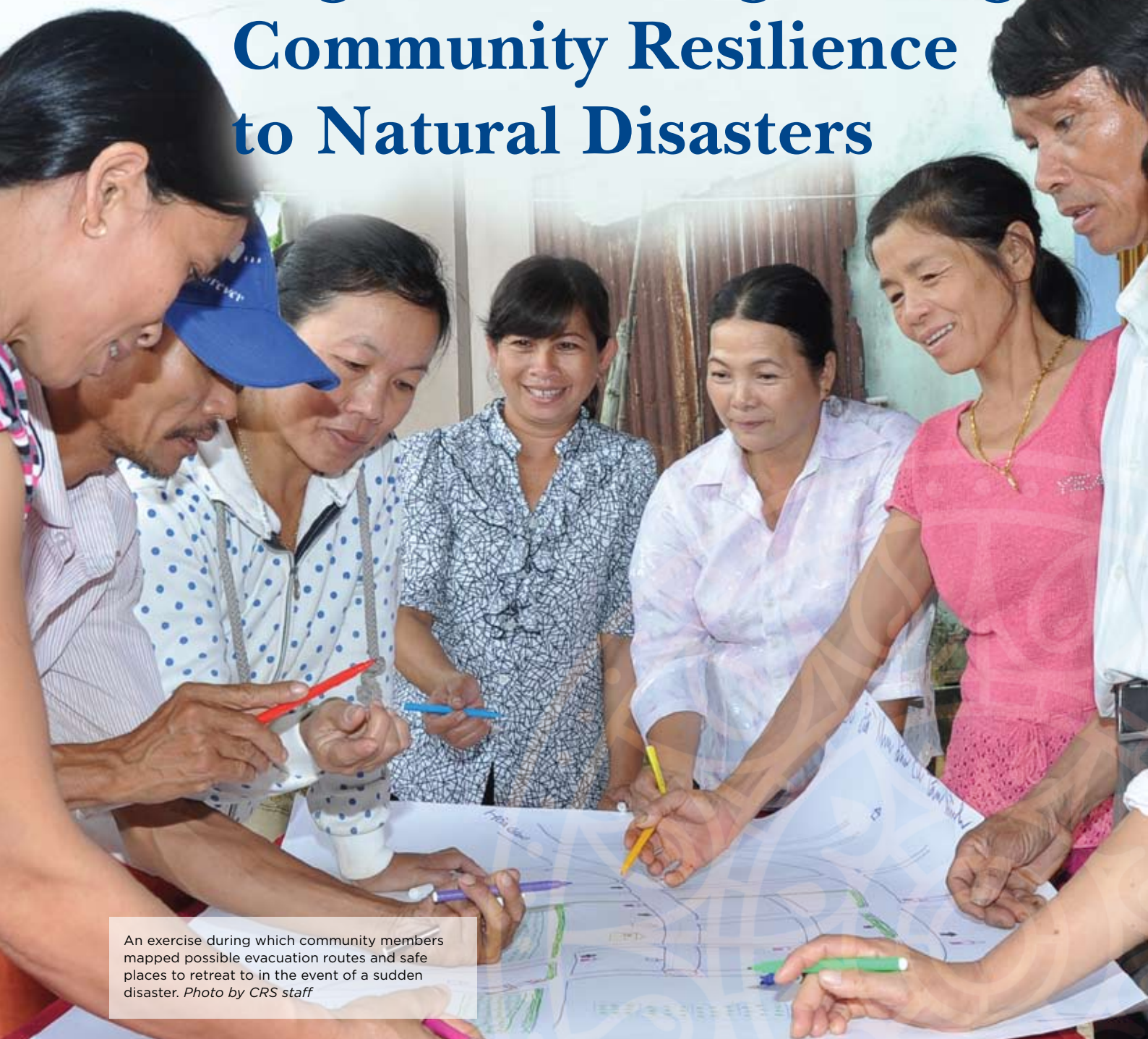


Together: Strengthening Community Resilience to Natural Disasters



An exercise during which community members mapped possible evacuation routes and safe places to retreat to in the event of a sudden disaster. *Photo by CRS staff*

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.

