

VOICES OF SIDR SURVIVORS



*Life stories of surviving victims of Cyclone SIDR
from some severely affected parts of coastal Bangladesh*

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Voice of South Bangladesh
and Gender and Water Alliance



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CONTENTS

Foreword by Joke Muylwijk, Gender and Water Alliance

Authors preface, by Md. Shahidul Islam, Voice of South Bangladesh

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Unheard life stories of surviving SIDR victims, 2016

1. Returned from a valley of death, miracle survival of Razia Begum
2. Cyclone SIDR – a life-long nightmare in Nupurs life
3. Mostafa: Victim of cruel superstition
4. Still alive, Rubee's story of rescue and survival
5. A Fierce night in Asma's Life
6. Catastrophic SIDR in Hamida's life
7. Sabur and his lonely Survival
8. Rokeya, now responsible for all
9. A girl gone missing by SIDR
10. Dangerous moments of Rahima
11. A new life for Jesmin, once stuck under a tree

SIDR ALBUM of 2007

12. SIDR in Mahinoors life, from housewife to roadworker
13. Resilience building by credits, Surjobanu, a fisher woman's life struggle against disasters
14. Pervin, SIDR, vegetables, Aila and salinity
15. Protect our animals for protecting our lives and livelihoods.
16. River fishers and erosion of land
17. Children's life at risk in the coastal belt
18. Voices from unprotected islands: we rather die by a cyclone than slowly starve afterwards
19. Indigenous knowledge helps to reduce the water crises

FOREWORD

When meeting the women in Saronkhola, Bagerhat, who had lost so many relatives, nearly 10 years ago, it was striking to hear that they had never before been asked to tell their memories of the worst cyclone they experienced, SIDR in 2007. They were also reluctant to recollect these very sad and painful days and the challenges afterwards, even till present. But slowly, they appreciated the listening ears, and the attention for the disaster, which they always kept quiet about. Apart from SIDR, also the impact of Aila, which was quite different, comes to the fore. There are some earlier publications about surviving victims of cyclones, but usually only men are asked, whilst women have quite different experiences, often more basic, and which could have been avoided if only there were not so many cultural restrictions to their way of life, and their constraints to empowerment.

During the Capacity Building workshop on Gender, Water and Climate Change, in Bagerhat, facilitated by GWA, the participants learnt to analyse people, groups and villages from an empowerment perspective. They find out how empowered, or disempowered people (women, men, elderly, children and all) are assessing their rights and position with four elements: socio-cultural, economic, political and physical empowerment. For all people these are different, still, about the surviving SIDR victims who we interviewed, we can generalize to some extent. Most have a lower social position than before the cyclones, those who lost all their children, whilst trying to hold on to them, they feel not only sad but also bad, and this feeling does not decrease over time. Economically few have recovered to their position of before SIDR and Aila. Those who managed to get their act together again after SIDR, were totally back to poverty after Aila, when all the land for crops, cattle and vegetables became saline, as well as the drinking water sources. This made it impossible for women to do most of the work which yielded them some income before. Politically, the empowerment could have been a positive process, if women would have been more involved in committees and in local government, however, we have not found such cases. One woman is interested to be a member of the UP, but she can't manage till now. She married as a child, and her husband does not allow her any independent activities. Physically, the cyclones have been terribly disempowering, with so much illness, pain and death, resulting disabilities, lack of drinking water and toilets, with loss of freedom of movement. One woman is now earning her own income in road work, but she is very poor compared to before SIDR, when she lost her husband, and has a double task. Empowerment has to come in each of the four elements together, not just one, because that will not feel like empowerment at all.

Of deadly victims, a very high percentage is women and children. Worldwide this figure is found to be 80%, which is 4 women of 5 victims. In Bangladesh this could be even higher. Gender disaggregated data for victims of SIDR and Aila have not been made available by the Government of Bangladesh. In the future, such data will have to be published, with the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, for which all data have to be separate for women and men, and regular monitoring is part of the agreement.

Cyclones are not a result of climate change, but the intensity of cyclones can very well be influenced by climate change. The rise of the seawater is directly a result of the changing climate and global warming.

Voices of SDR Survivors

This aspect of the problems in the coastal belt worsens the impact of cyclones, and already results in more saline groundwater and surface water upstream, even in nice quiet weather.

The first part of this book is based on the writings of the participants of mentioned workshop. The second part is different, because it was written long ago, directly after SDR, and it was meant to influence NGOs and relief workers.

We have tried to stick to the wordings that the interviewees use, but at the same time edit it into English which is somewhat correct. I have done my best, and English also not being my mother tongue, I apologise for my mistakes. In fact all mistakes are mine. I hope I nevertheless have succeeded in conveying the message of the surviving SDR victims.

This book is not a handbook for development workers, nowadays called a tool. It is a book to enable the reader to hear what poor people in remote places tell us, about their suffering and their courage and attempts to improve their situation and get back on their feet. It is meant for those readers who cannot go themselves to these far villages and dangerous chars. We also hope that policy and decision makers will increase their understanding of the needs and interests of those very poor people and children at risk, who also belong to the citizens of Bangladesh for whom they have been given responsibility.

We thank the Voice of South Bangladesh for enabling this work, and also the Netherlands Embassy for financing this work in the framework of the Gender and Water Programme Bangladesh.

Joke Muylwijk
 Executive Director
 Gender and Water Alliance

Joke Muylwijk (with black coat), Gender&Water Expert and Executive Director of the Gender and Water



Alliance is facilitating the Capacity Building workshop on Gender, Water and Climate Change in 2016 in Bagerhat. Participants are the authors of the unheard case studies collected under her advice and guidance. She also edited this book, together with the GWAPB team.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

November 15, 2007- A super cyclone named SIDR severely attacked the the coastal belt of Bangladesh. Many people¹ died, thousands were injured and hundreds were flown away with floodwater and missed forever. Nature of the area was destructed, and biodiversity was lessened. It all changed into a chaotic devastation. Dead bodies of human beings and animal were found scattered in allover. Inhabitants who survived and fought with SIDR were shouting and crying for their departed close relatives. A very painful situation aroused surrounding my village home where I was born in 1959 and have grown up.

These terrible incidents shook me at the core of my being as the coastal belt is the land I love and I also have lost many of my relatives in SIDR, those who sleep forever in that 'valley of death.' Since then I have had a great desire in my mind to write a book on the SIDR victims. Furthermore, after SIDR I visited many people of the affected coastal belt of the country and recorded unlimited sufferings, miseries, pain and vulnerabilities of SIDR victims: men, women, children and animals.

After nine years of SIDR, Voice of South Bangladesh organized a workshop in Bagerhat under GWA's Gender and Water Program Bangladesh, where participants had an assignment to collect case studies about SIDR victims to learn gender sensitive disaster management.

This publication is partly an output of that workshop along with my own experience and observation from extensive visits at severely SIDR affected parts of coastal belt in Bangladesh, immediately after the cyclone in 2007.

Md. Shahidul Islam
Executive Director Voice of South Bangladesh



¹ Numbers vary between 5000 and 15000.

Acknowledgement

Voice of South Bangladesh would like to thank the team members of Gender and Water Programme Bangladesh for their support, inspiration and contribution to prepare this publication.

The major part of this book is the outcome of a workshop on “Gender, Water and Climate Change” which took place from February 29 to March 02, 2016 in Bagerhat. As a part of this workshop, it was decided to visit SDR affected fields with all participants for acquiring practical knowledge on gender sensitive disaster management through interviewing surviving climate victims: men, women and children. The area which was selected is Southkhali union of Saronkhola upazilla under Bagerhat district.

To publish a book through incorporating the painful stories of cyclone SDR victims in 2007 along with its severe adverse effects on biodiversity was in my mind since long back. Immediately, after Cyclone SDR I have extensively visited most of the devastated locality, including some remote Islands of the country with reliefs and rehabilitation program. It was under my other engagement in development sector. Disaster brought me as an intimate friend to these coastal belt men, women and children. I became very closed with the life and livelihood of that remote island’s people, which facilitated me to learn a lot from them. I preserved most of my experiences and learning through documentation in my folders and mind with care as a valuable collection of life. This opportunity of publication enabled me to put their life stories in place with their other peers of same coastal belt, those whom we interviewed during workshop at Bagerhat on March 02, 2016. Therefore, my heartiest thanks to all those remote island’s men and women who provided their support, friendship, hospitality and finally spirit of inspiration for this publication.

