

How Calcutta Rescue builds climate change resilience into its development programmes

Ground Realities

When asked about the changing climate, Sulata Sardar, a slum resident in Kolkata, is resigned. “The weather keeps getting worse”. Ms. Sardar speaks from experience. In 2009, the then 40-year-old lived in the Sunderbans - 110km south of Kolkata - and one of the largest mangrove forests in the world. On 25th May 2009, Cyclone Aila ravaged the region leaving over 1 million Indians and Bangladeshis homeless¹ - including Ms. Sardar and her young family. They migrated to Kolkata where she had relatives staying in a slum in the eastern part of the city.

Fast forward to May 2020. Another super cyclonic storm, Cyclone Amphan, struck the region damaging 1 million homes in the district of South 24 Parganas alone (immediately south of Kolkata). Ms. Sardar’s urban home was destroyed as well. Her house, a fragile structure made of bamboo, makeshift wood pieces and plastic, was blown away by the storm, like many in her community. A local NGO, Calcutta Rescue (CR), which seeks to improve the conditions in urban slums, provided some of the materials to help rebuild her home.

“It never used to be like this”, Ms. Sardar laments, “not when I was growing up. We would catch crabs and fish and sell them in the Sunderbans. People would farm the land. But with the regularity of these excessive storms, the salt water is destroying the soil making the land un-tillable. Ponds are disappearing along with pond fish like rohu. It is almost impossible to make ends meet in the Sunderbans these days,” she says, “many people are moving to Kolkata”.

While economic opportunities in the city are better, she still feels vulnerable to the environment. “It’s seeming to be getting hotter, maybe because the trees are disappearing with each cyclone,” she says, “and we never know when the next Cyclone will hit”.

¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/bangladesh-hundreds-thousands-still-homeless-three-months-after-cyclone-aila>

Climate Change

She has good reason to be concerned. According to the 6th Assessment Report of the Working Group II of Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC), Kolkata is among the top 10 cities across the world that face the most dangerous multi-hazard risks like cyclones, floods, droughts, earthquakes, landslides and are most vulnerable to disaster-related mortality.² "A city like Kolkata will face a double whammy with heat and humidity plus the impact of increased frequency of cyclones." said climate scientist Anjal Prakash, one of authors of report. Most worryingly, Kolkata faces the significant threat of submersion by 2050.

The Role of the NGO - Calcutta Rescue

Background

From its inception 40 years ago, the NGO, Calcutta Rescue (CR) has adopted a development approach towards its work in health and education support for the slum dwellers in Kolkata, India. This approach is based on 2 interconnected approaches. Firstly, providing acute and chronic health care to the poor and secondly, reducing the vulnerability to illness of the inhabitants of these slums. This latter focus of Calcutta Rescue has directed its work towards improving the resilience of both the slum communities to all sources of ill-health (environmental factors, wars, economic shocks, and climate change) and the organisation itself.

CR has a presence in over 50 of Kolkata's slums with potential touch points with close to half a million residents. It is, therefore, well placed to be a force for change.

CR programmes to improve the resilience of the slum communities have included reducing poverty and inequality (adult skills training & direct cash handouts to attend clinics) and improving access to health (community health outreach programmes), education (after school education for children), sanitation (building toilets), clean water (Arsenic extraction systems) and food (staples given at clinics).

CR has recognised that organisational resilience is equally important and has looked to strengthening its health system capacity with improved responses to direct emergencies (extreme weather events and pandemics), environmental harms (air pollution & vector-borne diseases) and social disruption (climate change population displacement, worsening poverty, undernutrition, mental and heat stress). This has been done by expanding its workforce, extending its fundraising to include national voluntary sources of finance, increasing its outreach capacity and developing its health information systems to monitor the communities, reduce health risk and exposure and provide research support.

