actionaid

Women's leadership in resilience

Eight inspiring case studies from Africa and Asia

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Cover photo: Women in Rumphi district, Malawi, hold the baskets they use as slow cookers. The women place a cooking pot for a few minutes on a stove to heat it up and create steam. The hot cooking pot is then put inside the basket, covered with leaves, and left to steam for 4-5 hours. This local innovation allows women to work on the farm or do their other household chores simultaneously. Photo taken by Malumbo Simwaka/CISONECC/ActionAid Malawi.

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Women of the Village Natural Resource Management Committee in Rumphi District, Malawi, have gathered to prepare a village contingency plan.
PHOTO: MALUMBO SIMWAKA/CISONECC/ACTIONAID MALAWI

Introduction

ActionAid is working with poor communities across the world to support them in building their resilience to disasters, climate change and other shocks and stresses. This work is of ever-growing importance, not only because of changing weather patterns and rising temperatures increasing the likelihood of disasters, but also because of growing risks related to violent conflict, human and livestock epidemics, environmental degradation and political and economic crises.

The shape and nature of our resilience programmes varies from country to country, depending on the local context, but generally includes a combination of approaches such as disaster risk reduction, climate resilient sustainable agriculture, natural resource management, humanitarian response and recovery, and promoting accountable and inclusive governance. What sets us apart is our focus on women's rights and leadership in resilience-building.

It is widely known that women and girls are disproportionally affected by disasters, climate change and conflict. Women and girls face heightened risks due to the cultural and social norms that define gender stereotypes, and the breakdown of normal protection structures during crises. We see that all forms of violence against women and girls are exacerbated during humanitarian crises, and in emergency relief and recovery efforts women tend to be discriminated against by existing norms and processes. For example, social customs and women's role as carers limits their mobility and access to public spaces, meaning they do not directly receive relief items and are restricted from taking part in the decision-making that affects their lives.

Though the concept of gendered vulnerability is important for understanding the different ways in which women and men are affected by disasters, it must not be forgotten that there is nothing natural about this vulnerability. Rather, it is caused by the social and economic disadvantage that women experience as a result of socially constructed gender roles, systematic discrimination, and the power imbalance between women and men. While it is important to understand women's vulnerability to disasters and climate change, it is also vital to avoid stereotyping women as inherently vulnerable, passive recipients of aid and protection. This has previously precluded women from being considered as active agents in humanitarian action and resilience-building, and overlooks the fulfilment of their right to equal participation and decision-making.

Women have a fundamental right to contribute to the decisions that affect their lives, and they bring vital skills, resources and experience to building resilience. They hold intimate 'front-line' knowledge of the local environment, including a good understanding of local-level risk, which is extremely useful in identifying and implementing the most effective resilience-building activities.

Women's connections within their community and their skills in mobilisation suggest they are well-placed to be transformative agents in community disaster planning and preparedness, should they be empowered to do so. "Women have an inherent capacity for risk management which has not been capitalised upon," says Santosh Kumar, director of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Disaster Management Centre. "Experience from disasters indicates that the way women handle risk is different from men. They have different qualities to bring to disaster planning that have been ignored in the name of vulnerability."

When supported and empowered to take up a leadership role, the women ActionAid works with have shown readiness and enthusiasm to lead resilience-building efforts, and have time and again demonstrated their ability to do so. Women are leading initiatives to diversify livelihoods, adapt agricultural practices in the light of climate change, ensure governmental disaster management strategies incorporate their needs, and advocate for sustainable use of natural resources.

Our experiences demonstrate that facilitating women's leadership in resilience-building fosters a sense of self-confidence and empowerment among women that can help transform gender power relations in their households and communities, and overcome the barriers that have traditionally excluded women from decision-making and leadership.

The case studies in this publication demonstrate the incredible courage of women who have taken up leadership roles in different resilience-building initiatives in eight countries across Africa and Asia.

The stories illustrate the personal changes women have experienced, from being confined to their domestic responsibilities to participating in community decision-making processes and earning an income from different livelihood activities. They show the transformative change that women can bring about individually, or when they organise as a group. Such as in Vietnam, where women have demanded local authorities recognise and protect their right to forest land, and led the design and implementation of sustainable forest-based livelihoods. Or in Malawi, where women have decided to transition to agro-ecological farming practices, demonstrating its success and encouraging the larger community to follow suit.

They are true stories of change, and we hope they inspire you.

Two women are clearing their rice field in the Saloum river delta. This area is severely affected by salination which has reduced the rice production of communities.
PHOTO: CLÉMENT TARDIF/ACTIONAID SENEGAL

Preparing deforested land before planting tree seedlings in northern Vietnam.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID VIETNAM

Vietnam

Women become key players in forest governance

"People in my village didn't know how to use a computer. Thanks to the project, especially the information kiosk and several training courses, we all know how to use computers. Exploring the FORMIS system is the most exciting part. For the first time, we got to see our village on the satellite map, know what our forest plot looks like, with its precise boundaries. Now with this amount of clear information, we are no longer worried about forest land disputes."

Ms Thach Kim Duyen, 50, leader of Community Core Group in Dong Hai district

Around 40% of Vietnam's land mass is covered by forests, a vital resource that provides people with livelihoods and a habitat, and reduces the risk of soil erosion, floods and landslides. These forests used to be managed by state-owned enterprises, but this sometimes ended up in unsustainable forest management, coupled with corruption and land grabs. It also meant that local communities were hampered in accessing the forest for their livelihoods.

Since 1982 the government has issued several policies on people-focused forestry management, in an effort to improve transparency in forest governance, engage local authorities and communities, and allow communities to develop forest-based livelihoods. Forest Land Use Rights certificates have been introduced to grant people autonomy to manage forest land. These certificates can be granted to a household (for areas defined as productive forest land) or a community (for areas defined as protective forest land). Each certificate defines a single forest land plot, and is usually valid for 50 years. Through publically announced official decrees people can learn if they are eligible, and how to apply for a certificate.

Good intentions, poor execution

In reality, many people are not aware of their right to forest land – while those already in possession of certificates often remain unclear about the exact location and boundaries of their plot. Local forest authorities tend to be disorganised, and often fail to show the landowner-to-be the actual plot, despite the fact that this is stipulated as a requirement in law.

