in Ramnad district.
- To develop and moderate folk media troupes and formats to discuss related to risks and vulnerability and thereby increasing understanding of disaster risk reduction practices and enhance their effectiveness.
- To develop a content guideline, script and lyrics for the folk troupes.
- To utilize the talents and performances folk media troupes (Kathakalakhepam) in villages.
- To integrate local folk media in disaster preparedness with micro insurance products.
- To document the lessons learned with the community.

- To disseminate the lessons among the community and stakeholders.

Methods

- Conducted participatory rural appraisals with villages to determine their vulnerabilities to hazards.
- Encouraged village participation in the creation of puppets, costumes and other aspects of performance.
- Wrote and rehearsed a script based on outcomes of participatory rural appraisal.
- Returned to the village the following day to perform the traditional folk presentation that addressed issues of disaster risk reduction within villages.

Outcomes

- A package of contextualized traditional folk media formats and messages to impart disaster risk reduction literacy.
- A localised folklore unit involving community members, trained in taking up campaigns for disaster risk reduction literacy.
- Process documentation of the entire pilot interventions in a video documentary format.

Lesson Learned

- Understanding the communication needs of the community, stakeholders and the service providers with special reference to disaster risks and vulnerability.
- Integrating local folk media in the disaster preparedness strategy.
- Developing and moderating folk media troupes and formats to discuss the message related to risks and vulnerability and thereby increasing understanding of disaster risk reduction practices and enhance their effectiveness.

What is next?

This project has concluded. Lessons will be applied to future DHAN programs, and materials will be made available to communications practitioners.

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ACEDRR

The Advanced Centre for Enabling Disaster Risk Reduction (ACEDRR) is a specialized centre of Tata-Dhan Academy established to enhance the knowledge and practice on disaster risk reduction through research and pilot projects, training and education, networking, consultancy, and policy advocacy activities to ensure secured lives and livelihoods of vulnerable communities.

Tata-Dhan Academy

Tata-Dhan Academy is promoted by DHAN Foundation, a pioneering grassroots organization, and Sir Ratan Tata Trust, Mumbai, to identify, nurture, and groom young graduates into development professionals through its flagship two-year Programme in Development Management. The Academy offers a number of short-duration Development Management Programmes and undertakes research, documentation, and consultancy services.

DHAN Foundation

DHAN Foundation works with about 8,50,000 families in 12 states of India, striving to improve the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable communities by organizing them to reduce poverty and address their various development needs. The interventions are spread across urban, rural, coastal, and tribal contexts. DHAN works in different thematic areas including microfinance, tank-fed agriculture, information and communication technology for the poor, and local self-governance.

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