

Promoting community and women's leadership in building resilience:

Lessons from the **Ready for Anything** project



Women in Chiradzulu district, Malawi, show their sweet potato harvest produced with the help of skills training on agro-ecological farming.

PHOTO: MALUMBO SIMWAKA/
CISONECC/ACTIONAID MALAWI.

Introduction

The most vulnerable and poorest people in the world are being increasingly affected by climate change, disasters and conflict. Changing climates mean that communities face uncertain weather conditions which directly affect their food and livelihood security. It has also increased the likelihood of more frequent and intense weather related disasters like droughts and floods.

It is vital to build the resilience of communities to respond to these challenges, and for ActionAid, this means starting from an understanding of what makes individuals and communities vulnerable in the first place. Lack of assets, economic opportunities, access to services and lifesaving skills, as well as social exclusion and marginalisation, all contribute to communities' vulnerability.

ActionAid's approach to building resilience, as set out in the [Resilience Framework](#) (2016), is holistic and community-led, aiming to transform the unequal power relations which ultimately underline people's continued vulnerability to shocks and stresses. In particular, ActionAid recognises the importance of working with women and girls. In partnership with the Economist Intelligence Unit, ActionAid produced a [Women's Resilience Index](#) (2014). This report found that women are disproportionately affected by all kinds of disasters, and that violations of women's rights significantly increase after disasters. Equally, the report also showed that women can be strong leaders in preparing for and responding to disasters. All of ActionAid's resilience work supports women to take up this leadership role.

The *Ready for Anything* project was implemented by ActionAid and funded by DFID through the Aid Match programme. Taking place from July 2013 to December 2016 in rural communities in Afghanistan, Malawi, Myanmar and Nepal, the project explored a holistic approach to building community

resilience. *Ready for Anything* aimed to equip women in the target communities with the skills, knowledge and confidence to lead community resilience building. Women and families were supported to adapt farming practices to tackle climate change, using a Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture approach. Communities were also supported to diversify their livelihoods and implement Disaster Risk Reduction strategies. At policy level, the project aimed to influence government institutions to adopt policies and practices which support community resilience.

While the four country contexts were diverse, each implementing area could be characterised as rural, moderately remote, and with high levels of poverty and vulnerability. Several major disasters impacted the implementing countries during the project lifetime, as well as climate change impacts and insecurity. These challenges had impacts on the project implementation and outcomes. Malawi experienced heavy flooding, followed by a severe El Niño-related drought. Nepal experienced a major earthquake which temporarily impacted staffing and project implementation (although the main effects were outside of the project working areas), and

also went an unprecedented eight months without rainfall in 2015-16. Myanmar experienced flooding. The ongoing conflict situation in Afghanistan forced the project to change focus to another province. These challenges may have affected the overall impact of the project, but also show the value and urgency of this project, and provided a real test for the resilience of affected communities.

An independent evaluation of the *Ready for Anything* project was commissioned in July 2016, based on focus groups in each country, interviews with key stakeholders, and an endline survey. The three aims of the evaluation included: to discover the extent to which the project achieved its outcomes; to understand whether and how ActionAid's Human Rights Based Approach had been applied; and to learn lessons of successes and challenges from the project. Finalised in January 2017, this summary of the evaluation's findings is intended to be used as a snapshot of lessons learnt for ActionAid programming, fundraising and policy staff. It is also hoped that the wider sector will use these findings in designing and implementing resilience building programmes.



Woman in Magway region, Myanmar, clearing her land.
PHOTO: GREG FUNNELL/ACTIONAID

Snapshot: **Achievements of the Ready for Anything project**

Key achievements from the Ready for Anything project include:

- **165 communities implemented strategies to strengthen food security and livelihoods**, in particular using Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture techniques, and livelihood diversification
- **At least 20 'good practices' for food security and sustainable livelihoods are being implemented** (e.g. mulching in Malawi, water collection ponds in Nepal), and evidence suggests that they are even being replicated in non-target communities.
- **2,898 women** have been engaged in developing and/or implementing disaster risk reduction plans
- **891 women have been engaged in reviewing government policies and budget expenditure on agriculture, climate and disaster risk reduction.** In Malawi, Nepal and Afghanistan, this led to face-to-face discussions with district level decision makers, resulting in 36 official government responses.

Impact-level achievements of the Ready for Anything project include:

- The project has had a clear impact on food and income security in target communities (an important indicator of resilience).
- All target communities have been supported to better understand and implement disaster risk reduction strategies, including through establishing disaster management committees and developing community risk management plans.
- ActionAid introduced a number of alternative food and income security practices that have been sustained by community members without ongoing support.
- Women have grown in confidence, taking on the roles of leaders and managers of community resilience initiatives, and influencing community leaders and policy makers.
- Despite the context of a year of drought conditions in Malawi and Nepal, overall the project improved the food and income security of approximately 40% of households in target communities. 60% of participants felt that their food security would have been worse off without the project.