Further contributing to the confusion is the fact that allocated forest land does not always match exactly with a household's ancestral land, and many people presume that it does. This can result in land disputes and illegal land dispossessions, as well as the land either being inefficiently used or simply left unused. It may also be difficult for rural poor people to turn the land into a productive resource, due to either a lack of support, or a lack of the skills, resources and labour needed to develop the plot efficiently. Additionally, cultivation may be difficult if the soil quality is too poor.

Access to information

In response to this myriad of issues, ActionAid Vietnam has worked with poor ethnic minorities in rural mountain and coastal communities in four districts across northern, central and southern Vietnam. The aim is to increase people's awareness of forestry laws, support them in applying for forest certificates, and develop sustainable forest livelihoods.

Given the low awareness and understanding among ethnic communities on their rights to forest land and governance, improving access to information was key. To this end, information kiosks have been set up that allow communities to access the government's national database on forestry (FORMIS) via computers with internet access. Different training courses have been conducted to equip people with the necessary computer and internet skills, and to raise community awareness on their legal rights to forest governance.

Access to this knowledge has empowered community members. People can now consult the database and find information on each individual land plot such as the owner(s), location, boundaries, etc. People have discovered errors in the system while looking up their (potential) plot. In this case, there is information available in the kiosk on how to appeal with the forestry authority.

Forest-based livelihoods

People in rural forest areas have limited livelihood options, and climate change has put further strain on people's resilience. In the northern and central regions, drought and prolonged hot weather have become more frequent, reducing rice yields and accelerating desertification. In the south floods, saltwater intrusion and rising sea levels are an increasing threat to people's assets and livelihoods.

In these contexts, forests are an important source of income for communities, especially for the women who collect honey, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, vegetables and flowers for household use or to sell at local markets. In the mangrove forests, women go out and catch shrimps, crabs or fish. At the same time, we see some communities using the mountain and mangrove forests in an unsustainable way, for example, through illegal logging and slash and burn practices for farming.

With women playing an important role in forest-based livelihoods – but having little access to relevant information and skills training – the project supported women in resilience-building through sustainable livelihoods. Through the kiosks women can now easily access information on market prices, weather forecasts and crop and livestock diseases, helping them to adapt to climate change and prepare for disasters, and to increase their income.

Women leading reforestation

Through regional livelihood activities, women were supported to turn their forest plots into productive and sustainable resources. In the northern and central region, women and their communes were supported in planting different varieties of trees on land that had previously seen deforestation. Not only will this generate an income from forest products in the medium and long term, but it also offers households the opportunity to sell carbon credits to businesses that emit more CO2 than legally granted. Additionally, it will reduce the risk of landslides and floods, and recover soil quality.

In the southern coastal areas ActionAid supported communities to plant mangrove trees, in order to promote the rehabilitation of mangrove forests and allow aquaculture to thrive. Shrimp and crab production in mangrove forests takes much less labour and is less resource intensive than in ponds or open sea. The mangrove forest stabilises the environment, reduces floods and cyclone risks, and offers organic vegetation waste as a food source, which means shrimps and crabs tend to grow bigger and a higher harvest can be achieved.

Women have played a leading role in the design and implementation of these forest-based livelihood models as members and leaders of Community Core Groups, established as part of the project. Women participated in commune meetings, joined study tours to other areas to learn about various forest-based livelihood models, and took a lead in the identification of tree species, seedlings and fertilisers, as well as the selection of the exact location of the intervention and tree planting. Women are now recognised for their contribution to the socio-economic development of their communities, and are regarded as key players in forest governance.

Women and the wider community are now much more aware of their rights to own property and natural resources. Women can now claim their rights to actively participate in forest governance and sustainable livelihood development. They can register land titles in their names as stipulated by law, and demand that the authorities recognise and protect their rights. Through regular dialogues with local forest management authorities, they are asking for improved transparency in the governance of the forests. They have also initiated many ongoing discussions on legitimacy and fairness in the distribution of local forest land.

ActionAid volunteer facilitator Hawa Jalloh is raising mass awareness on Ebola in her village.
PHOTO: TOMMY TRENCHARD/ACTIONAID

Liberia/Sierra Leone/Zimbabwe

Women leaders act to eradicate disease epidemics

"They accuse us and say 'Ebola nor dae' (Ebola isn't real). But we don't mind. We go on sensitising anyway. And slowly people are starting to believe, even in the handwashing!"

Hawa Jalloh, Community Mobiliser in Bo District, Sierra Leone

When thinking about women in a humanitarian crisis, people often tend to focus on how they are disproportionally affected by disaster or conflict. However, much less attention and recognition is given to women as first responders in a crisis. Women are often the visible and invisible forces behind an effective first response following the outbreak of a humanitarian crisis, taking risks and playing critical roles in the survival of families and communities.

ActionAid has worked with and supported women first responders in different humanitarian contexts, including the Ebola crisis in West Africa and a typhoid outbreak in Zimbabwe that threatened the lives of millions of people. In such potentially serious disease outbreaks, women are affected in different ways. They can fall ill themselves, but they are also responsible for caring for family members who have fallen ill. This in turn places them at higher risk in the case of contagious diseases such as cholera, Ebola and typhoid, and means they tend to spend more time collecting water, cooking and cleaning.

In humanitarian responses to disease outbreaks women are often considered victims and receive advice and help. Yet, they are rarely encouraged and supported to lead the response.

Stepping up against a typhoid outbreak in Zimbabwe

In 2014, a typhoid outbreak was confirmed in Nyanga district, Zimbabwe, fuelled by poor hygiene practices in combination with a lack of clean water. The provision of clean water tends to be very limited across Zimbabwe, and the majority of rural water supply infrastructure is in bad condition. Boreholes and wells are not maintained, and consequently fill up with non-potable water. In most urban areas the piped water supply is sporadic and sometimes unclean. As a result, people resort to fetching water from unprotected sources such as rivers. These unprotected sources are however very likely to be polluted,

due to poor sewage infrastructure and open defecation in the absence of latrines.