We are indebted to Joke Muylwijk, an expert on Gender and Water and Executive Director, Gender and Water Alliance, internationally as well, who was kindly convinced to provide her support to make my dream in to reality. The field visit of participants was designed by Joke. It covered to collect some surprising case studies, disaster preparedness local knowledge, empowerment assessment and life after SDR 2007. Support from Joke enabled us to make this publication meaningful and evidence-based.

Thanks to all workshop participants for their inclusive dedication to find out some unheard stories of pain and sorrows from victims during Cyclone SDR and to some extent also cyclone Aila, 2009. It was somehow amazing and during their presentation in the workshop, they became emotional as the painful stories touched their heart and shook the core of their beings.

This book could never have been written without the cooperation of our hundreds of SDR victims including men, women and children of coastal belt. Still they are doing lots of work for their survival and living in the most challenging humanitarian environment. My heartiest gratitude to all of them.

I am not so optimistic to believe that the current disaster management system will now fill-up all these gaps of gender sensitive approaches, as taught in the workshop, however if we can properly present the extreme limitations/gaps of gender in disaster management, I think it will be a big success. Certainly, by these ways, one day it will be ensured that, gender equality and diversity will remain at the heart of effective disaster response, recovery and risk reduction work.

Introduction

“My Husband jumped from above into the flood water with my sons without informing me at all. I was not sure what I could do holding my baby. I was just calling my husband, my father, and my children, through citing their names. I shouted Bachao! (Help to live), Bachao! Finding no other way, I jumped from a space of a corrugated iron (tin) with my baby- holding her strongly with my chest. Unfortunately, my Saree got stuck on an iron rod. I was trying to escape but failed. In the meantime, floodwater started to flow with a rough current and turned into a furious sight. I lost my cloth in the flow and kept moving with the flowing floodwater whilst holding and keeping my baby at my chest.”

It is a small part of quotes from Razia Begum of Southkhali union, one of the victims, who lost all her three children in Cyclone SIDR-2007. Her story of survival is as a miracle to us. It represents thousands of men, women and children who survived from the fierce cyclone SIDR and continue to live with unlimited hidden pain and sorrow. It is also a brief answer of questions, why we selected gender as an important issue of the subject of this book.

Bangladesh experienced a devastating cyclone SIDR on 15 November, 2007. Twelve coastal districts of the country were hit by the SIDR of which Bagerhat, Patuakhali, Barguna, Jhalokhati, Madaripur, Barisal and Pirojpur were among the worst hit. A huge number of people died, thousands of people were injured and hundreds of others were missing or flown to tidal surge. The cyclone SIDR simply left behind a ‘valley of death’ and a devastated locality in almost all coastal areas of the mentioned districts.

Those who survived and rescued from these severe adverse effects of SIDR through struggling with its furious attack, I think they are the living instances of diversified and systematic practical indigenous knowledge on rescue and survival. We have to learn a lot from them. They did not only try to save their lives, they had to do a lot of effort to save the lives of their sons, daughters, parents, cattle and so on. Even some of their closed family members sacrificed their life for saving the life of others.

Therefore, their amazing experiences and survival strategies along with success and failure is a most important part of future disaster management. This is in terms of designing disaster preparedness strategies, adaptation, mitigation and resilience building. Furthermore, it is also very important to prepare disaster addressing strategies and policies both its emergency and recovery phases. Since during our visit to victims, we realized that those who are living after losing their parents, sons, daughters and closed ones, they are bearing a hidden pain in their mind. It also revealed to us that women and children are more vulnerable than men in this disaster are. This is due to several reasons like cultural constraints on female mobility which hinder self-rescue, long hair and inconvenient clothing such as sarees, lack of skills such as swimming or tree climbing, less physical strength than males, reluctant to seek shelter because shared communal facilities do not have separate, private spaces for women due to the effects of prolonged nutritional deficiencies caused by less access to food than men and boys.

Unheard Life stories of surviving SIDR victims

Case Study-1

Return from a valley of death: Miracle survival of Razia Begum

Name: Razia Begum

Husband: Md Sarwar Hossain, Age 38 years

Village: South South Khali, Upazilla, Saronkhola, Dist-Bagerhat

Date of interview, 02/03/2016

Place : South South Khali Akon Bari

Interview taker Shamim Hasan

“The sky was cloudy before the flood started and it was lightly raining. A small wind was also flowing surrounding us. It was raining for about 5 days back. Suddenly, someone was told us that, ‘It is told in the area that there will be a cyclone’.

Hence, everybody went to the cyclone shelter and passed the whole night there. However, nothing happened. In the morning we returned home and found that our nets and the chickens were all stolen.



In the next evening, again it was called from the loudspeaker that everybody has to go to the cyclone shelter, we did not follow the order that time. Five of our family stayed in the house. They were my husband, our two sons, one daughter, and me. The children’s names were Rakib (7), Shakib (5) and Sonia (3 months). We were all asleep, when suddenly at about 9 pm we found that the wind was becoming very strong. Our house was

located at the side of the river embankment. Getting up, seeing the strong storm and rain outside, we found no other way than to move to my father’s house which is close to ours. When reached in it, we found it empty, perhaps they have gone to another house (Khondoker Bari). We also moved on and found that about 30 people took shelter on the up-stairs of a wooden house. We also moved there and I started to breast-feed to my baby. Since 12 pm, we observed that the house is shaking and people became afraid and everybody started to shout. In the meantime, we found that the house is collapsing from all sides.

My Husband jumped from above into the flood water with my sons without informing me at all. I was not sure what I could do holding my baby. I was just calling my husband, my father, and my children, through citing their names. I shouted Bachao! (Help to live), Bachao! Finding no other way, I jumped

Voices of SIDR Survivors

from a space of a corrugated iron (tin) with my baby- holding her strongly with my chest. Unfortunately, my Saree got stuck on an iron rod. I was trying to escape but failed. In the meantime, floodwater started to flow with a rough current and turned into a furious sight. I lost my cloth in the flow and kept moving with the flowing floodwater whilst holding and keeping my baby at my chest. I was trying to keep her up, to save her life. Once I could not help swallowing floodwater. My stomach got full of water. Due to the fast floating, I got injuring with painful hits from trees and branches. I could not remember anything anymore, just one thing I can remember, which was continuously in my mind, 'where are my two sons. How could my husband leave me behind in this serious misery without informing me about anything?' I was blaming my husband in thought, and was seeking help from Allah. I had no idea where I was flowing and once I lost my sense.

By the morning, I found myself back on branch of a big tree. At the west side of the tree, there was a fallen bundle of bamboo trees, which saved me to fall on the ground. Somehow, again I caught the tree for saving me. In my nearest side, I found the dead body of my little baby, who had been tied-up on my chest since the beginning of floating on floodwater. I was shouting and crying loudly. Once a man came to me and offered his gamcha (towel) to somehow cover my body as there was not a piece of cloths left on my body. Then I loosened myself from the branch of tree and of the bundles of bamboos. I followed the men with the dead body of my sweet baby and started towards Gabtala Cyclone shelter.

Arriving there, I found that my husband crying loudly by citing names of our children and me.

'Oh my Shakib, Rakib and Sonia, oh my heartiest children, my wife, where are you all?'

When seeing me, he embraced me closely and his sound turned into a painful crying. He was saying me, 'I failed to save your sons.'

Hearing the news of loss of my two sons keeping my daughter's dead body on my shoulder, I fainted. After sometime I regained my senses and I found that the cyclone shelter had



turned into a Valley of Death. Dead bodies and injured peoples were coming from different parts of the locality. Most of the people in the cyclone shelter were crying by holding the dead bodies of their closed one. Some injured people were carried by local young men, those who were injured in their legs, hands, and heads along with other complaints of the body.

I kept the dead body of my baby under the cyclone shelter and dressed in a sari of my sister. Jahangir bhai, a village doctor of our village came to me and treated my wounds, including a big injury below my throat. There was no place in the cyclone shelter, even to stand. Somehow, I managed a space amongst male people. My husband was moving aimlessly like a mental patient and frequently crying by citing the names of our children, Rakib, Sakib, Sonia. He turned insane.

That day we have passed with extreme sorrows, pains and miseries and with serious hunger. Next day, we returned home, however, there was not even a sign of our house, everything taken away by

Voices of SIDR Survivors

floodwater, and nothing left behind. People are going towards the cyclone shelter with dead bodies. The road was blocked with hundreds of fallen trees, which was very tough to overcome.

