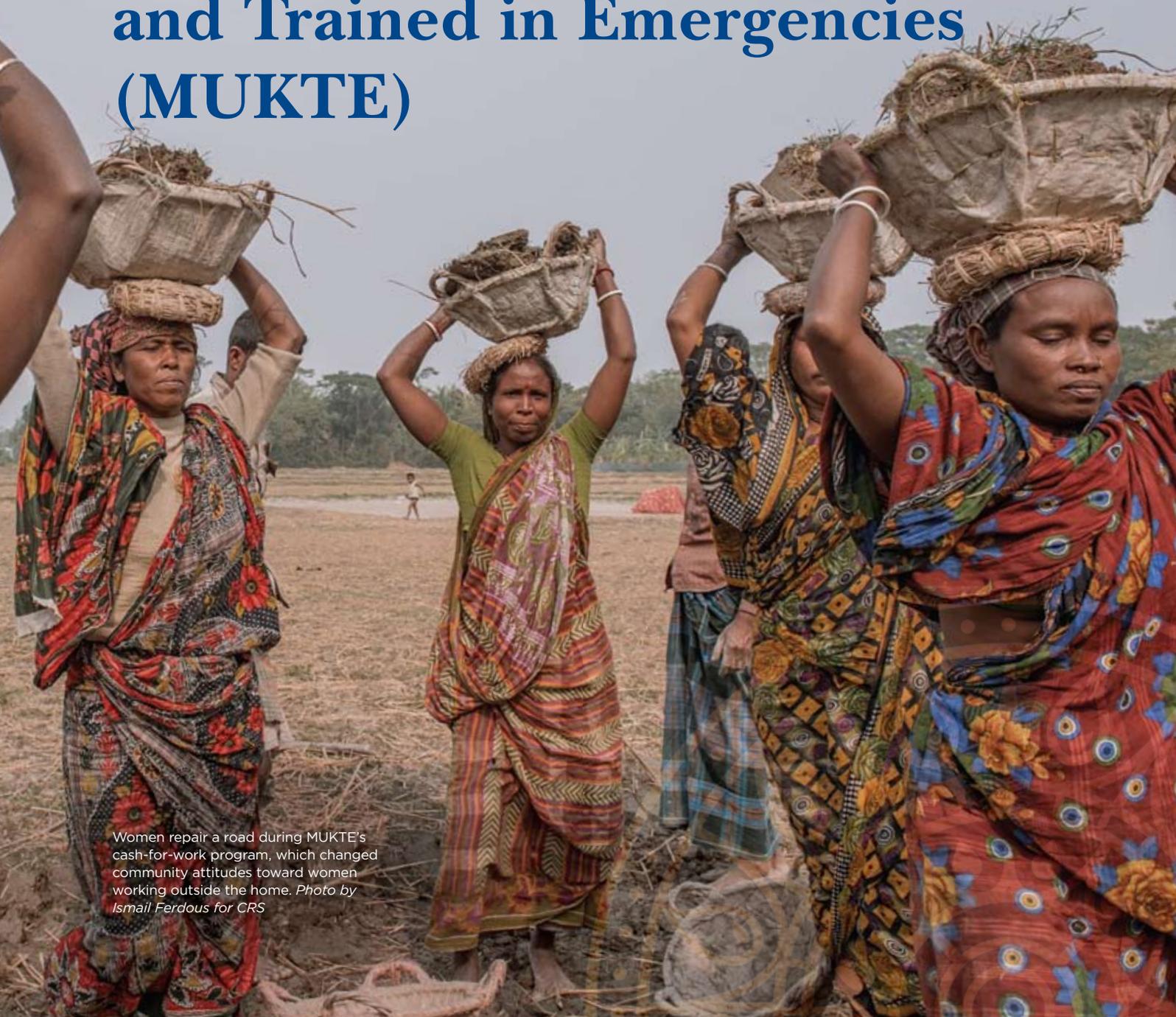


Make Us Knowledgeable and Trained in Emergencies (MUKTE)



Women repair a road during MUKTE's cash-for-work program, which changed community attitudes toward women working outside the home. *Photo by Ismail Ferdous for CRS*

CRS' Response, Recovery and Resilience (R3) program

Cyclones, tornados, drought, cholera and devastating crop disease are among the hazards facing communities that CRS has been helping in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Haiti, India, Bangladesh, Vietnam and Indonesia. In 2013, CRS launched the R3 program to reduce underserved vulnerable communities' risks to multiple natural disasters and build their resilience. A strong dimension of all of these projects was to better understand how people perceive their own resilience. Disaster management and resilience plans developed by communities, households and farmers detailed ways to mitigate and respond to disasters.