ActionAid Zimbabwe, in partnership with the Diocese of Mutare Community Care Programme, supported the government of Zimbabwe to stop the typhoid outbreak. ActionAid and the Diocese started training female and male community health workers in the village of Samanyika in Nyanga district. Training focused on diagnosing and treating typhoid, as well as preventing further spread of the disease.

Village health workers led a local awareness campaign to encourage people to practice better hygiene. They advised people to only use water from protected sources, collect water in clean buckets and cover these buckets when not in use, treat water with free available tablets, practice regular handwashing with soap under running water, and avoid open defecation.

The women went to schools and trained teachers and children, asked community leaders to gather community members for a handwashing demonstration, and conducted house-to-house visits. This was in line with the response plan of the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare and took place in close collaboration with local authorities, who provided the village health workers with pamphlets with similar messaging to help raise awareness.

ActionAid Zimbabwe and the Diocese of Mutare distributed soap and buckets to the most affected, poor and at risk communities in Samanyika. In addition, three new boreholes were drilled and two other boreholes rehabilitated. The ablution block in the village market centre was also rehabilitated, and a water tank installed in order to encourage people to refrain from open defecation.

Fighting Ebola in Liberia and Sierra Leone

Also during the Ebola crisis in Liberia and Sierra Leone in 2014 and 2015, women were at the forefront of fighting the spread of the deadly virus. ActionAid trained women community mobilisers to raise awareness on Ebola prevention, offer advice on where people could go for help, and trace people at risk of infection so they could be quarantined. With adult literacy rates below 45% in Liberia and Sierra Leone, awareness-raising had to go beyond the distribution of flyers and posters to make sure everyone knew how to prevent and identify Ebola regardless of age, literacy, mobility etc.

Women community mobilisers went from door-to-door raising awareness, encouraging people to listen to the radio to keep up-to-date on the spread of the disease and the advice being given. Dramas were performed and special Ebola songs played on radio and TV. The women also set up public handwashing points and kept them topped up with chlorinated water.

Handwashing point in Sierra Leone during the Ebola crisis.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID SIERRA LEONE

Heroism of women first responders

The community health mobilisers faced a very difficult task in changing habits and behaviour in relation to hygiene practices. In Zimbabwe, people generally wash their hands in buckets used by the entire family. They initially opposed the new handwashing practices. Women were also reluctant as it implied they had to spend more time collecting water from further away protected water sources. However by repeating the same message over and over again, in combination with people's fear of the growing typhoid outbreak, the community started to adopt the new handwashing practices and defecated in latrines or in specially identified areas.

Women community health mobilisers in Liberia and Sierra Leone probably faced even greater challenges. They not only promoted better hygiene practices, but also had to fight persistent rumours and conspiracy theories regarding the spread of Ebola, and convince people to avoid any bodily contact. With people living in crowded houses and towns, this required a lot of self-control and vigilance.

Those community health mobilisers trained as 'contract tracers' faced an incredibly difficult task convincing people in a state of shock and trauma to allow their sick loved ones to be admitted for quarantine, or taken away for quick burial without performing the customary body wash ritual. These brave women and men would find themselves in risky situations when people possibly carrying the Ebola virus turned aggressive in response to the measures imposed.

Despite all these challenges, women responders played a large role in eradicating Ebola in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and the typhoid outbreak in Zimbabwe. The fact that they were women contributed to their success, as communities reported that they trusted women most when being approached to change their household's hygiene practices. Women are associated with their domestic responsibilities and therefore people would believe in their honesty and professionalism.

Member of the Advisory Mothers' Committee stands in the water reservoir of Inn Yaung village tract, Myanmar, durng the dry season.
PHOTO: GREG FUNNELL/ACTIONAID MYANMAR

Myanmar

Women lead community initiatives to overcome water scarcity

Water scarcity is a big concern in the Dry Zone in central Myanmar, where communities share anecdotal information about the number of rainy days reducing year by year. This is not surprising, as Myanmar has just been identified as the second country in the world most affected by climate change, according to the Global Climate Risk Index 2017 by Germanwatch. It is local people dependent on subsistence farming who are often most affected, as they experience increasingly unpredictable rainfall coupled with increasing temperatures. As a result, agricultural yields have declined over the years, with the Dry Zone having been identified as one of the most food insecure regions of the country.

The Inn Yaung village tract is located in the Dry Zone. It is made up of four small villages, each between 45 and 55 households, many of them headed by women as men have left the villages in search of work. Many households cultivate rice, but yields are highly dependent on the monsoon rains. If the monsoon starts late or brings below average rain, the rice harvest can be completely lost. More than 35 years ago the four villages started to collaborate to overcome this challenge, and constructed a small earthen check dam across the Yin Daing Taung stream, which flows through the area during the monsoon months. This created a small water reservoir that stored water to irrigate paddy fields in the area.

Community ownership of problems and solutions

In the decades that followed the dam demonstrated its use, but its poor structure was also a continuous point of concern for villagers. The reservoir would quickly silt up, and hold less and less water as a result. This required modification, but its limited capacity to hold water remained a concern for the growing population. In 2011, a strong storm released a torrent of water that destroyed parts of the dam and weakened it in others. The damage was too severe for villagers to repair.

Given the vulnerability of local communities to disasters and climate change, ActionAid had already started supporting the four villages through a series of community-led assessments, which allowed the villagers to collectively analyse their situation, identify the causes of problems and prioritise their needs and

solutions in the form of action plans. The results of these consultations were later compiled into what are known as 'Village Books'. This process has been designed to give people ownership of the solutions, and empower communities to claim their rights from the government. This built their confidence to approach local authorities and request their support in repairing the dam and reservoir.

Repairing of dam and water reservoir

The local government was willing to look into supporting the repair of the dam and reservoir, but their budget and expertise was falling short. ActionAid facilitated a multi-stakeholder discussion to explore ways to repair and enlarge the dam with minimal resources. It was decided that the Irrigation Department would lend heavy machinery such as bulldozers, while ActionAid covered the fuel costs and villagers provided their labour on a voluntary and rotational basis.

Villagers also elected representatives for a number of committees to oversee the construction: preparing the budget, organising volunteer labour, handling procurement etc. With ActionAid's encouragement, women were included in these committees. However, over time it became evident that women on the committees were being marginalised, not privy to information and not actively participating in decision-making, despite their keen interest.