Together: Strengthening Community Resilience to Natural Disasters

The project focused on strengthening the disaster risk reduction capacities and increasing the resilience of vulnerable communities in 27 villages by helping them to prepare for and respond to natural hazards and engage with government for support.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The project promoted the adoption of simple, sustainable disaster risk reduction, or DRR, techniques to help people protect their social and economic assets, and engage with government departments for help in implementing their DRR plans and receiving long-term support. The project also provided training for government departments and ministries, using a practical, participatory model of community-based disaster management that could be replicated in other areas.

35,000

PEOPLE BENEFITED FROM PROJECT ACTIVITIES TO BUILD THEIR RESILIENCE TO NATURAL HAZARDS

With the People's Committee of Dien Ban, a district local government body, CRS formed a management board with district members as well as representatives from the commune-level local authority, District Agriculture and Rural Development Departments, the Flood and Storm Management and Rescue Committee, and local primary schools. Community groups such as village task forces and commune/village Women's Unions also played a key role in project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

A total of 35,000 people, or 8,183 households, benefited from project activities. According to the project's latest survey in January 2016, 65 percent of households cited agriculture and animal husbandry as their primary livelihoods while 35 percent cited daily labor, the sale of handicrafts or other types of small merchandise, and fisheries. Of the project participants, 1,561 households (almost 20 percent) were considered "poor" or "near poor"¹. Some 37 percent of households lived in poorly constructed temporary houses with very limited or no basic sanitary facilities such as latrines.

The district is on coastal lowland, highly vulnerable to severe damage from frequent floods and storms, and communities were generally not prepared to mitigate or respond to disasters. On average, from September to December each year, the community experiences about 10 significant storms, with flooding causing



AT A GLANCE

Project	Together: Strengthening Community Resilience to Natural Disasters in Coastal Vietnam
Location	Dien Ngoc, Dien Phong, and Dien Trung communes, Dien Ban district, Quang Nam province, Vietnam
Duration	November 2013 to May 2016
Partner	People's Committee of Dien Ban
Funder	CRS private donors
Budget	US\$485,894

the loss of life, productive assets and property. When the project started, almost 50 percent of the focus households had suffered flood damage and many had lost water infrastructure (well covers, water pipes) as well as crops, livestock, and other means of earning a living. In 2013 alone, the district was affected by 12 storms in which 4 people died; 49 were injured; 79 houses collapsed; 527 houses lost their roofs; hundreds of hectares of cash crops and rice were waterlogged, damaged or destroyed; and more than 32,000 livestock animals and poultry died.

These vulnerable households had never received support or training on how to manage their risks and deal with the disasters they faced. The government had limited skills and funds to respond effectively, early warning systems were lacking, and evacuation plans weak or non-existent. This caused desperate households to often engage in negative and/or unsustainable coping strategies that severely compromised their ability to recover.

1. According to the Government of Vietnam's ranking criteria, "poor" households are those with an average monthly income of less than US\$18 per person and "near poor" households are those with an average monthly income of US\$18.10 to US\$24 per person.

KEY COMPONENTS

Participatory approaches Participatory village planning for disaster preparedness involved most villagers. Project facilitators used simple methodologies to help the community collectively identify who were the most vulnerable and the reasons for their vulnerability. This resulted in a DRR plan that addressed a diversity of needs, with a clear timeframe and agreement on roles and responsibilities among stakeholders.

Engaging government Local government supported the development and implementation of the community DRR plan. The project strengthened local capacities to engage in activities to build disaster resilience. It used a community-based approach to build the capacity of about 80 district- and commune-level government officials directly responsible for managing, implementing and monitoring the government DRR plan.

RESULTS

Vietnam in general and its coastal areas specifically have been gravely affected by climate change. The situation in Dien Ban district has become more critical with floods and storms predicted to be more severe. Households, communities and government bodies responsible for DRR and disaster response had not been able to plan for, mitigate and respond to disasters. They identified the absence of skills and planning as a major threat to their resilience. After the project, participants said that it had fully met the needs of both the government and the community in increasing DRR capacities.

The project sought to leverage the political commitment and existing systems of the local authorities responsible for DRR by supporting local government agencies to activate existing DRR policies, while helping vulnerable communities to protect their lives and livelihoods from natural hazards.