Finding no other ways, I sat down at the place where our house was located. My husband started to seek my children in that places where we lost them during the SIDR night. He recovered my children's dead bodies at the paddy field nearby my parent's home. Accompanied with my brother, he brought those dead bodies back home. After that, we went to see the house in where we first took shelter. It was looking like a bundle of broken materials. People along with my husband created a space after removal some parts of tin. Oh God! There were 13 dead bodies underneath of those who could not escape anymore from that collapsing house.

Most of them are our relatives. There was highland at the roadside, we dug a hole and put all dead bodies there together. I kept my three children along with them without any funeral which will remain a life-long hidden pain in my mind. Like that, with sorrow, pain and hunger, we were passing our days in the shelter. The next day someone provided us some dried rice and a glass of water.

After losing our children and everything, somehow we were passing our days with severe miseries. In the meantime, Rupantar NGO provided us Tk-15000 as a grant. With that money later we bought some ducks and hens to pick up our lives. We tried to run a business for survival.

After SIDR, different NGOs trained us about rescue strategies to save our life in case of cyclones. Being survived, we tried to make everything again as it was normal. But then again a cyclone hit us hard, it was named Aila.

This time, local young people were preaching about Aila and advised us to go to the cyclone shelter and immediately we went to the shelter without wasting time and thinking otherwise. When we returned from the cyclone shelter at the next morning, we found that everything was flown away by floodwater. Again, we lost our poultry, fish in the pond and everything else.

The second time we were attacked by severe floods. The SIDR turned our area into a Valley of Death, but Aila destroyed our crops, fish, vegetable fields, and finally put us in a severe scarcity of water through replacing all sweet water sources by saline water. Due to salinity, now we cannot produce any crops or vegetables in the field. My husband is now catching fish in the nearby forest and our family has to manage with his small income. Somehow we are alive. ”

Case Study-2

Cyclone SIDR-A life-long nightmare of Nupurs Life

Name: Nupur Begum

Husband: Md Jahangir Hossain, Age: 22

Village: South-South khali, **Upazilla:** Saronkhola, **District:** Bagerhat

Date of Interview: 2.3.2016

Interview taker: Shafiqul Azom

The name of a coastal upazilla of Bangladesh is Saronkhola. On 15 November 2007, the catastrophic cyclone SIDR attacked the area. Since then, the name SIDR resembles a threat, a frustration, a sadness, and a lot of dead bodies to the local people. Thousands of houses were destroyed, devastated. Mothers lost their children, wives lost their husbands, children lost their parents- and a depressing situation arose

Voices of SIDR Survivors

in the surrounding area. Whoever saw the damage and the dead bodies, got out of their mind for a while. Whoever could, extended their supporting hands for rescue and relief.

Nupur Begum was telling the story of these deaths and devastation as following:

“SIDR destroyed everything we had and nothing was left. It was in the evening, there was some light raining. However, we were not warned for floods. One of our cousins from neighboring village told us that a storm is coming.

The Imam from Mosque was telling this news to all villagers. Even then, we could not understand, what was going to happen. Our father came to us and he told me, ‘Dear mother (affectionately address to daughter by her father in Bangladesh), a flood is coming to attack us.’

Then he started to pack-up foods, cloths and prepared to go for the cyclone shelter with us. When we started our journey towards Gabtala cyclone shelter and went outside, we found that the floodwater already drowned the surrounding area and nothing could be found except waves of water. We did not know what to do. Finding no other way, we just jumped into the water. We were flowing with the water and it floated us to an uncertain destination. Suddenly, I found a top of banana tree; I caught it and saved my life somehow, but I lost my senses when I got hit. After getting my senses back, I found that our father was holding us (four sisters) with his strong hand and we observed that our mother holding a tree a little away from us. Later on, we knew that my father kept my mother strongly tied with a gamcha and he picked me from the banana tree to save my life. ‘My father continuously shouted and loudly prayed to Allah so that he gives us the courage of believing that nothing would happen”

“Bhai (Brother/Interview taker), what can I say to you. Suddenly we found that our younger brother is not with us anymore. I told my father crying: ‘Baba, (Father) I can’t find my younger brother. Where is he?’ we started to cry loudly. We passed long time in this devastating situation. When the floodwater started to get down, we saw a little boat coming, which picked us up. We were worried to see that there were 3 dead bodies on the boat. Then again, my mother started to cry remembering my brother. That day we could not trace him anywhere, but after three days of SIDR, some local people informed us, ‘There is a dead body hanging in a beetle nut tree.’

We ran away to the tree and found that it was my younger brother’s dead body hanging there.”

While remembering her brother’s memory, Nupur Begum became very emotional and stopped talking. I gave her condolences and after a while she continued her story “At the end of this life and death struggle, when we returned home, it was difficult to identify our own house, as SIDR left nothing behind by which we could identify our house, Everything was flown away by extreme wind and floodwater. Somehow, we passed three days by taking only drinking water. After three days, some young people of the area came to us and gave us some dry food to eat. Later on, an NGO gave us a tent for shelter and food to eat. We constructed a little tiny house with polythene and started to live under it. For eight months, we lived on the humanitarian support from people. My husband was not present in there. He had gone to Bagerhat (district town) and came home after SIDR. However, after SIDR, there was no work to do in the area. In search of work again, he went to Dhaka and started to pull rickshaw to earn money. I started to cultivate crops and vegetables



Voices of SIDR Survivors

surrounding our home with the support of a Saudi based organization. They also provided the means to construct a house where we were living.

I cannot go out from my home without the permission of my husband. My father is working a lot for my sake; however, I cannot visit him when I want to see him. I arranged a loan in my name from an NGO for support my father's small trade. After my husband knew about it, he misbehaved with me. My desire is to join election as a female UP (Union Parishad) candidate; but my husband told me: 'Where you will get money to spend for election.'

Even I could not put my vote in last election due to control of my in laws family. I am very much interested to study however my husband cannot even stand the idea of studying.'

Now we get warning prior to any disaster. Some people come to the area and warn us, hence we become alert. Some others cyclones titled Aila, Mohosin, Nargis, etc. attacked us again but our concern is that can we ever be out of the dangers of the attack caused by these disasters?

Case Study-3

Mostafa: Victim of cruel superstition

Name: Md. Mostafa

Village: South Southkhali, Upazila: Shoronkhona, District: Bagerhat

Interview taker: Nazrul Islam Akon

"We all were inside our home that night. Mother said, 'No one will get out of the house. It depends on our destiny whether we shall remain alive or not.' We asked, 'What will happened if signal 10 is given?' 'Nobody will get out even if the signal is 20. If death is in your destiny, you will get killed even in the cyclone shelter', mother replied.

Mostafa expressed his experience of SIDR like this when he was talking to the volunteer reporter Nazrul Islam of the voluntary organization Voice of South Bangladesh. Mostafa lost 7 family members was left all alone.

"Abundant water was coming from the south. It seemed like all the waters of the sea were coming towards us. We had a wooden house. Waves took away everything. The land got drowned under 6 meters of water. I cannot remember where and how the water flow took my parents, 3 bothers, 2 sisters and me. I took shelter in a *sherej* tree in Chaltabuniya village. I hold the branches of the tree and somehow survived. I don't know where everybody has flown away. After the day of SIDR, the villagers rescued me from the tree. I did not have any sense at that time.

When I got my sense back, I got to know that my relatives have buried my parents in the WAPDA roadside. I also heard that my brothers and sisters were buried together with 8 more people. Dead bodies were everywhere around us. I only survived fighting the death all night, but none of my family members remained alive.

There was no food, no water. There was nothing but misery and loneliness. All the trees had fallen down. It was difficult to live without food. Some men gave us processed rice. And later, the NGO people gave us a lot of things. They even repaired our roads. A lot of people from the country and outside asked me to go with them since I had no place to live and food to eat. I denied to go with them since I cannot leave the grave of my parents. A lot of people wanted to adopt me finding me helpless, but every time I denied to go with them.

After SIDR, there was no house. With the help of Saudi government aid, I got a house. Some NGO people gave me food and money and I started to survive with those. After some days, my relatives forced me into marriage, and after some days of marriage, we had a son. Now, my wife’s health remains poor. I go fishing in the Boleshwar River. When I don’t get fish in the river, I work in other people’s houses. I am optimistic about my son. I will send him to school and educate him. I will also teach him to go to the cyclone center when storm comes so that he does not make mistakes like we did.”