An Advisory Mothers' Committee, made up of older women from all four villages, was then formed to provide advice and logistical support to the various committees, and ensure that women's voices were finally being heard. This role was accepted after the villagers had learnt to appreciate the knowledge and skills of ActionAid facilitators, all of whom happened to be young women.

The new, expanded earthen dam has increased the reservoir's water holding capacity, which has increased the amount of land that can be irrigated. Enthused by this successful community/government/NGO collaboration, the district government allocated additional resources to further enlarge the dam, in order to double the land that could be irrigated. This work has now been completed, but due to below average rainfall not all four villages benefited.

Discussion and work is currently underway to renovate the irrigation canal between the reservoir and two villages, and to construct a new off-shoot channel to the other two villages. This would reduce the loss of water in the main reservoir. A Water Users' Committee will be set up to manage the distribution and payment for water. These fees will go into a fund to cover the costs of maintaining the dam, and irrigation infrastructure of canals and channels. The aim is that the dam will ensure sufficient water for two harvests each year.

Women leading community initiatives

As the works on the dam progressed, the Advisory Mothers' Committee and women from other committees became increasingly interested in further building the resilience of villagers, and ensuring that it wasn't just landholding farmers benefiting from the repair and enlargement works.

ActionAid encouraged the women to propose income-generating activities associated with the dam. They identified the poorest and landless families to take part in activities such as goat rearing, fish breeding and community-based tourism. They also proposed buying fruit tree seedlings, which have been planted near the reservoir. Villagers agreed that the profits will be used as follows: dam maintenance (20%), village infrastructure (30%), and a revolving fund (50%) from which poor and landless families can borrow at low interest rates to start or expand livelihood activities, and in case of an emergency.

The four villages also each received a small grant from ActionAid to implement a priority activity, as identified in their Village Book. Women consider the daily journey to collect drinking water from rivers and ponds as a burden taking a lot of their time and energy. Therefore, women in two villages persuaded their village members to use the fund, topped up by community contributions, to construct reticulation systems that take potable water from existing ponds and deliver it to taps at each house.

Gender transformation

Besides the fact that the availability of water has increased, villagers – especially women – feel much more empowered now. They have learned to analyse problems, organise themselves, access information, understand their rights and develop the confidence and skills to lobby for these.

Several women in the community have taken up leadership roles, and are now often asked to meet visitors such as senior government officials and donors to explain the initiatives in the local area. The women admitted that they used to 'act like a mirror', simply reflecting the attitudes and ideas of their husband, whereas now they feel confident to assess the situation by themselves and voice their opinion. This is helping to slowly but surely change social and cultural norms around women's roles in society that dictate existing patriarchal power structures.

Woman in Inn Yaung village tract in front of a community resource map.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID MYANMAR

Women show their sweet potato harvest produced with the help of skills training on agro-ecological farming.
PHOTO: SIEGFRIED MODOLA/SHOOT THE EARTH/ACTIONAID KENYA

Malawi

Village savings and loans empower women to introduce agro-ecological farming

"[The savings and loans scheme] means that I am now economically empowered, as I am generating income from the sale of my harvest and from my vegetable business. Together with COWFA we have also championed a land rights campaign, and as a result I now have my own piece of land that I control. Together with the savings and loans, this means I now have control over these productive resources."

Florence Nkhonjera, 50, from Kaiwale village, Malawi

In 2016 many countries experienced one of the strongest El Niño weather events in history, which scientists believe was aggravated by climate change. Many poor people across Africa, Asia and South America are still experiencing severe food insecurity as a result of El Niño.

In Malawi a national emergency was declared, as 6.5 million people were in need of humanitarian aid. Food shortages at household level have greatly affected women and girls across Malawi. As food preparation is considered a task for women, they tend to spend more time collecting water and food in times of drought. The challenges are particularly acute for families where the husbands are hardly ever home, such as in polygamist marriages or if they have moved abroad in search of work.

According to local culture, key decision-making responsibilities on money and livestock are considered the preserve of men. For example, a woman cannot sell the family cow to buy food for the family without her husband's approval. In the absence of the husband, women may have to look for alternative sources of income such as casual labour, which is low paid and can be highly exploitative or associated with sexual violence. It also affects their ability to tend their crops, further reducing their harvest.

Village savings and loans groups

In Rumphi district, ActionAid worked with the Coalition of Women Farmers (COWFA) to initiate a process of participatory vulnerability analysis and reflection-action discussions with

local women. This allowed them to reflect on their circumstances and identify the reasons they were vulnerable to food insecurity. The women identified climate-induced disasters as a key cause, coupled with gender inequality. Their analysis and discussion led them to prioritise diversifying their livelihoods, as well as introducing agro-ecological farming practices as a way of adapting to climate change. In order to enable them to resource these priorities, they agreed to introduce village savings and loans groups.

These groups are a simple, low cost, locally-owned approach to microfinance that thrive outside registered financial institutions. Every woman is expected to regularly pay small contributions, and their accumulated savings then form a loan fund from which they can borrow at an agreed interest rate. During difficult times for the entire community, such as during drought, the women in Rumphi agreed to share the accumulated savings in proportion to the amount each member saved.

ActionAid and COWFA trained 27 savings and loans agents from their respective communities, who then trained 412 women from 20 groups on how to run a village savings and loans scheme, and in entrepreneurship skills. Some women who decided to take a loan from the savings and loans scheme have been able to set up small-scale businesses, allowing them to trade in agricultural commodities and other essentials such as cooking utensils and soap. They are now generating an income, which has helped build the resilience of both themselves and their families.

Agro-ecological farming

Some women are using the loans to invest in their farming activities, for example by purchasing equipment for small-scale irrigation to reduce their reliance on rain-fed agriculture. Others have bought organic fertilisers to mix with ash, animal dung, maize bran and other organic manure, as they transition to agro-ecological farming. They decided to invest in this following training on agro-ecological farming practices by ActionAid and COWFA.

