

Community Based Disaster Preparedness Project in India



CRS beneficiary Patitpawan Das demonstrates a knot in a rope to be used for flood rescue that he learned to tie through a search and rescue training, part of a CRS Community Based Disaster Preparedness Project

• Photo by David Snyder for CRS

Disaster Preparedness Saves Lives in India

Disaster Preparedness Crisis linked to natural disaster is all too common in India. Eighty percent of the country is vulnerable to cyclones, floods, earthquakes, and landslides. Approximately 5,700 kilometers of India's coastline is exposed to severe cyclones and about 40% of India's population lives within 100 km of the coastline. Data for the period 1980-2000 indicates that on 370 million people in India are exposed to cyclones every year (World Bank). With more than 60 years of experience working in India, Catholic Relief Services has responded to many emergencies, providing food and other relief items in the wake of devastating natural disasters.

Catholic Relief Services recognizes that investing in disaster risk reduction assists communities to mitigate impact and prepare for disasters in order to reduce negative consequences. In addition to responding to emergencies, CRS' focus in recent years has been on community based disaster preparedness (CBDP) projects that empower communities to manage their own disaster risks and be the first line of defense against hazards like floods and cyclones. Natural disasters are part of life in India. Mitigating impact and being prepared for when they do occur has become the thrust of CRS India's disaster management approach.

Hands-On Training Where it Matters Most

CRS works with villagers in vulnerable communities to facilitate the development of disaster management plans. These plans include disaster risk mapping, the identification of the most vulnerable as well as measures the community will put into place to increase their resilience to disasters.

To ensure that each community takes ownership of the project, a Village Development Management Committee (VDMC) selects individuals from within the community best suited for and committed to the various trainings offered through the project. These people are members of task forces responsible for different aspects of disaster management. The project criteria requires a balanced representation of women, men, elderly and different caste groups in the VDMC to ensure that the most vulnerable are served by this community structure.



18-year-old Nakaulanada Das stands by a water pump in the village of Bhaunreswar in Orissa State, where he is trained in water and sanitation management or issues through the CRS CDBP project. The water pump is elevated so that it is accessible even during floods.

• Photo by David Snyder for CRS

Communities establish a number of task forces that best meet their needs:

1. Early warning system team
2. Evacuation, search & rescue team
3. Medical & first aid team
4. Damage assessment team
5. Relief & coordination team
6. Water & sanitation team
7. Shelter management team
8. Cattle care team

CRS and its partners are developing critical skills where they are needed most - in villages where disasters are most likely to happen. Communities organize periodic mock drills to test emergency response systems and allow the task forces and communities to practice their skills, before disaster strikes.

Patitpawan Das, a villager from Bhaunreswar in the State of Orissa who was trained in search and rescue techniques says “I have a very good reputation in the village that I do good work, so they said that I should be in the task force. I wanted to be on the search and rescue task force to help my community.”

CDBP project participant Sujata Mohanty demonstrates how to clear water from the lungs of a drowning victim in the village of Bhaunreswar in Orissa, India, one of the life saving skills she learned in her emergency first aid training as part of the project.

• Photo by David Snyder for CRS

Das and four other villagers, chosen for their community involvement as well as their physical fitness, were trained for three days in a variety of search and rescue techniques by the Civil Defense Force, a government unit specializing in search and rescue. Equipped with simple, readily available materials like ropes for rescue and plastic bottles to be used as flotation devices, Das and his fellow trainees know they are now the village’s first responders capable of saving lives until additional help can arrive. This is especially important in the many remote areas in India where cyclones and floods occur frequently and access to the area is difficult.

For Das and the other villagers, the CDBP project has given them an important new skill set and a newfound confidence in their ability to prepare for the next disaster.

“This is a very good program and especially the skills that we are getting through trainings,” Das said. “Earlier we were not aware of these kinds of skills, so it’s very beneficial to have these kinds of programs so we can learn more.”

Scaling up

With increasingly unpredictable rains and tropical storms, more communities need to be prepared to manage their disaster risks. CRS has developed a Community Based Disaster Preparedness How-To Guide to assist field practitioners to plan and implement similar programs.



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