Case Study-4

Still alive: Rubee’s story of rescue and survival

Name: Rubee Begum, Age- 27 years

Husband: Mujam hawlater

Village -south south khali, **Post-Tafalbari, Upazilla-Saronkhola, District- Bagerhat**

Date of Interview: March 03,2016

“Since Achor (afternoon), we were experiencing the wind and light rainfall. Suddenly the rain started to fall heavily. Even we could not go out. Since Magrib (evening) the rain became more heavy. My father gifted me a radio, I was looking for the weather forecast, but could not get it. I asked my husband, have you heard any signal of flood or something like that? My husband kept silent without replying me. After dinner, both of us went to bed, but I felt some draft of air. The outside wind became stronger and I was afraid, in case some big trees around our house would break and fall on top of our house. What would happen then?

My husband already slept, but I could not. I made a call to my father from my cell phone, but could not reach him. Since then how and when I go to sleep, I cannot say.

Around 11 pm, suddenly I woke-up from fear, I don’t know why. At midnight I saw that everything was destroyed outside due to extreme storm. My husband woke up and went out. He came back into the



house and told that nothing can be found outside, except deep darkness around the whole area. My husband asked us to go to the cyclone shelter and I started walk there with my sweet son. Oh my Allah, we could not see anything outside, and then I could not even find my husband anymore. I shouted frequently by citing his name, however there was no answer. I was becoming mentally insane and started to run quickly, but fell on the ground. My cloths turned like a bundle, which became difficult for me to get released from. Then I noticed that

flood water is coming towards me. I could not make out where I should go. I was so scared that I was sure that death is at my doorstep, and there is no way to live at all. Without finding any road, I

Voices of SIDR Survivors

surrendered to flood water and it was floating me to an unknown destination. Suddenly, I saw a Dalim tree (a tree with little soft fruits) I caught it tightly to stay, but immediately it broke and again I started to float on the floodwater waves.

I felt a strong tree that I was passing, and I caught it. Actually, it was a branch of a tree. The huge floodwater was flowing like a sea and creating shoo, shoo (sound like waves in the seashore). Since catching the branch, I passed the whole night there.

I do not know what the exact time was when I have been rescued, but my night of sufferings could not be passed. I felt that the storm lessened a little bit and the floodwater came rushing passed with less speed. Then I could stand at the side of the tree. Still it was raining. Since I heard men talking and I called, 'Brother, who are you? Please help me to live, Please rescue me from here.'

It was a matter of great shame for me that no cloth was left on my body, nevertheless I had to live and to be rescued, and finally the man rescued me from the tree.

Then, the water was reaching my chest. Some big trees were fallen on the road to our cyclone shelter. It was very difficult to pass that road full of obstacles. And it took us 3 hours struggling. About half a km from the cyclone shelter, a female SIDR victim gave me a *kantha* (blanket made by combining old sarees to prevent coolness) to dress myself in, not to reach the shelter without cloths. I covered my body quickly and was thinking of the destiny of my husband and sweet child those who I lost in the night. I was looking for them everywhere. I was injured with a big wound and both body and mind were hurting endlessly. It was early in the morning in the cyclone shelter when I saw somebody coming with a child. Then I saw that it was my husband, who was also injured, and I became quiet after thinking what could have happened. I was so happy to see him with my sweet child that the pain from my injury bothered me less. When we got our acts together, we sat together in the center and prayed to Allah with a loud voice.

Since the day after the devastated night of SIDR, we gathered all victims in the cyclone shelter. This was a terrible situation. Women, men and children were coming in the center without cloths on. Some of them were crying surrounding dead bodies, some of painful injuries, and some loudly citing their relatives names, those who flown away with flood water and probably missed forever.

I felt very much pain in the cut below my throat. My father came to me and told, 'It is a big injury! How did my sweet mother get cut so badly?' I told my father that I don't know and can't remember how it exactly happened, but the pain is tremendous. He ran away to others in the shelter and brought some pieces of cloths, which he kept at my throat like a bandage.

We became very hungry but there was nothing with us to eat. Since 7 am we found that about 17 dead bodies were brought into the shelter. Among those dead bodies, I identified our elder brother's daughter. She was a very lovely girl and so nice to all of us. I started to cry loudly.

Time was passing and at noon all people were gathered in the shelter. Most of them were injured and many women came without cloths on their bodies. Some were using *kantha* to cover their body. People were busy to bring hundreds of dead bodies from different fields to the nearby road.

However, it was not possible to bury them by lack of white cloths or other materials and dry place.

Those who reached the cyclone shelter prior to start the extreme wind and water, they brought some dry foods, rice and pulses. Furthermore, someone brought a wet bundle of rice and somebody brought wet fuel woods. Through its mixing, they boiled some rice and pulses without any spices even without salt. After boiling they distributed that food in peoples' palm, but there was not even enough for all victims.

Voices of SIDR Survivors

I had no strength to visit my home after all these sorrows and pain of injury, however my husband went there. On his return he informed me that, nothing is there.

Even he could not identify the location of our house as every sign of its surrounding is destroyed. We stayed the night at the cyclone shelter, all together including children, infants, old aged, daughter, son, we all were seated on a wet *kantha* and passing the time somehow. Nobody could sleep due to lack of space and the wet *kantha*. At mid-night somebody shouted whilst passing in front of our shelter.

We all together started to run towards the relief spot, victims were passing over others bodies due to their extreme hunger. I also ran but not fast enough to get anything to eat or drink.

The next day, our UP local chairman came to us with sweet and *chira*. This was the first food we ate after two days, and accordingly passed the day.

Next day, we went home and constructed a hanging house to live in. Somebody came to the riverside to bring some second hand clothes. After that, the army started to provide free treatment and different NGOs started to visit the area. One NGO donated us Tk-15,000 from Saudi Arab (may be Muslim Aid charity) and provided us a tent to live in, which we used as temporary shelter. The donated money we used to produce vegetable cultivation on the yard, which we consumed, and my husband sold it in the market.

In such ways, we were passing our days dreaming of a peaceful life. However, after two years another super cyclone Aila attacked us. This flood made all our vegetables and crops flow away which was our only source of income. After SIDR, somehow we constructed our house, but now again it was totally destructed and taken away by floodwater. All of our dreams and hopes were destroyed by the flood and turned us into extremely poor people. Both I and my husband are now working as labourers. Sometimes I help my husband with his labour. In this season, we collect shrimp seed (fry) to sell in the market and live from that. The whole day we have to work hard to survive in this world.”

Case Study- 5

A fierce night in Asma’s Life

Name: Asma Begum, Age: 35

Village: Saronkhola, Union: Southkhali, Upazilla: Saronkhola, District: Bagerhat

Interview taker: by Rumana Akter

“Since two days it was raining lightly, and the day the SIDR happened, rained more and the wind increased. It was a Thursday, and after evening, the wind turned into a storm. There was no concrete or strong building to take shelter at near to us. I did not know what to do. Since it was risky to stay at home, I went outside and found that the whole area is surrounded by floodwater. The tidal surge intensified.

Finding no other solution, we took shelter at the nearby Mosque, but that was immediately full of flood water. Since then, our father tied- us to a tree where we passed the whole night, only to be released from it the next day by local people. My elder brother was gone with the waves of the floodwater. His dead body was recovered one day after SIDR.

Then I had to face Aila, but this time we did not lose a lot of our home assets, because we were aware about disasters, in comparison with the cyclone SIDR in 2007. Due to Aila, we lost our crops and vegetables in the field. Floodwater from Aila brought salinity in the locality, which is now still making it difficult for us to grow crops and vegetables. Since Aila we are sufferings of food insecurity and malnutrition. Due to SIDR we lost everything we had including the cows to plough. After SIDR different aid agencies provided relief to us for survival.



Two years after SIDR, I got married with my parent decision. I was 16 then. After two years of marriage, I delivered a son. It hurts me that I have not been to school for enough time. Hence, I decided to give my son a proper education. My husband is a seasonal labor. Most of the time he is working in the nearby forest. Our family manages somehow from my husband’s income, which is not much. My husband consult with me for any family decision. Earlier I did not cast my vote, but this time my husband permitted me to vote for an honest person. My mother in law is shouting sometimes, if I go out for work. She told that it is not wise for women to do outside work.

Since after two very heavy Cyclones, we have learnt the following disaster preparedness strategies:

- I look at the weather signal.
- I keep some savings for hard times after a disaster
- I have trained my son to swim.
- We planted trees in our home areas
- We raised the foundation of our house.
- We keep some dry food in store
- We are lucky to have the cyclone shelter next to our house.