The women are now practicing mulching (which helps keep soil cool and damp), crop diversity, intercropping, crop rotation, land and water management, pit planting and catchment area conservation. They have also collectively lobbied the Agriculture Development Office in Rumphi and the Ministry of Agriculture to provide better extension services linked to agro-ecology for small-scale farmers.

Women's empowerment

The women participating in the savings and loans groups have developed their leadership skills and confidence. As part of the larger COWFA network, groups from different villages have been connected. Women have experienced this as empowering, as it gives them different opportunities and space in which to share ideas, plan, reflect, learn and work together.

Having said that, there has been slow progress in the formation of savings and loans associations. Issues such as illiteracy and a lack of vision have hampered most individual groups from joining others and forming larger savings and loans associations. These associations could potentially generate larger funds and eventually support more women. There is also a problem with some women borrowing so much without a clear business plan that they fail to pay back their loans. This underlines the importance of continuously training women on the discipline of borrowing, solid business plans and sustainable growth of savings and loans groups into associations.

Women report that the skills and knowledge they gained are greatly valued by the community, and their access to income sources independent of their husbands has made the women more confident and empowered. These factors combined have allowed women to exercise greater agency in their households and their communities, as demonstrated by the women deciding to transition to agro-ecological farming practices. The fact that there are now more women than men in leadership positions in Disaster Risk Management committee structures in the area is illustrative of the change in status of women in the community.

Women acting in solidarity

The savings and loans groups have also acted as social networks and mobilised women to initiate other activities such as protecting girls from early marriage, for example standing in solidarity when girls in the area presented a petition to the District Commissioner, asking him to come up with by-laws for punishing and ending early marriages for girls under 18. Increased solidarity was also demonstrated when a savings and loans group in Chigwere village decided to support two very vulnerable households by providing maize and some money for processing the maize into flour. Another initiative has been a goat pass-on scheme, where over 187 women and their families have received goat kids. This has been an effective way of building their assets, allowing women to invest in their children's education and health, as well as to meet daily non-food expenses such as soap and clothing.

The women in the savings and loans groups also decided to mobilise themselves against the discriminatory land rights situation for women, especially widows. In Malawi, while the Constitution advocates for equality in the control, ownership and access of productive resources, informal rules in the form of culture and tradition (especially in patriarchal societies such as Rumphi), discriminate against women controlling and owning productive resources such as land. This means that if a woman's husband passes away, she can lose her access to land. With the support of COWFA, the women ran a successful land rights campaign appealing to the traditional local authorities of elders to change the traditional practices around inheritance of land. As a result, more and more widows are now allowed to inherit land.

Women's leaders collectively working on resilience-building initiatives in Patharghata, Bangladesh.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID BANGLADESH

Bangladesh

Women's leadership fosters resilience and disaster preparedness

"Being a leader in disaster response and risk reduction has changed my life. People now respect me and judge my work and experience a lot more than before. Each time there is an emergency I contact everyone in my network to tell them that the disaster is coming, and I give suggestions and advice about what steps to follow and who should do what. Everyone gives importance to what I say. Everybody respects me. I am creating change! I am so proud of how far I have come and everything I am able to do now."

Women's leader Sabita Rani, Bangladesh

Gender inequality and patriarchy

For the poorest women in South Asia, gender-based cultural restrictions are routinely practised. Women are excluded from economic activities and have limited access to, or control over, the productive resources that would allow them to earn their own income. Even when women are able to earn an income, they are often expected to hand the money over to their husband or male relative, and have little say on how their earnings are spent.

Customs such as *purdah* restrict women to the family home, only being allowed to venture into public spaces when they have permission, or are accompanied by a male relative. The different restrictions women face limits their participation in community activities and decision-making, which results in their needs and priorities not being met, and severely undermines their resilience.

For this to change ActionAid believes women's access to information and collective action is crucial. With information that accurately describes their situation, the challenges they face and opportunities available to them, women are able to organise and mobilise together to start challenging the inequalities they face on a daily basis.

South Asia Women's Resilience Index

The South Asia Women's Resilience Index, developed by ActionAid in collaboration with the Economist Intelligence Unit, sets out the key factors affecting women's resilience – and demonstrates that countries across South Asia fare poorly in supporting women's resilience to disasters. Many countries have significant economic and social barriers to women's empowerment that increase their vulnerability during disasters.

The Index has been used to influence policy discussions at the national and international level, where ActionAid has called for a greater commitment to women's participation and leadership in policy and decision-making.

ActionAid, in collaboration with the Overseas Development Institute, also developed the Measuring People's Resilience Toolkit, based on the Resilience Index, which was piloted in three districts in Bangladesh (Patuakhali, Faridpur and Barguna). Using the Toolkit, ActionAid and local communities develop a community-level Resilience Index, which establishes a dialogue between women and men on the differences in resilience between genders and other excluded social groups. The objective is to inspire women to challenge the status quo and advocate for gender-responsive resilience investments that transform gender relations.

Changing gender perceptions through a community Resilience Index

The community Resilience Index started important conversations between women and men, and contributed to the empowerment of women. Women are now more aware of the factors that limit or promote their resilience, and are determined to work collectively to improve the situation through priority actions they themselves have identified. Many of the women's action plans feature activities that are helping them gain better access to services, as well as increasing acceptance of women's social mobility in their community, and their involvement in income-generating activities.

For example, women collectively requested space at the local market to sell their goods and services. No market stalls in this community had previously been run by women, but they were successful in their demands. Women who have access to income-generating activities are now more respected in family decision-making, and have greater control over their income. This has enabled women to contribute to savings and loans groups, helping them manage their ability to withstand any future shocks or stresses.

Women leaders preparing the community for floods

Through increased awareness of their resilience, women leaders in Faridpur recognised that they must be proactive in preparing their communities for rapidly rising water levels, amidst the fear of the annual monsoon floods. Women convened meetings in their courtyards to build awareness with both men and women in the community. They encouraged community members to stockpile dried foods and to keep an emergency safety net fund if possible. They also started to identify the most vulnerable – children, persons with disabilities, the elderly and pregnant women – so that they could quickly be evacuated to safe zones during a possible flood.

