

20 November 2007, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Reflections on the Sidr response: *an opportunity for more accountable humanitarian action*

On the 15th November cyclone Sidr hit the southern Bangladesh coast with winds of up to 240km per hour, flattening houses and crops, and leaving a trail of devastation. The Bangladesh Ministry of Disaster Management estimates the death toll to be 2,625, although the Bangladesh Red Crescent estimates it could actually be as high as 10,000. Over 4 million people are affected and more than 900,000 houses damaged. The Government of Bangladesh has so far received pledges of emergency aid worth over \$140 million.



While the early warning system saved many lives, the devastating effect of cyclone Sidr is clearly evident

Photo courtesy of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Amidst this, information from the field is still relatively scarce and it will take a few more days until the actual damage and casualty figure will be known, the resources needed for relief and rehabilitation more accurately assessed and the response strategies more carefully drafted. Until then, agencies involved in the immediate response should not forget some key lessons from past experiences in disaster relief and reconstruction: that community participation and transparency from the very first and critical stages of relief intervention are fundamental in reducing trauma, ensuring appropriate solutions, equity, community ownership and accountability.

As immediate emergency response continues, there are reports that, in some districts, disaster survivors are already starting to rebuild their houses, a reminder to the humanitarian community that relief efforts need to consider rehabilitation and recovery plans and, with that, the local context: existing resources and the needs of local communities. And at a time when public appeals have

already been launched in European countries and the US, humanitarian NGOs in particular will need to balance diverse pressures to spend money and show quick results with the need for thorough assessments and proper accountability mechanisms, geared towards disaster survivors in particular. For agencies working through partners, this is likely to require special attention, to ensure that local partners have the capacity to absorb the funds that are being raised, while continuing to deliver high quality service.

At times like these, a question in the mind of many humanitarian workers is “are we serving better this time?” And a positive answer will be heavily linked to whether:

- Affected communities have access to *timely* and *relevant* information on different aspects of the intervention including plans, procedures and entitlements.
- Appropriate mechanisms are developed at the local level to enable affected communities to actively participate in the response (in needs assessments, program design, planning, implementation and evaluation) *and* to articulate their grievances and concerns.

For the 10 HAP members* that work in Bangladesh directly or through partners, this emergency response is an opportunity to better address the challenges of providing high quality and accountable humanitarian programmes, and to show proof of their commitment to implement the [HAP Principles of Accountability](#).

The HAP Field Team is planning to monitor the accountability of HAP members to disaster survivors throughout the emergency response cycle using the requirements and means of verification in the 2007 [HAP Standard](#) in Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management.

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* These are: CAFOD, CARE, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide, DanChurchAid, MERCY Malaysia, Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK, Tearfund and World Vision International.