Case Study -6

Catastrophic SIDR in Hamida’s life

Name: Hamida Begum; Age: 24

Husband: Shirajul Islam Khan

Village Khuriyakhali, Union: Southkhali, place: Khuriyakhali cyclone cente

interviewed by: Shafiqul Azom, PGUS

When she was asked about SIDR, Hamida got depressed and said, “I wasn’t married yet during SIDR. I used to stay with my father and mother. In the evening, my father said to us all: ‘May be flood is coming. See, it has been raining a lot’. The mosque was giving warning again and again through the loudspeakers. My mother quickly took some dry food and pond water and got onto the entresol with us.

Voices of SIDR Survivors

The storm started blowing very hard and we tried to hold each other tightly. The doors and fences of our house flew in the air. The corrugated iron shade of our house also flew away and we kept sitting on the entresol. My younger sister shouted at that moment saying, ‘something fell on my head’. It was dark and we tried look for the thing that attacked her head. It was a branch of a tree and my sister already fainted because of the hit.

We spent our whole night on the entresol and the next three days we only had dry foods. Then, people from Sadar gave us food and water. SIDR took away our chickens, ducks, goats and cows. I lost my cousin sister that night.

After SIDR, I got married off and I have now been married for 6 years. My father now works in other people’s house and my husband goes fishing in the sea. My family lives on the income generated from fishing. I do household work as well as raise chickens and ducks. I cannot even spend my income without husband’s permission. My husband sometimes gives some money to me and I am not allowed to spend even that according to my wish.

I give vote in accordance with my husband’s choice. I always have to take permission of my husband before going anywhere.”

Case study 7

Sabur and his lonely survival

Name: Sabur Haoladar, Age: 40

Village: South Southkhali, Union: Southkhali, place: C.S.B Primary School

Date: 02/03/2016

Interview taker: Latifa Jahan Ali



“My age is around 36 but in the ID card it is higher. My family had 15

members. . I have two sons and one daughter. I shall talk about my parents later. When I talk about them, I find tears in my eyes. . On that day, the whole sky became dark with clouds. At 8 PM in the evening, it started to rain heavily. I had seven cows. My father said, ‘Go and tie the cows up’. When I went to the cowshed from house, I found out that the trees started to fall down. I ran towards home found my house was under water. All the clothes, goods, stored money, gold was flowing into the water. I had to save my life and thus started to swim somehow. I had no idea where my parents, wife and children were. After swimming a while I took shelter in a long date tree.

My father was swimming carrying my small child of three years. My father understood that if he wanted to save his life, he would not be able to save my kid’s life. So, he stuck my son in a betel-nut tree and nobody knows where the water has taken him. My wife took shelter holding a *Chambal* tree with my elder son. The whole night we fought with the water flow and in the morning the water got down to knee length level. After three days, we found my father’s dead body in the west. We found a total of 7 dead bodies of our family members including the son and daughter of my brother. I went insane seeing too many dead bodies of my family. I did not understand what to do.

Voices of SIDR Survivors

Water is everywhere around my house, I could not understand where to go with everyone. We did not even have enough clothes to bury the dead bodies. I couldn't think much. At the end, we buried everyone near to in the cowshed of the house. That's how everyone got buried. We lived from hand to mouth after that, with the relief of national and international organizations.

I am trying to live a new life. I do not have money and for that reason I cannot go for fishing in the sea. Now, I do earth work to run the family. We do not even get good food to eat. A lot of aid was given in our area, but we did not receive much. I lost my seven cows, but did not receive even one as relief. If we had cyclone shelters at those days like at present, a lot of people could have been saved. Now I am trying to educate my children and tell them that when the storm comes, they must go to the cyclone shelter immediately.”

Case study 8

Rokeya responsible for all

Name: Rokeya Begum, Age: 35

Husband: Khalil Haji

Village: South Southkhali, Union: Southkhali

Interview taker: Khukumoni Buddha



“Now I am quite fine. I was not fine at all during SIDR. I stayed at the side of the river with my three sons at the time of SIDR. My husband went out for fishing in the sea. Nobody told us that a storm is coming. Suddenly we found the wind blowing strongly. I hold the hands of my two sons, tied another son in my waist, and started to run. There were many trees falling on the ground when I got out of my house to take shelter in another house. Before I even understand anything of what is happening, the water flow took us. I swam and floated for some hours and then felt a base of tree under my feet. Placing my feet on that, I placed my sons on an elevated land. I had no clothes left in my body.

In the morning, I discovered that the thing which I thought a tree and placed feet over that is a dead body of a person. I found some cloth floating in the water, collected those, and covered my sons. I also covered myself with a cloth. Then I started to look for my house. I could not even understand which side is east and which side is west. My sons started crying from hunger. I did not know what to do. Then I saw some people handing out cooked rice and water. We also received some and ate it. There is no place and dry fuel to cook. Only after seven days we got some rice again. My sons got overwhelmed with joy when they saw the rice after so long. The story of SIDR will not finish in a day. My heart trembles when I remember those days.”

Case Study-9

A girl gone missing by SIDR

Name: Laily Begum

Village: South Southkhali, **Upazilla:** Soronkhola, **District:** Bagerhat

Interview taker: Shamim Hossan

When we asked how she is, she said, “I am alive somehow, after losing everything in life. What can I say! If I remember SIDR, I get drowned with pain and sorrow. I try to forget about it, as I cannot bear the memory of that dangerous day of SIDR. ‘My husband, can read and write. His business was to run a poultry farm and additionally he did mobile flexi load business. We had two daughters named Sadia and Munni. We were happy with our two sweet children. My husband was a volunteer of the Cyclone Preparedness Program. His responsibility was to warn the local people about disasters after getting a signal of flood or cyclone from the authority. In fact, we were living a peaceful life.

However, the happiness did not last long. It was slightly raining with a cool wind and all looked abnormal. My husband made a call to his office and heard that it was a number 3 signal. He went to the local market to hang a flag of signal 3 for disaster, and returned home. He told me that ‘the weather is unpredictable.’ We finished our dinner together along with our two daughters and went to sleep. However, in the next night he lost his life because of SIDR. Even in the afternoon before the day of SIDR, he was busy with disseminating information about a possibility of Cyclone in the locality. He was moving to the other side of the village. The next day, he was even busier to call people in order to share information about warning signal. After late lunch, again he started to visit many people to make them aware of the danger and this was his role as CPP volunteer. This time he carried our younger daughter in his shoulder. After informing all the villagers, he returned home at about 10 pm. His body was wet, he took his bath and prayed to Allah (esharnamaz). In the meantime, the wind started to blow with speed. My husband’s younger brother came to take shelter in our house with his family members. Since the cyclone started in a full swing, we became very afraid, we strongly held our two daughters.

The area became noisy with the sound of breaking and falling trees outside our house and people started shouting saying ‘bachao, bachao!’ (‘Help me to live’). Most probably, it was at 10 or 11 pm, we were wondering what to do. My husband packed up some of our belongings in gunny bags. From the opened door, we heard only a sound of a wild water flow (sha, sha).’

It seemed to us that the whole area has destroyed and devastated with the storm. It was so dark outside, we could not see anything. Because of the high water level, we went upstairs to our 1st floor made of wooden planks. My husband and younger daughter stayed downstairs. After some time, the water started to rise and collapsed everything downstairs. My husband also started to come upstairs. He could not manage to get to us. Then I heard the voice of my younger daughter, ‘Father Please, don’t leave me alone in this danger’.

Our house started to collapse and I managed to go out together with my elder daughter. Immediately, the floodwater started to take us away, we don’t know where. I have lost my cloths and my body was injured by trees and branches. We were floating on water and our stomach was filling with dirty water from nose and mouth. It was dark and silent. Then I found a tree and caught it strongly, and managed to ride on it. I kept calling my younger daughter by citing her name and stayed on the tree for three hours. My daughter had trouble of the cold but I had nothing to do at that moment. When the cyclone got calm,

Voices of SIDR Survivors

people started to look for their relatives. We heard my husband's elder brother calling my husband's name. Then elder daughter shouted 'Uncle, Uncle!'

He came close to us by climbing the tree and asked me about my husband. Together with my husband's brother we went to the cyclone shelter, which was difficult to reach as the paths were covered with fallen trees. When we reached there finally, it was so full that there was not even a place to stand. Here it was even worse, since everybody was shouting, crying and calling each other.' A lot of people in the shelter were injured. Some lost their legs, some their hands, some were wounded, and they were crying of untenable pain. I covered my body with a bed sheet and I gave my elder daughter an orna (thin shawl). We sat in a corner of the shelter closely together. In the early morning, I looked for my husband and daughter, but did not find them. From the Cyclone shelter, we went to our house, where only part of the foundation was left and nothing else. We called out the name of my father in law. However, there was no response from any side. Arriving at the spot, we found the dead body of my husband's sister. She got left behind of her husband and two daughters. It was intolerable to see them crying in each other's arms. I felt insane whenever I was thinking about my husband and daughter. I kept calling my younger daughter's name.