Fortunately, the water level did not rise as much as feared and people did not have to leave their homes during the flood, however many crops were destroyed. With farming being the primary economic activity for local communities, many people experienced serious economic losses as a result of the destruction. Women leaders decided to prepare a list of the affected farmers, and submitted applications to the Union Council and Department of Agriculture for financial assistance. The Union Council responded favourably, providing 40 of the most affected families with staple food products.

Linking the community level to national and international

The South Asia Women's Resilience Index and Measuring People's Resilience Toolkit are also linking the grassroots experiences of women and their communities with national and international dialogues.

During the 2015 World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, ActionAid sponsored Sabita Rani from Bangladesh and Riffat Yasmin from Pakistan to attend the conference and share their experiences as women leaders at the frontline of disasters. Sabita and Riffat were both featured panellists in a discussion about gender and disaster risk reduction, where they shared their stories of women's vulnerability and capacity in disaster, and the role their leadership played in building women's and community resilience in the long term.

This increased their confidence to continue advocating for change, and also captured the attention of policy-makers and other international stakeholders with an interest in the unique approach to conceptualising women's resilience. This has allowed ActionAid to replicate the community Resilience Index initiative with women in Vanuatu in the Pacific, demonstrating how the toolkit can be applied in a different geographic region and society.

Steps towards change

One of the key outcomes of the community Resilience Index has been the collective mobilisation of women, and empowerment of women leaders to guide community members in resilience-building efforts. Throughout the project, women have been able to initiate processes that incrementally build their resilience by challenging and transforming existing gender stereotypes.

Women's social mobility within these communities has improved markedly, with women who previously never left their homes being some of the first to participate in disaster preparedness initiatives. Men are also increasingly able to see the influence certain traditional practices have on women, and how small changes can make a big difference to the resilience of women, the household and the community.

This does not mean that the pilot has been without challenges. Not all men in the communities were comfortable with the findings of the community Resilience Index, and the implications of these initiatives on gender relations. Bringing change in religiously conservative communities with strong gender stereotypes will require time, however by establishing close connections with community members, facilitating meetings with women's groups, and seeking assistance from government institutions, Bangladeshi women leaders are now more determined than ever to continue expanding their influence and breaking down the barriers to gender equality.

A woman para-vet on Fayako island, Senegal, treating a community member's goat.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID SENEGAL

Senegal

Women para-vets help build community resilience

The Saloum river delta in central Senegal is known for its lakes, lagoons, wetlands and marshes, as well as dunes, savannah and forests. This eco-system plays an important role in flood prevention, and is a source of income for people living in the area and on the islands that dot the river delta. Most people here depend on agriculture, livestock, fishing, tourism and salt extraction, but these have come under increasing pressure as a result of changing weather patterns and negative environmental changes.

Fayako is one of the islands in the Saloum river delta. People on the island used to combine farming with fishing but salinity intrusion, worsened by a lack of preservation and regeneration of mangroves, has diminished the amount of farmland available. Sadly, fishing has also become increasingly difficult. Traditionally, women on Fayako island collect and sell shellfish from the mangroves that surround the island. Lower rainfall has however decreased the flow of the river, meaning that salt water coming up from the sea has a stronger current, destroying the mangrove habitat.

As the mangroves become less bushy, their lack of leaves means that shellfish are no longer shaded from the sun. The stronger current also makes it more difficult for crustaceans to anchor on the mangroves. All this contributes to a much lower presence of shellfish, and declining yields and income for the women of the community. Vulnerability is further compounded by the lack of basic infrastructure and livelihood opportunities, and the remoteness and isolation of the villages, which are only accessible via small fishing boats *(pirogues)*.

Open discussions for building resilience

In the face of these challenges ActionAid, in collaboration with local organisation Committee for Facilitators for Development, gathered the community in a weekly discussion group. With a majority of women being represented in a 'reflect circle', the group conducted a vulnerability analysis to assess their situation. Relevant local authorities working on agriculture, livestock and local development were also present during some of these meetings. The group built their understanding of climate change, its impact on their livelihoods, and the need to develop alternatives to cope with pressing issues such as sea advancement and salinity intrusion.

Their analysis indicated that the community had very limited knowledge and skills available to adapt their farming practices in the context of climate change. Instead, many people felt they had no other option than to partly abandon farming activities. Consequently ActionAid worked with the local Department for Agriculture and extension workers to conduct training on agro-ecology, including on producing and applying organic compost, and the importance of crop and seed diversification. They also provided the most vulnerable households with seeds and tools.

Livelihood diversification to build resilience

Livelihood diversification was also identified by the group as a key strategy in building their resilience. Goat keeping and poultry keeping were most preferred by the women. Six women were selected by the community to each receive two goats from ActionAid. First born goat kids were then passed on to other women in the community.

The women were trained in simple goat rearing, and materials for caring for the livestock were also distributed. Milk from the goats now supplements the families' diets, and women have the possibility of selling offspring to make some income. It also helps them put their agro-ecology training into practice, as goat manure helps to reduce soil salinity. Women have also been trained on poultry keeping in terms of the type and quantity of feeding and vitamins required. They were then provided with 100 chicks to help initiate the project.

Women as para-vets

In order for goat rearing and poultry keeping to be successful, veterinary services are essential. There is only one vet in the entire district, around 20km away including a boat ride. And so the community decided to train six women to be para-veterinary workers (para-vets), able to deal with the health and welfare of animals.

The women have been trained by the government's Veterinary Technical Services on: animal food and health needs; preventing, recognising and treating disease; maintenance of coops and pens; and correct dosage and application of vaccines and vitamins. They have become the first point of contact and support for community members seeking medical help for their animals. In case the para-vets are not able to help, they will contact the district vet for advice.

Training of the women para-vets was not a straightforward process, as their literacy levels are low, and it appeared they did not always fully understand the instructions on the drugs packaging. This resulted in them not following the instructions for preserving drugs properly and using incorrect quantities. As a result, initial treatments by the para-vets were not always effective. So trainers started using drawings and symbols to overcome this challenge. The district vet has also been asked to pay regular visits to mentor the para-vets. This is also meant to take some of the worry away from the district vet, as he initially considered the women to be potential competitors.