Make Us Knowledgeable and Trained in Emergencies (MUKTE)

This project was implemented in a remote and underserved area that experiences frequent natural disasters, including ongoing river erosion. The goal was to support communities to build resilient community structures and households, and save lives and livelihoods in the event of natural disasters. *Mukte* means ‘independence’ in Bengali.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The project directly benefited 30,880 people—or 6,176 households—many of whom were living in extreme poverty. The project reduced disaster risks through two main approaches: (1) Working directly with local communities to empower them to prepare for disasters through a participatory planning process that engaged marginalized people to identify their natural disaster risks and propose solutions to build their resilience, and (2) Strengthening the capacity of the existing government system responsible for disaster preparedness and response, the Union Disaster Management Committee, to support communities to meet their disaster management requirements.

CRS and Caritas Bangladesh used a participatory approach to engage all levels of the community in the design, implementation and monitoring of project interventions. This included a transparent beneficiary selection process. Engaging women was key to project design, as was ensuring gender diversity among staff members. Particular attention was paid to the inclusion of women and other marginalized groups in decision-making processes. The project team worked with the whole community to make sure that the specific needs of different minorities were incorporated into the project. This fostered ownership and endorsement of the project activities, which was reflected in the adoption of water, sanitation and hygiene practices, the reinforcing of homes to better withstand future storms, and the adoption of new gardening techniques to provide families with food, even in times of disaster.

CRS hired local community members as the community organizers, strengthening trust and ownership of the processes and increasing acceptance of the project’s approach. The close collaboration between the community organizers and community members also helped to ensure that the staff understood the capacities, challenges and needs of the community.

To ensure sustainability of project interventions, MUKTE worked closely with households, communities and local government disaster management committees, or DMCs, to develop and implement early warning strategies, as well as to strengthen people’s capacities to plan for, and recover from, natural disasters such as floods and cyclones.



AT A GLANCE

Project	Make Us Knowledgeable and Trained in Emergencies (MUKTE)
Location	Monpura Union, Bhola District, Barisal Division, Bangladesh
Duration	March 2014 to May 2016
Partner	Caritas Bangladesh
Funder	CRS private donors
Budget	US\$498,618

Project staff also worked with the Union Disaster Management Committee to consolidate community-developed risk reduction action plans. The project conducted community and household level trainings on:

- Household DRR techniques (safe shelter design, mobile gardening, seed/monetary savings)
- Water, sanitation and hygiene (consumption of safe water, use of latrines)
- Diversification of livelihoods (through cash-for-work and livestock input support)

Monthly meetings between the community and local government staff were organized to build capacities in disaster management and emergency preparedness and response. Through the project, strong relationships between communities and the sub-district and village-level disaster management committees were established to strengthen the capacity of emergency response, disaster management and disaster risk reduction.

KEY COMPONENTS

Strengthening local disaster management committees and creating village help teams was central to the project, as was equipping them with the appropriate skills to respond to emergencies. There are now clear guidelines so people know the roles and responsibilities of their families, community groups, and the government in the face of a disaster. Engaging and training youth for the village help teams, or VHTs, was very successful and they are instrumental in managing the early warning systems and are equipped with megaphones, radios, information dissemination guidelines and clear action steps for households and communities.

Training local builders to construct stronger shelters

In July 2014, floods affected the MUKTE communities and, as part of CRS' emergency response, builders were trained to construct shelters for beneficiaries of the flood response. This meant homes withstood Cyclone Komen in July 2015 with little or no damage. MUKTE encouraged other families to follow that example and use stronger construction techniques. After the cyclone, even non-beneficiary families became interested in adapting the low- or no-cost techniques promoted by MUKTE, such as a raised plinth, cross nails, cross bearing, and tying down roofs. Improved building practices replicated by non-beneficiaries enabled them to also adapt and become disaster resilient.

Income-generation activities included disaster-resilient vegetable-growing techniques such as mobile gardening, use of natural pesticides, and flood-resistant planting techniques such as raised beds and crop positioning. The new methods were quickly adopted by households, resulting in substantial improvements in vegetable garden yields allowing for increased consumption and market profits. The project also promoted family-level savings of money and rice to lessen the impacts of disasters.