Suddenly my husband's younger brother appeared there with tears in his eyes and told that- 'Do not call them. They have gone forever to a place from where nobody can reply to any call. Do not call Sadia. She slept by embracing her father forever in some bushes nearby.'

I felt insane and ran to the place with my brother. I found that both father and daughter were sleeping whilst holding each other tightly. I still hear my young daughter's last words, at the beginning of the devastating SIDR 'Father don't leave me alone in this danger'

Her father had strictly followed the last request of my sweet girl. Even after death he was still holding her. When seeing this my elder daughter cried out loudly and I lost my senses, as it was not possible for me to see this horrifying picture. "

When I got my sense back, I found myself lying down on the ground of our destroyed house. My husband, my daughter and husbands sisters dead body were lying down beside me. My husband's brothers were crying loudly. I could not cry due to pain in my chest, I kept wondering where my husband could have gone after asking us to go to cyclone shelter.

There was no highland to burry these dead bodies. Water was scattered everywhere. Later on, we buried them on comparatively higher land. We had nothing left after SIDR. For three days, we stayed in the Cyclone shelter. Later on, we received some relief goods and we survived with those. I started to live in my mother's house with my daughter. My brothers helped me to survive. Sometimes my daughter's uncles also helped us. My daughter goes to school now. Now, I only think about the future of my daughter. If I can arrange marriage for her, then, maybe, I can remain free from tension."

Case study- 10

Dangerous moments of Rahima’s life

Name-Rahima, Age-33

Husband: Sabur Fakir

Village: Bakultala, Post: Tafalbari, Upazilla: Saronkhola, Bagerhat

“I have some education up to class five. What should I tell you about SIDR? It is such a terrible history. Five days are not even enough to talk about it. I had two sons and one daughter. During SIDR, my husband was in my father’s house with my elder son. My father died during SIDR under crushed by our collapsing house. We found his dead body three days after SIDR. Our corrugated iron roof top had flown away with the extreme wind. We started to run away to our neighbours and the flood water reached the nearby pond.

There were many trees around the pond, and I saw someone sitting on a tree. We reached him by swimming through the floodwater, and also sat there. I kept my son on one and my daughter on the other side. Then we waited. Water and waves were everywhere and it kept storming. It looked like a sea. Suddenly I saw that my son was vomiting, and I covered him with my clothes, to keep him warm. Allah saved my son and he recovered. The three of us were sitting on the tree till the floodwater started to reduce. We then started to swim back towards our house where was no sign of our house, where it used to be located. When my husband returned from somewhere I asked him regarding my elder son, Jewel. He simply replied,



‘Yes he is.’

Then I asked him about my father. He said:

‘Don’t worry! They are somewhere. Everybody is well.’

I realized by his appearance and style of response that my son Jewel is not alive anymore in this world. But, that my father had died, no, I could not believe it.

For three days, we have been seeking our father, but only on the fourth day we recovered his dead body under our collapsed house. To be warned

and informed beforehand, that would not have helped us, because we have no radio. And there was no Cyclone shelter nearby our house. Everywhere is floodwater, and it stayed for 8 days. For three days we only ate dry food.

How can I express my sorrows, four children of my husband's sister died, and hundreds of dead bodies we found, this is unbelievable. Now we are living somehow in a world of sadness without belief and trust.”

Case study 11

A new life for Jesmine, once stuck under a tree

Name: *Jesmine Begum*

Date: *02/02/16*

Union: *Southkhali, Upazila: Shoronkhola*

“It has been eight years, still I can see everything clearly what happened. I think that I can never forget that night. The flood took away everything we had. We heard something about flood before the occurrence, but we did not pay attention to it. We all went to sleep like usual day. I slept soundly with my children, till we suddenly woke up finding water in our room. We ran outside and the water flow took us into a village looking totally different. We survived this night by holding onto a big tree branch. In the morning I could not recognize anything. Everything got wiped away. We had dead bodies of people and animals floating around us. I could even recognize most of the faces of the dead bodies. I cannot explain to you how hard it is to find dead bodies of so many known people. Everybody was alive, walking and talking and now, after SIDR attacked, they are no more. My whole body was wet and I got cuts and wounds in different places of my body.

There were trees everywhere so that we could not move. A tree fell onto my leg and I could not move my leg from under it. Most people were busy saving their own lives. I was just praying to god. After three or four hours, some people came who cut the tree branch and got me out of it. Many of my relatives died in the storm.

I lost everything in SIDR. I had gold jewelries which were lost in the water. After SIDR, my husband went to Chittagong for work, to earn money. We live in hardship with the little money he earns. After SIDR, Aila and Mohsin again ruined whatever we had. Now, I have become more conscious and knowledgeable. Now I know what I should do during floods. I send my children to school. When my children get ill, I take them to the hospital. I sometimes buy necessary goods from the market. My husband now gives importance to me. We take decisions jointly on family matters.

We need to know more about floods since we are busy with household work most of the time. So, it is not possible for us to remember all the signals. So, if we could have a book with pictures, it would have been easier for us to remember and learn.”

FROM SIDR ALBUM, 2007

Directly after SIDR, the author went to the devastated village, where he originates from, to hear from people how they are, and to make photographs of the disaster. The cases had the purpose to make decision-makers, NGOs and government agencies aware of the painful and hopeless situation the surviving victims of SIDR were in.



Voices of SIDR Survivors



Case Study-12

SIDR in Mahinoors life: from housewife to road worker

Name: Mahinoor
Upazilla: Galachipa
District: Patuakhali
Interview taker: Writer

When it was asked to Mahinoor how is she? She told “Allah gave us danger. So, how can I keep myself well? You know very well that it is not possible for poor women to run her six members’ family without the help of others, even after she lost her only earning husband in a sudden death. Therefore, I am only surviving somehow with my children and old mother-in-law.”



This was just of the beginning of her history. Continuously, Mahinoor, wife of Ibrahim, who lost his life in the devastating cyclone SIDR, in 2007 on a remote island named Underchar, was describing her sorrows and pains of life served by SIDR and by losing her husband. It was a very painful situation when all the family members were crying and remembering Ibrahim’s qualities.

Hafiz, the younger child of Ibrahim, who was only two years old during when his father died told, ‘*Baba mitha ante gasa* (Father has gone for buying sweet)’.

The viewfinders little boy until now believes that his father will come again with his favorite sweets. However, the reality is that his father was victimized by SIDR and gone forever like the mothers and fathers of thousands of children in coastal belts of Bangladesh.

This was my second visit to this family. I have visited the first time immediately after cyclone SIDR, 2007. As far as I can remember, it was November 19, 2007. The dead body was just brought home and buried in the graveyard. Ibrahim’s mother was not able to tolerate the pain for her most affectionate son’s sudden death and she was losing her sense frequently. Mahinoor got into a fix and the children were crying by their father’s grave.

By giving condolence and after breaking silence I asked Mahinoor regarding the support extended by different organizations to them in this critical disaster of family and wanted to learn the economic status of the family. Mahinoor told me, “although we are poor but we were passing our days very peacefully. We could feed our children and they were going to school regularly. As a housewife, I used to do all homework like cooking, taking care of my children and my old mother in law and many other

Voices of SIDR Survivors

tasks. Even I was very happy with my husband. As a very honest and sincere day labourer, my husband was regularly earning money and provided all sorts of support to family. We had some cattle grazing on the char, but we also lost these during the cyclone. After all, we were living peacefully.”

However, during my next visit after two years of SIDR, I became surprised to see the condition of Mahinoor’s family. We did not find her at home, and heard that she is doing road-repairing work by moving to different places in the area. On the second day, we met with her and took her interview.

The way of life has totally changed. A peaceful homemaker is now a hardworking labourer in the street. Her appearance also changed due to living and working in a harsh environment.

“Since one year and a half, I am working on the roadside for its repairmen. At present, I am working on the roads and getting Tk.50 per day. I have nothing more than that.



voiceofsouth.org

Every day from morning to evening, I am moving on roads and repairing it. After coming back to home, I have to cook food for my family members and take care of my children. Now, I am overburdened because every day I have this double duty. In case of sickness, I have to give another labourer for work to continue my road-repairing job.