Ensuring consistent para-veterinary care on an isolated island has proved another challenge. Currently, the para-vets struggle due to a lack of veterinary tools and drugs, and so the women proposed that they make regular bulk purchases to ensure a well-stocked veterinary pharmacy. This would require them to have larger sums of money available, which is a major difficulty. The community is now negotiating with the Mayor and businesses to try to source the drugs for free or at reduced rates.

There is no official legal framework for para-vets in Senegal, which means that the women are not officially accredited. ActionAid is supporting them to get their profession formalised with the Ministry of Livestock and Animal Resources and the local veterinary service through, for example, a certificate. The community has also asked ActionAid to train more women as para-vets, as the number is deemed too low to meet all the needs of the community. Communities on neighbouring islands are also very keen to have a few members trained as para-vets.

Improved food security

The project has provided multiple benefits and increased the resilience of women and their families on the islands. Many women now have a reliable income from rearing and selling chickens and goats. The goat initiative has contributed to solidarity and mutual support in the community. With the help of improved agro-ecology farming practices, people now consume more vegetables, meat and milk, which has improved their food security situation. Their animals are healthy as a result of the support and advice they can get from the women para-vets. Furthermore, engagement and collaboration with local authorities and extension services has made the government more responsive to the challenges and needs of people on Fayako island.

Women's leadership for resilience

The para-vets themselves have also increased their income, as they can earn a small amount when treating animals. They report that they can now contribute to family medical expenses, and the income is securing their children's education. Most importantly, the women para-vets have contributed to an increased status of women within the community, as they are now viewed as key actors by both the community and the government. During a recent annual livestock vaccination campaign by the government, the para-vets were asked to take part in the campaign and visit the different islands in the Saloum delta to carry out the vaccinations.

A woman drying her shrimp catch of the day.
PHOTO: CHARLES FOX/ACTIONAID

Cambodia

Women beat big business to local fishing rights

"Since my parents' time, we have been living on resources from the sea. Other villagers can go far in the sea as they have boats. For me, as a widow, I cannot afford to go far and I don't have a boat either. I can only collect shrimp, crab and snail near the stream. My daughter and I rely on this resource for daily food. I think I am so lucky for living near the sea which allows me to have access to these resources. The sea is just 500 metres away and I just spend about an hour or two, and can get the food for a day. I don't need to spend money to buy food at the market... I am very happy to have the community fishing area back."

Ms. Houng Meoung, a 40-year-old widow living with her nine-year-old daughter in Chroy Svay Lech

Land grabs, natural resource extraction and the increasing power of big businesses are posing a real threat to many poor communities across the world, including those in Cambodia. Losing access to and control over land, water, pasture, forests, minerals and biodiversity encroaches on people's spiritual and cultural identity, livelihoods and possibilities of building resilience.

Fisher folk in two villages (Chroy Svay Lech and Chroy Svay Keout) in Cambodia have been relying on locally available natural resources for their daily life and household income for generations. But in 2011, the government decided to grant part of the community fishing area (63 out of 589 hectares) to Chanroth Group, a private business that planned to use it for aquaculture (farming of aquatic organisms such as fish, crustaceans, molluscs and aquatic plants). This decision was taken without consultation with the community, despite the large risks it would pose to the livelihoods of people in the two villages, a total of 338 households.

Community activism and role models

When Chanroth Group started to make preparations for their operations, three sisters in the local area were the first to notice the activity, and discovered that 63 hectares of community

fishing area had been granted to the company. The sisters discussed the issue with a small group of women, and then mobilised other community members to get clarification from the village chiefs and the commune chief – who failed to provide a satisfactory explanation for the situation. This was unacceptable to the community, and they called for the support of ActionAid's partner Mlup Promvihearthor Centre (MPC), another organisation called MORODOC, and community fishery networks in the region.

MPC decided to train the community on relevant policies and community fishery law, sustainable natural resource management, and lobbying. Women really stepped forward as activists in the community fishery committee, and MPC supported them to join relevant meetings with community fishery networks at the local, regional and national level to seek support and advice on claiming back the fishing area.

Women and men activists from Banteay Meanchey and Kampot provinces were invited to a quarterly meeting of the Chroy Svay commune, to share their success in winning back their land and mangrove forest from a private company that had tried to take them over. They explained their lobbying techniques and other influencing tactics. This inspired the women activists of Chroy Svay commune to organise a petition with which they put pressure on local, provincial and national authorities. They also requested airtime on local radio to speak about the issue, and to share their concerns and demands.

Road to victory

With community pressure building, the company was forced to put its preparatory work on hold. During a national election campaign in Chroy Svay in 2013, the community shared their deep concerns with representatives from the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP). They asked them to discuss this issue within the party administration. In May 2013, Mr Yon Min, a representative from the CPP in charge of Sre Amble district, joined a local CPP meeting in Chroy Svay commune, where he informed the community that party administration had decided to withdraw the concession of land to the company. The 63 hectares would instead be managed by the Ministry of Environment, and fisher folk in the two villages are now able to fully access and use the area for fishing and collecting crabs, sea snail and shells again.

Lessons learned

There were many critical factors that contributed to the successful claiming back of community fishing areas in Chroy Svay commune. Women in the two villages stepped up and organised themselves and the rest of the community, and sought support from local organisations to plan for a non-violent campaign to claim back their communities' fishing rights. Solidarity and engagement from very vocal and successful women and men leaders from two other provinces inspired the women from Chroy Svay, and provided them with suggestions so that they could replicate their success. The community also used the upcoming national elections to their advantage, by putting pressure on the CPP to look into the issue.

Plans for bringing it under full community management

In Chroy Svay commune fisher folk are determined to improve their fishing area and bring it completely under their own control. They have planted 35,000 mangrove tree seedlings, as they have come to understand the importance of a healthy mangrove forest – it protects the village from strong winds and many fish species use it for breeding.

They have also prepared the relevant documents and plan to ask the government to qualify the fishing area as community property, to prevent it from being allocated for land concession again in the future. They have shared their long-term plans to turn it into an eco-tourism area. Although this will require continued lobbying, in the meantime the first tourists have already visited the community, spent the night with a local family, and explored the mangrove forest through locally organised boat trips.