Income recovery through cash-for-work After the July 2014 floods, Caritas Bangladesh and CRS made a careful assessment of the status of market activities and the most appropriate disaster response approach. They then launched a cash-for-work dimension to their emergency response to build

new roads and repair damaged ones, strengthen river embankments, and raise plinths on the most vulnerable people's homes. This expedited recovery in the MUKTE communities so that they could resume their livelihoods and then continue with the project's DRR activities.

Improved responsiveness to cyclone early warning

The project showed positive impacts through improved emergency response during Cyclone Komen. The DMC issued an early warning signal so that the community could make preparations. Field officers met with the three local disaster management committees and village help teams and, for the first time, they jointly coordinated the planning and dissemination of this rapid early warning signal. Previously, warnings had only been communicated to people living on the main road; however, because a wider system had been established by the MUKTE project, the Cyclone Komen warning was communicated to all villages in Monpura Union. Vulnerable people—including the elderly, disabled, pregnant women, and children—were able to seek refuge in the cyclone shelters. The collaborative early warning also allowed families of fisherman to relay the messages, so that they were able to return from the river and take shelter. Many took shelter in Caritas and CRS-built shelters, and the cyclone caused no deaths.



A mobile garden in a basket enables food plants to be portable in the event of a flood. *Photo courtesy of Caritas Bangladesh*

RESULTS

The community reported that their early warning plan has made them more prepared to face future cyclones and floods. The safe building techniques greatly contributed to making households better able to withstand future disasters. For example, when building a plinth to raise their shelters, families now take into account the height of the previous tide or water surge to ensure their plinth is higher than expected water levels. People said they felt that through the formation and training of the village help teams and government DMCs, the local government would be able to better prepare for, and respond to, future disasters.

Before MUKTE, the DMCs were inactive, though systems and structures were in place. DMCs are now functioning after project trainings helped them understand their roles and responsibilities through a study of the Bangladesh National Disaster Management Act and the national Standing Orders on Disaster. They say they feel more prepared to respond to the next disaster. Prior to MUKTE, the community reported that they were dependent on local government and NGOs to aid in their recovery after a disaster. Now they feel they have the skills and knowledge to prepare and recover faster.



The community gathers for a meeting about the early warning system. Photo by Ismail Ferdous for CRS

UNINTENDED POSITIVE RESULT

The project's cash-for-work program changed community attitudes toward women working outside the home, increased women's access to fair wages and built their confidence. On Monpura Island, traditionally men believed that women should only work in the home and care for their families and the elderly. The MUKTE team met with the men during the project's monthly meetings and made household visits to discuss the importance of equal wages and help everyone understand how CFW activities were an opportunity to improve their community through the building of new roads, the strengthening of embankments, and the raising of homes onto plinths. The MUKTE team also invited the disaster management committee members to the same meeting to encourage men to embrace the idea of women being involved in CFW. After a few meetings, the men agreed to work with women for the same wages and allow women to work outside the home.

Women now feel empowered, are claiming their right to work, and report having a stronger voice in their families, which they attribute to earning higher wages. Before the CFW program, women said they did not have equal access to the family's food, but now have larger meal portions. Women are also now participating and speaking up in monthly meetings and trainings organized by MUKTE.

COMMUNITY VOICES

Sandha Rani Das, 59, is the sole provider for her elderly husband and their five children. Due to the family's low income, they were unable to educate their children. They arranged their daughters' early marriage to use the dowry to support the family, a traditional coping mechanism of very poor families in this area of Bangladesh. As Sandha's eldest son is disabled and her husband is unable to work, she works as a day laborer. She earned the equivalent of 75 US cents and 3.3 pounds of rice per day (50 percent less than men) for her labor. River erosion and natural disasters have forced Sandha and her family to relocate and reconstruct the family home 12 times in the last 24 years, making recovery extremely difficult.

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Sandha was selected as a cash-for-work participant for 45 days and was paid a daily wage of almost US\$3, earning a total of US\$143. She used this to repair her house, and bought three swans and three chickens, saving the rest to prepare for future disasters. Her swan flock grew and she sold nine chickens for US\$24. This additional income enabled her to pay for her husband's medical needs and she is still able to continue saving. Sandha's goal is to save about US\$130 so that she can buy a cow and start a vegetable garden.

SUSTAINABILITY

Project participants believe many of the activities will continue after the project ends because people see these contributing to their resilience. These include regular saving (of money and rice), building stronger homes and improved hygiene practices. Some families were hoping to start a mobile vegetable garden in the next planting season. The local DMCs will also continue with the early warning systems, updating their preparedness plans, communicating with the government and NGOs on disaster risk reduction and response, and encouraging communities to continue implementing their disaster preparedness plans.

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CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES

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