During my duties, I keep my little son at home. Due to lack of proper care over the months, he became sick and he is suffering for jaundice (Hb). But I can’t afford a doctor. My children’s education has already been stopped. Within these crises of the family, my mother in law is still with me. Although she has two other earning sons but she is not leaving us as she lost her most affectionate son (Ibrahim) during living with us. If my husband would be alive, for me to work in the street could not even be thought about. But now I have no choice than to do this road work. Furious cyclone SIDR destroyed every dream and reality of my life. Now, I am just fighting to survive with my children.”

This was the last dialogue I had with Mahinoor. Hundreds of painful stories like the story of Mahinoor are now available in the coastal belt of Bangladesh. Vulnerability and misery are silently increasing day by day among these coastal belt communities. We should concentrate our deep attention for the protection of that innocent remote island people.

Case Study-13

Resilience building by credits - Surjabanu a fisher woman's life struggle against disasters

Interviewed by me (writer) during my service to 'South Asia Partnership Bangladesh' as a microfinance coordinator)

In Golachipa, a place of offshore valley in Patuakhali, disasters like cyclones, floods, river erosion, and tidal surges are common, some disasters even take place every year. The people of this coastal area got affected dangerously with the terrible floods of 1970, 1988 and 1998. Finally, devastating cyclone SIDR on 15th November, 2007 hit the people of this location terribly. Within two to three hours of destruction, thousands of people died and millions of people lost everything they had. The remote island turned into a valley of death immediately after SIDR.



Despite all of these losses and challenges, the coastal belt people are moving ahead with their new hopes, aspirations and dreams. Those who survived and not lost their courage, have learnt how to live with the changing situation of climate change and disasters.

This is a story of a struggling woman who is living a dignified life fighting with disasters and risks.

Surjabanu is one of the successful group members of a microcredit program of an NGO. She lives adjacent to Agunmukha river. Her tiny

house was not even protected by any dam/embankment and is situated in a place by the riverside. River is the lifelong partner of her struggle and painful life. As woman of angler's community, Surjabanu passed her life on the dam. Her father is landless poor angler.

At the very beginning of her teenager life, Surjabanu was brought up with extreme family control. She was not so fortunate to go to school. During her adolescent age, once she looked at a young man who was fishing with her brothers. The young man was a day labor. His name is Habibur Rahman.

The next story we can learn from Surjabanu's voice, "Habib was a very sincere, handsome and honest man. He had no close relative in the world. Simply, he was a day labor and fishing with my brothers. He used to receive tk-50/per day as his wage. After fishing in the sea, he frequently visited our house.

Gradually, I got attracted to Habib. But, it was tough to disclose this to anybody. My parents realized my weakness and finally they settled my marriage with him.

Voices of SIDR Survivors

The marriage could not bring any happiness but instead it added more misery to my life. The income of Habib remained constant which was Tk-50 per day only. We lived in a small house made of different dried materials. We used to eat only boiled flour to meet our hunger. In such a sad situation, I became a mother of an unfortunate girl within one year of our marriage.

We kept her name Rexona. I had to do work collectively with my husband. I started to knit fishing nets. Somehow, we began to earn a bit more. My four brothers jointly gifted us a cow .We reared it properly. When my husband went out fishing in the sea, we passed our days without or with a very minimum food. I even a very few clothe to wear. Later on, I heard that an



NGO is organizing samitee (association) for providing small loans. After hearing this, I visited the place and requested them to give me a loan. When the NGO knew everything about my distressing economic situation, they were reluctant to do so help me. They doubted my ability to repay. I burst into tears and I came back home straightaway.

Later, I heard about an organization that provides flexible loans with slow repayment for extremely poor women like us. I rushed into that NGO and listened to their instructions. Being inspired, I formed a group, but I feared that I would again be disqualified for a loan. It was inspiring that after listening to all they had to say, the NGO staff not only included me as a member but also selected me as the chairman



of that samitee with concern and active participation of every member.

I started a new journey in my life with new spirit. Working hard was not a problem because I was born and brought up in a poor angler family. The only problem was that I lacked seed capital, which was necessary to run my fish- net making business. I ran my business with these two of my strengths which boats and nets.

The NGO started the hardcore poor loan program at Golachipa in the year 2005. As a member, I became a mainstream micro credit client within two years, which is fast,

Voices of SIDR Survivors

and was possible due to my hard and dedicated work. My economic position improved within a short span of time.

Before cyclone SIDR, I took two times a hardcore loan of Tk-4000/- and 5000/-, and the third was a mainstream rural micro credit loan of Tk-7000/-. All the money I invested in making fishing nets. Side by side, I deposited my income for an engine boat for my husband. But only when we sold our cow, we could buy the much required motor boat. Recovering from poverty, my life then went well, till the time devastating cyclone SIDR-2007 hit the small river side houses mercilessly, destroying all dreams and aspirations of my life.

We had heard that a cyclone is going to happen but we did not believe it because we heard it once before and were prepared for it, but finally nothing happened. At the night of 15th November, 2007 initially we just felt some sound of flowing wind.

After that, once we looked over the river and saw that a large wave was coming to our place in threatening look. We ran away to the dam with the children and found that the water level was rapidly increasing and it rose to a level of almost touching us

Immediately my husband brought the engine boat to rescue us. We got on the boat but it was very



tough to manage the boat over fallen trees caused by extreme storms. Still, he managed somehow to tie the boat to a big tree. The women held the children tightly in their arms so that they don't lose them in the floodwater. After about 3 hours, the cyclone gradually turned into a normal storm. Water gradually got down.

We returned to our home, but there was nothing left, everything was washed away with the floodwater. We only found some utensils in the garden. Having no alternative, we waited somewhere under the open sky.

In the evening, some people came to visit us and offered one kg rice and 250 gram pulses. We collected a tin pot and boiled these all together, and enjoyed the food after the whole day of starvation. We passed three full days on the dam. People from neighborhood provided us some food. Gradually, different NGOs came and extended their helping hand to rescue us from such a critical disaster.

We are happy that the microfinance NGO helped us to rebuild the lives of many of us. It provided TK-10,000 as a rural microcredit loan to me as well as Tk.10,000 interest free long-term soft loan for the reconstruction of our house and to restart my business. I got in total Tk-36000 credit for running my business and covering our losses of cyclone SIDR.

I was running my life almost peacefully by regularly paying my dues/debts to the NGO. It is said that

‘Man proposes and God disposes.’ Two years later, we were again got hit hard by a cyclone, it was Aila took place in 25th May, 2009. We were lucky that Aila hit at daylight and its duration was short. I lost everything for the second time. But this time I did not take any loan except withdrawing some amount from my savings. Our fishing net making and business with boats is something we can continue to do also with this changing climate, because it’s our way of my income earning, and also possible during floods. After covering losses, I used to pay my dues and then took 30,000/ as a RMC loan which I repaid regularly.

The loans have brought a remarkable change in my life. After overcoming losses caused by Cyclone SIDR and Aila, again I sent my husband to sea for fishing. Additionally, he transports crops, animals and vegetables from chars when the fishing season is low. With this sort of trading with his engine boat, he earned sufficient income.

Once, being a labourer himself, he now employs five labourers in his boat. During the fishing season, he gets a double share - one for him and another for his motor boat.”

Surjobanu proved that with her bold initiatives in significant action, women who use opportunities empower themselves are capable to overcoming losses of disasters.

(The report was prepared in 2009 based on the contemporary background and contest)

Case Study-14

Parvin, SIDR, vegetables, Aila and salinity

Name: Pervin

Village: Nayarchar, Union: Charmontaz, Upazilla: Galachipa District: Patuakhali

Interview taker: Writer

“We have lost everything during cyclone SIDR and Aila. First SIDR destroyed our tiny house situated at the southern part of the river embankment. Then we constructed our house at comparatively higher land beside the road. Then Aila destroyed our house and for a second time we lost it. Then, we decided



to build our house at the north side of the embankment so that floods would not directly hit us. However, it is a matter of great regret that part of the high-rise road was broken by the floods of Aila.

To see the flowing furious floodwater made us scared, and then suddenly, it hit the embankment and broke it. It was very intolerable to watch the scenery that so much land has been lost in the water within a few moments. People were crying and moving to the cyclone

shelter. God helped us because it was day and the duration of Aila was not more than three hours. However, when it left, it kept us under great risk of living on the dam.