A handful of recently harvested Krenh (a Cambodian sea shell).
PHOTO: CHARLES FOX/ACTIONAID

A woman from the Samburu tribe, Isiolo, Kenya.
PHOTO: SIEGFRIED MODOLA/SHOOT THE EARTH/ACTIONAID KENYA

Kenya

Women farmers develop export market with help of Farmer Field Schools

"Since I joined the group, I have gained great skills in farming. I have dug terraces, I grow sweet potatoes, green grams, cowpeas and chicken. I have enough food for my children."
Farmer Mary Katumeta, Kenya

Daily life in Isiolo County in Kenya is tough for the mostly pastoral and agro-pastoral communities who live here. The region is characterised by arid and semi-arid lands, and only receives average rainfall of 150mm per year. The only reliable source of water is the Ewaso Nyiro River, which brings much needed rainwater from hillier areas upcountry. However, with climate change the river's flow has changed dramatically, and is often below normal water flow.

Isiolo has long been a traditional pastoral area where people depend on livestock such as cattle, camels and goats for their livelihoods. In the last two decades this has changed, for various reasons including climate change and a growing population. Many communities nowadays combine livestock keeping with small-scale farming. Women are often responsible for farming and taking care of small animals such as chickens, whereas men take care of cattle and camels, sometimes spending weeks away from home in search of pasture.

Farming on arid and semi-arid lands is not easy, and communities are in great need of skills training. Farmer Field Schools have proven their success in different parts of Kenya and abroad, bringing farmers together to learn from each other, jointly request for support from, for example, extension services, and speak with one voice to demand fair prices for their produce. In 2012, smallholder farmers in Kambi Ya Sheikh Omar village in Isiolo Central Division asked ActionAid Kenya to support them in forming a Farmer Field School.

Tree nursery

Eighteen female and seven male farmers from the Kikuyu, Ameru, Akamba, Somali and Borana tribes were selected and formed the Bidii Farmer Field School ('bidii' is the Swahili word for 'effort'). ActionAid trained them in leadership skills and group dynamics. During a training workshop on identifying and managing enterprises, members agreed to establish a

tree nursery. The objective was threefold. Firstly, it would curb ongoing deforestation as a result of tree cutting for charcoal production. Secondly, by planting fruit trees people could earn an income. Thirdly, it would diversify people's rather one-sided livestock produce-based diet. ActionAid also encouraged the group to ask forest extension officers in Isiolo County to support them with training on seed selection, propagation and care of seedlings.

The tree nursery was established on the land of one member of the Farmer Field School who leased it free of charge, while other members contributed construction materials. ActionAid supported the group with a shade net to protect the soil and seedlings from the blazing sun. As an innovation, farmers agreed to sub-divide the nursery into equal blocks, and each member was allocated a block to establish her or his individual tree nursery. This ensured competition and a sense of responsibility. Seedlings produced have been used by members to plant on their individual farms, while the surplus has been sold to other farmers and government institutions.

Demanding support

ActionAid also trained the Bidii Farmer Field School in advocacy skills, the new responsibilities of county administration following devolution of power, and related county budget-making processes. This opened their eyes to the increasing number of spaces available to them to participate and influence county decision-making processes. As a result, they successfully started demanding services from the county government such as improved extension services, which included training on dry land farming and growing drought tolerant crops, as well as fertilisers and drought-resilient seeds at subsidised prices, and dam liners to minimise water losses at water pumps.

Women farmers exporting French beans

Bidii Farmer Field School has since graduated into a farmers' self help group registered by the Ministry of Gender and Social Services, and its membership has grown to 36, of which nearly 80% are women. The group has also joined hands with other farmers within the Isiolo Central division to form the Isiolo Smallholder Farmers' Cooperative Society Limited, which is mandated to link its members with markets for their farm produce, as well as to negotiate for affordable inputs.

ActionAid supported the farmers by building an irrigation pipeline and linked them with Finlays Kenya Limited, a grower and exporter of flowers and horticultural goods. Upon training, provision of quality seeds and continuous monitoring by government extension officers and Finlays staff, the members of the Bidii Farmer Field School started growing French beans, which were eventually selected for export to Germany and the UK! By building a collection and cooling centre, the farmers were able to store the French beans, and became a regular supplier to Finlays.

Climate change putting brakes on success

French bean production proved to be a massive success and contributed tremendously to the farmers' income and the status of women farmers in the community. However, it also proved to be very dependent on the water levels in the Ewaso Nyiro River. Currently, water levels are too low to irrigate the farms, and the community has had to suspend their French bean production for the time being. ActionAid is supporting the farmers to build water storage tanks to catch rain and flood water. It is however unlikely to secure sufficient storage water to allow continuous French bean production. Despite this setback, farmers have demonstrated resilience by resorting to producing other more drought-resilient crops, with the help of the training and continuous support they are getting from extension officers.

Hesitation to expand farms

Building resilience in the context of Isiolo County has not been without challenges, as French bean production has already highlighted. We see that many people are hesitant to invest too much time and resources into expanding their farms. Cattle raiding is still common in the area, whereby raiders not only steal livestock but also destroy houses and farms. People are afraid all their hard work will be destroyed in an overnight attack, and paradoxically they become more of a target for raiders if they fare well and accumulate assets. By bringing different ethnic communities together in the Bidii Farmer Field School, ActionAid has attempted to overcome hostilities between communities. This has increased understanding and support between them.

Another reason for concern is that people don't own the land they live and farm on. Most land outside of towns is communal, which means there is always a risk that their farmland can be confiscated – and it also implies that there is free passage for livestock keepers and their animals. Members of the Bidii Farmer Field School have written to the county Governor to demand the revision of land ownership regulations, but it is unlikely there will be any rapid changes.

Life changing

The Farmer Field School has been life changing for the women farmers, their families and the larger community. They have been able to diversify their diet with vegetable and fruit production, have started earning an income by selling their surplus for fairer prices, and as a result we see that more children are going to school. It has also brought stability to the area, with people from different ethnic communities understanding each other better and collaborating for a common good. Women are now also much more recognised for their socio-economic contributions in their communities, having demonstrated that you can turn arable land into highly productive land. They feel empowered and are very well aware of their rights.

actionaid

ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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