

POPULAR THEATRE ***Effective Tool for Raising Awareness***

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Introduction to the Tool

Popular Theatre is an effective tool that is well accepted by communities, and it is playing a significant role in the field of community-based disaster risk management in Bangladesh. The broad objective of the tool is to build disaster-resilient communities.

The specific objectives of the tool are to:

- Raise awareness
- Enhance capacity
- Promote preparedness at the family and community levels
- Develop community ownership

Its geophysical features make Bangladesh a disaster-prone country. Cyclones, tidal surges, floods, river bank erosion, drought and other disasters are regular occurrences in Bangladesh. Natural disasters cannot be prevented by human beings, but the risks can be reduced to some extent through structural measures. Due to its poor socio-economic conditions, however, Bangladesh lacks the capacity to do this. Thus, disaster risk reduction through community empowerment is very important in the context of Bangladesh.



Project Brief

The Bangladesh Disaster Preparedness Centre (BDPC) successfully adopted the tool to implement a Disaster Preparedness and Management Plan for the Pabna Irrigation and Rural Development Project (PIRDP) and the Meghna-Dhonagoda Irrigation Project (MDIP). These projects were jointly implemented by the water development board of Bangladesh (BWDB) and the BDPC in 2003-2004, with the assistance of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The objective of the project was to raise awareness of disaster risk reduction related to embankment breaches.

Relevance of the Tool

Information sharing is very important for community empowerment, but in Bangladesh, information sharing with community members is not very easy. People lack access to electronic and print media due to their poor socio-economic conditions and low literacy rates. To address this reality, popular theatre has been identified and adapted in the project as an effective information dissemination tool which can be easily implemented in every part of the country by involving the local community and using local resources.



Application of the Tool

The project focused on raising awareness and enhancing the capacity of community members regarding disaster preparedness and emergency response to reduce risks due to embankment breaches. The popular theatre has been adapted as a tool to achieve the objective of the project. The following steps were taken to utilize the tool:

Step 1: Write a script

A script was developed by incorporating key messages related to the project goals and objectives. Local popular folk forms and local cultural norms and values were given priority consideration during script development.

Step 2: Select a venue

In consultation with the community and stakeholders, a number of possible venues were identified for holding the popular theatre performances. Venues were selected based on the idea of promoting "mass participation."

Step 3: Form a group of performers

A performer group was formed by involving community representatives. Group members consisted of different age groups and gender. Regular rehearsals were held before the final event.

Step 4: Publicize the event

To ensure mass participation, massive publicity measures were taken to highlight the date, time and venue.

Step 5: Hold popular theatre performance

Finally, the popular theatre performance was held for the community.

**Impact of the Tool**

This popular theatre performance increased the community's level of knowledge and awareness of disaster preparedness and emergency response regarding embankment breaches. Moreover, the tool promoted excellent community ownership of disaster preparedness.

Case Study

Feelings of a Performer, - *Ishrat Jahan Jostna, resident of Raksha-Shakullapara, New Bharenga Union, Bera*

"The first song I sang in my life was the National Anthem. I was in primary school. The culturally enlightened headmaster used to praise my voice. Subsequently, I sang on many occasions at school. To encourage me, he used to play the harmonium.

As I grew older, my parents did not allow me to perform in public, because of the conservative culture that prevails in our society. After many years, it was my former headmaster once again who invited me to sing once again. I replied that although I was interested, my guardians would not give the necessary permission. He replied that the songs were not entertainment, but educational and instructive. He added that several cultural events were to be organized in our community to raise public awareness of the necessity of disaster preparedness at the household and community levels. Later, he convinced my parents and obtained their permission. Still, I had to steal away to the rehearsals every day inventing various excuses. After performing in the events, I could not believe the way my presentations were received and praised by the audience. If even a single person is motivated by my rendition of the songs to recognize the importance of protecting embankments and preparing for disasters, then that will be my greatest reward."