Voices of SIDR Survivors

Over the years, we kept living on the embankment. Our life and livelihood are almost dependent on this embankment. We take shelter on it when the water level rises. We also had a boat, on which we take shelter when we see the water flowing over the embankment. After the devastation of flood, we now cultivate vegetables, fatten cows, goats and other poultry, all on the embankment. We don't know what will happen to us if the embankment will break.”

Pervin was telling about her struggle of survival against disasters. After receiving training from an NGO, she cultivated bottle gourds and she earned more than Tk-4000 in that season. In addition, she prepared a homestead garden surrounding her tiny house on the dam. She likes the gardening a lot, and regrets that she has no land for cultivation apart from the small garden. Pervin's husband is an angler, always fishing, whilst Pervin created a green world surrounding her house, which may be an example for all flood victims to recover of SIDR. Regretfully after Aila, these opportunities were made impossible by the salinity of the water and the land.

Case Study-15

Protect our animals for protecting our lives and livelihoods.

In Bangladesh, millions of people in the coastal belt are rely on animals for their income. The welfare and survival of these animals are essential for their livelihoods. The vast char areas are suitable for rearing goats, fattening cows and growing different types of animals and livestock rearing has become the major source of income for the inhabitants.

During SIDR and Aila, thousands of animals died and their owners lost their livelihoods. They had bought their animals with microcredit, and were then unable to repay their loans. The microfinance agencies kept their debtors under constant pressure whereas without animals they could not comply. They were indebted, out of income, and very poor and miserable.

The objective of this case study is to draw attention of different development agencies, NGO's, policy makers to address these issues seriously, as it has so far not been given significant attention We are only thinking and talking about protecting people of those areas whereas people are more concerned about protecting the animals for their lives



Always we hear and observe that many cyclone shelters are constructed for the protection of human beings living in its surroundings. But we have not found any animal shelter in these areas. Even no steps were taken to elevate lands in the coastal areas in order to enable animals to take shelter in times of disaster.

I personally observed that when the tidal surges gets into the area, people try to protect their animals. They run to open the door of the animal shed and tries to free them

to find shelter in any safe place they can reach. Being free, animals start to run to seek high land and safe places to survive. But since they have no shelter or high land established by their owners or otherwise, and they don't know how to climb trees, as a result, hundreds of animals died very miserably and helplessly.

As the animals are the only ways of source of income for many coastal belt people, some of them try to save their animals by risking their own life. It was found that some cattle owners stay at home during serious disasters. They don't take shelter in cyclone shelter with fear of losing their animals and finally die with their animals. Ibrahim, a cattle owner of one of the remote islands died in Sidr trying to save his animals. When flood water started to flow over the land, he ran away to lose his animals, but kept his small children in a place he thought was safe. After untying the cattle, he returned to his child but it was too late and later on he went under water, drowned and died. His son Mokbul is still cries, remembering his father's sad death. (*Case of Mahinoor and her late husband Ibrahim, Case 12*)

Therefore, our objective of protection should be saving animals. Not only to save their lives but also to save lives and livelihoods of the people of the coastal belt.

Case Study-16

River fishers and erosion of land

“We don't know what will happen in the future, we are landless. The river and our life are closely related with each other. As a very poor family, already for years we are living on the riverside. My husband is an angler, so the riverside is our place to live. River erodes the land faster than before. Big embankments were broken during SIDR and Aila, but the riverside is decreasing due to erosion. Floods break the embankment almost every year. So, our living place with our means of livelihood is becoming smaller day-by-day. Our place has become so congested that we are moving frequently from one side to another. By gradual erosion the furious river has come near to our shelter. If any cyclone hits in the future, how will we survive?”



Pervin², the wife of poor angler, was continuously telling her worries about threats and risks of life. Thousands of extremely poor people are leading this life on risky riversides. Actually, poverty and hunger are the powers, which forces them to live in this high-risk area. They fear floods but are not yet aware of disasters by climate change. As global warming makes the sea-water rise, these people are on

² See also case 14 about Pervin

Voices of SIDR Survivors

the way of becoming victims of climate change. Rich and educated people are aware about climate change and prepare themselves. But what will be in fate of these thousands of poor people who have no other place to live.

The big river is slowly breaking parts of the land towards the tiny shelter where Pervin is living with her children and her goats. Her life and livelihood is under threat and she lacks the means to overcome this problem. Development partners and Government need to consider these people's position, and seek solutions to move them to another safe place.

Case Study-17

Children's lives at risk in the coastal belt

Charmontaz is a remote island in the southern part of Bangladesh where thousands of children are living with their families. They are seriously victimized by cyclones like SIDR and Aila, and the situation is worsened due to climate change.



During my visit to that area, I talked with the parents and wanted to know the impact of flood and cyclone on the lives of their children. Most of them told us that they suffered seriously due to lack of pure drinking water. With the flood, saline water polluted the drinking water sources. This situation generated diarrheal diseases, especially amongst children. The

pollution is worsened by the rising sea level. Several diseases spread and it affected children, many of whom became sick and died.

Food is also scarce, and people are poor. Malnutrition is another problem among coastal belt children. During SIDR, even after three days, nobody was there, not from the government and not from NGOs, to provide safe drinking water and baby food. They used contaminated water and became sick. Children under five years old were affected especially.

National and international policy makers need to consider the situation of poor children in the coastal belt and take action to protect them.

Case Study-18

Voices from unprotected islands: We rather die by the cyclone than slowly starve afterwards -

In each disaster due to cyclones or climate change, the worst off are the people who live on the remote islands, which have no embankments yet. During SIDR it was observed that hundreds of inhabitants of these chars lost their lives together with their assets and cattle. The inhabitants grow trees, cultivate land, catch fish in the sea and keep these islands as a green forest. They are not responsible for global warming. In fact, the contrary, because they create and manage a vast green forest thus reducing temperature and absorbing emissions of CO₂. They do not deserve to become the first victims of disasters, worsened by climate change. This is an issue of climate justice.



When I asked the char-dwellers why they are living in such risky areas, their answer is simple:

“To survive in the world, because we have no other way and no other place to live. Somebody else said: “We rather die by the cyclone than slowly starve afterwards.” It is of poverty that they have to live in these vulnerable areas. Solutions need to be sought in rehabilitation after migration, or by reclaiming the chars, and building embankments. Perhaps these are already issues discussed at policy level. Policy makers need to learn about disaster preparedness, list priorities, prefer proposals of solutions for these serious issues, and take steps to protect these thousands of people living in these unsafe, remote chars.

Case study-19

Indigenous knowledge helps to reduce the water crises

An often heard saying is, ‘Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink.’ This was 100% true during and after the cyclones SIDR and Aila. Drinking Water was a serious problem in the affected areas. The water was contaminated in different ways. All latrines opened up and human faeces flowed into the floodwater. River water became saline from the flooding sea water. Small water ponds were polluted by falling trees, leaves, that made the water turn black.



Voices of SIDR Survivors

The situation was inhuman, without any fresh water, even three days after cyclone SIDR. Many children became sick and died from drinking the extremely contaminated water. It was also very tough to bring fresh water from other parts of the country because all transport routes were devastated and not any type of vehicle could reach the area. Although different NGO's provided drinking water to the affected area, this could never be enough to fulfill the demands of the millions of affected people.

However, during my last visit to Charmontaz, a high-risk area, I have learnt a lesson from the local people. I was told that after SIDR, they dug a pond in high land, so that it cannot be polluted by floodwater. They took the benefit of a high raised dam on one side, which is surrounding the locality in between sea level and ponds. They also constructed dams surrounding the other three sides of the pond to protect it.



Their objective was to store usable water for the crises moment and for drinking in general. After Aila when the whole southern belt was flooded by saline water, people of that area used this pond water as their only source of usable water. The place is distant from the village, but without that pond there would not be a real way of surviving during a disaster such as flood.

Not all these water problems can be solved easily, with climate change adding to the salinity. However, we can and should address these important issues in isolated places, one by one. Like the visited village, also in other places ponds with high embankments around it, could be constructed, to increase the chance that usable water will be available during and after a crisis.

Listening to different scholars and hearing their hopeful words, again turned into disappointment, when seeing the reality of disaster victims in remote areas of the country. There the men and women need relief and to be helped with repairing their houses. The lectures and promising reports are not

matching with reality.



Therefore, my request is to all concerned development partners, try to identify critical issues arising due to climate change, and resulting from disasters, prepare a list of priorities and make attempts to solve these one by one. The area cannot recover from the impact of SIDR and Aila, due to rising sea water and saline aquaculture. We should join forces to improve the situation in working on the list of priorities.