Project participants noted that the project's support to community-based DRR planning and the implementation of plans of action contributed to the community's increased resilience and reduced risks. The community together discussed their risks to natural disasters and the capacities they had to manage them. They identified who was most vulnerable and needed the most assistance during disasters and why. Through the community DRR planning process, government staff and community members learned to identify the internal and external resources, including institutions and organizations, that could help them cope with natural disasters.

Needs-based DRR plans were designed for gradual change, starting with families strengthening their own DRR capacities, then moving to a commitment from community members and local government to support DRR measures and the implementation of the community action plans. This close collaboration did not exist prior to the Together project. As a result, the post-project survey showed that 78 percent of households in project areas had protected their assets and livestock, and 92 percent had adopted general DRR preparedness measures introduced through the project, compared with 15 percent and 14 percent respectively before the project.



An "evacuation" takes place during a community disaster simulation.
Photo CRS staff

Participants said the project's contribution to the increased capacity of village task forces was very valuable. They said the variety of training built their capacity to engage in and manage community-based DRR planning and to develop household-level preparedness and response plans. Training in search and rescue, including first aid, was also appreciated. Other capacities that participants said were especially helpful were understanding techniques to reinforce their homes, establishing and managing early warning systems, identification of evacuation sites, and the mock drills enabling them to practice their new skills.

The village task forces said they would continue using most of the skills they had learned, especially those that applied to their daily tasks. They said they were more confident than they had been before the project, especially because they now had disaster preparedness and response equipment—small search-and-rescue boats, life vests and battery-operated microphones to disseminate early warning information—and had been trained in its use.

Men and women said during the post-project study that they were much more confident that they were able to prepare themselves and their families to reduce their disaster risks after participating in the project.

LEARNINGS

A sustainable local human resource Training of trainers built community facilitators' capacities to help move the DRR plan forward. They will continue their role at the project sites, and the government is also engaging them in DRR mobilization in communities that were not part of the project. They are expected to be formally recognized by government, resulting in the sustainability of their work.

DRR interventions in rural and urban communities

Current DRR approaches might not work for all communes due to rapid urbanization, which calls for a different approach. DRR models would need to be adapted to apply to urban or peri-urban settings.

High potential for replication Local groups appreciated the methods and specific, simple tools and templates that will be easy to replicate elsewhere.

Diverse awareness-raising methods were used, with creative participation from a wide range of partners. The villages used community events to convey DRR messages through a range of media. The government will continue using these across a wider geographic area.

COMMUNITY VOICES

Community facilitator Thien Thi Phan, who participated in project activities in Dong Lanh village, led meetings in which community members mapped out evacuation routes and safe places to retreat to in the event of a sudden disaster. She and her neighbors elevated their animals' living spaces and learned where they could take cows and pigs when floods occurred. Phan built platforms for her rice, which she stores in plastic bags during the flood season. Now, when her home floods each season, her grain stays dry. "Before, we didn't have good forecasts, but now we can get early warnings, so we have more days to prepare for a flood," she said.

The community-based DRR plans at the village and commune levels resulted in local villages' increased awareness of the risks of natural disasters. Communities also received training in fundraising and budget management for community DRR funds. They started raising funds from villagers, local businesses, organizations, and local people who were working away in cities.

SUSTAINABILITY

Seven out of ten priority activities were ranked as highly likely to be continued after the project ended: (1) reinforcing homes; (2) properly storing food and drinking water in preparation for floods; (3) knowing where/how to evacuate assets and animals; (4) protecting water sources; (5) maintaining communications during power outages; (6) village-level first aid; (7) reinforcing animal shelters.

The communities and local authorities said they would maintain the seven DRR activities once the project was completed because (i) they were now aware of the importance of critical and impactful DRR activities; (ii) they thought that all these would benefit them by reducing their losses during future disasters; and (iii) they felt that the knowledge gained through the project had demonstrated positive impacts and would result in long-term behavior change and thus they were willing to mobilize their own resources to continue following these DRR priorities.



Community facilitator Thien Thi Phan and Duong Thi Bach Nguyen, a CRS project officer, review a disaster preparedness plan. They worked with local government to establish evacuation sites, identify vulnerable households and enhance early warning systems. Photo by Jennifer Hardy/CRS

The DRR fund, of about US\$1,500, was used to maintain early warning equipment and implement local initiatives to support the most-affected households, such as building disaster-resistant houses.

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CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES

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