² <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/kolkata-to-face-double-whammy-of-heat-waves-frequentcyclones-warns-ipcc-report/article65186905.ece>

Dealing with Climate Change

70% of CR's funding come from the community volunteers in the Global North and there is an annual conference of all these volunteers in Europe. At the last international meeting in Zurich in June 2022, there was a move for the organisation to focus attention on the health consequences of Climate Change. It was recognised that all the health threats currently faced by the slum dwellers were likely to get significantly worse with accelerated climate change and that CR needed to build on and expanding its current approach to organisational and community resilience.

In the space of a few short months, the NGO has embraced these concerns and has created a working group to assess community and organisational vulnerability, capacity and adaptation requirements to meet the health threats from climate change. The CR group has used and modified the World Health Organization (WHO) *Operational framework for building climate resilient health systems* 2015 to help it structure its response to building climate change resilience across the organisation.

Leadership

CR's working group will lead an integrated approach to formulating Climate Change policy.

The CR leadership recognises the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration with city departments of housing, water, food, waste, energy, transport & sanitation because climate change will create health risks from other sectors.

The CR Leadership recognises the importance of community engagement, participation and empowerment in developing community resilience. It has a particular focus on gender equality, which is especially important in the context of Climate Change since women are 14 times more likely to die than men due to its effects.³

Workforce

Climate change will i) create longer more extreme and more frequent weather events (floods, droughts, storms, heatwaves), ii) increase vector, food and water borne disease, iii) increase poverty, population migration, undernutrition, and heat and mental health stress, which will significantly increase health needs which the workforce must be ready and trained to address.

In response, CR has begun to review its 180-strong workforce and invest in community outreach workers to identify the most vulnerable & educate the communities on climate change health treats.

³ <https://www.undp.org/blog/women-are-hit-hardest-disasters-so-why-are-responses-too-often-gender-blind>

In addition, CR has committed to increase attention on disaster planning and food distribution during times of acute shocks (floods, pandemics).

CR has begun training its workforce in emergency health preparedness and climate change understanding in general.

CR recognises the importance of strengthening links with other sectors which are not under CR control (water, sanitation, waste, food, transport).

Health Information

CR recognises the importance of accurate, reliable, timely, available information to allow it to assess vulnerability in the community, gaps in capacity and the adaptations required - a significant learning from the COVID pandemic.

CR recognises the value of information to provide an early warning system for extreme weather, pollution, heatwaves and vector borne diseases.

CR is committed to ongoing health and climate change research (eg establishing the link between wood burning cooking stoves and respiratory illness, developing the cleaner improved wood burning stove and then monitoring the health benefit).

Health Technologies (medicine, vaccines, surgical equipment, PPE)

As part of the Working Group's considerations, CR will examine its health technologies to make them as climate change resilient and sustainable as is possible. This includes looking at using dry powder respiratory inhalers, solar powered devices, electric vehicles and waste recycling.

Service Delivery

All health programmes and policies in CR are now informed by climate change whether from improving indoor air quality, vector, food and water-borne diseases, nutrition, Arsenic removal from drinking water to managing heatwaves.

CR is increasingly looking beyond the immediate caused of disease to consider the climate change induced environmental (air pollution, water, waste, food, housing) and social (migration, poverty, undernutrition) determinants of illness.

CR is developing emergency preparedness plans to better manage extreme weather events (floods, storms and heatwaves).

Health Financing

CR is well aware of the costs involved in climate change mitigation and adaptation, financial losses that extreme weather events will cause (damage to infrastructure and equipment),

and the increased costs of medications, vaccines and equipment when demand is high. CR is committed to using its limited finances to maximise its ability to prepare, prevent, adapt and mitigate the health consequences from climate change

To date CR has not yet applied to climate change funding mechanisms like the Global Environmental Facility, Special Climate Change Fund, Kyoto Adaptation Fund nor the UNFCC Green Climate Fund. Instead, CR has attracted new money from national corporate social responsibility fund raising activities.

Conclusion

Ms. Sardar has every right to be concerned about the changing weather and the effects on her and her family. However, her partnership with Calcutta Rescue is important. It is equipping her with the tools and building her resilience, which will be required to combat the future threats of Climate Change. That is reassurance enough to give her some peace of mind.



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Ms. Sardar and her son and daughter.