Zahra Wafo from Bamyan province, Afghanistan, is the community facilitator for the women association of her village Nawa. Zahra teaches women to read and write and she supervises the production of handicrafts and check the quality.
PHOTO: LORENZO TUGNOLI/ACTIONAID



Strengths of the *Ready for Anything* project

A community-led and holistic approach increased the project's impact

Throughout the *Ready for Anything* project, ActionAid's approach was participatory, with communities themselves being empowered to identify challenges and solutions which were relevant to their particular context. This ensured that the *Ready for Anything* project activities were fully anchored in the community. Communities had ownership of the activities, and the plans they created were more relevant and credible as a result. Women in particular were empowered to take up leadership roles and to engage directly with governments.

ActionAid applied five approaches within the project: the human rights based approach (HRBA), Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture, Disaster Risk Reduction, promoting women's leadership, and holding government authorities to

account. Applying all five approaches meant that the project was able to address a wide range of needs and tackle multiple barriers to resilience. Empowering women through the human rights based approach and promotion of women's leadership allowed them to take a greater role in building their community's resilience. The application of Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture provided more options to farmers, resulting in changes in attitude, most evident in Malawi where farmers reported a strengthened ability to cope with disasters.

Engaging with government at different levels through the *Ready for Anything* project has raised the prominence of disaster risk. This dialogue has been particularly successful at the local level. In Malawi, discourse between village women and local authorities around risk reduction resulted in an increase in the deployment of 'extension workers' to support vulnerable communities. In Myanmar and Afghanistan, ActionAid modelled resilience planning processes which have been adopted by some local governments, and are being considered by others. Without using approaches that empowered women at the community level, such as raising awareness, supporting women's groups, transferring knowledge and skills, and training to diversify livelihoods, these advances would not have been possible.

Empowering Women is a Critical Investment

Women were at the centre of the *Ready for Anything* project in all target communities. ActionAid set in motion empowering processes by prioritising women, working to increase their knowledge and introducing practices that promote resilience. This focus was based on ActionAid's conviction that women have the right to participate and take up a leadership role. In many target communities, women face systematic inequalities, and their potential is ignored or undermined. ActionAid's approach aims to counter this reality. In addition, focusing on women brought new perspectives to the project, while assuring multiple benefits across families and wider communities. ActionAid's approach recognises the challenges and inequalities that women face, actively supporting them to build confidence, overcome systemic barriers, and participate fully in resilience building.

Training on basic principles of Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture, in combination with increasing the skills and capacity of women, such as literacy, empowered women to take a stronger role in resilience activities in their community. In Afghanistan, for example, women now have the skills and confidence to suggest alternative agricultural practices and investments to their husbands, in the knowledge that they will be taken seriously.



Woman in Inn Yaung village tract in front of a community resource map.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID MYANMAR

Women were given the opportunity to put into practice what they had learned by forming groups, enabling them to share new ideas and approaches. They were also provided with new opportunities to raise and manage their own income, which increased the status of women within their households and strengthened their decision-making power. Village Savings and Loans schemes established by the project in some countries facilitated women's investment in income-raising activities. In Myanmar, for example, women used such a scheme to establish small businesses which produced snacks for children, or selling pig feed. As a result, women's contribution to livelihood security in the community was acknowledged, and mothers felt that they have become strong role models for their daughters.

Over the duration of the project, women began to gain the confidence to become more active in community structures, seeing themselves as agents of change, able to influence government policies. In Nepal, women have spearheaded delegations to request that local government bodies allocate budget for disaster preparedness and mitigation. While the sustainability of this improvement will depend on the ability to finance and facilitate ongoing meetings between women leaders and local authorities, the platform has nevertheless been established, from which ActionAid can take the next steps as part of the journey towards equality for women in resilience and disaster risk reduction.

Working through strong partners and structures

ActionAid's approach is to work through local partners, strengthening local capacity and shifting power to the local level. Several strong, fit-for-purpose local partners and community organisations were involved in the *Ready for Anything* project. In Nepal, organisations which partnered with ActionAid had a mandate and proven capacity to work with the most vulnerable sections of society, improving the reach and effectiveness of the project. By working with both



Woman in Ngokwe village, Malawi, is paying her monthly contribution to the local Village Savings and Loans group.

PHOTO: MALUMBO SIMWAKA/CISIONECC/ACTIONAID MALAWI

a women farmers' network and national-level advocacy organisation in Malawi, ActionAid established a pathway for village women to use their experience to influence provincial and national resilience agendas. ActionAid's partner in Myanmar was a provincial organisation with particularly strong roots in target communities. They invested in setting up structures in all target communities by establishing community disaster management committees that were provided with the capacity to plan and lead resilience building actions. Working through such embedded local partners is likely to ensure that the advancements made by the *Ready for Anything* project endure and serve the target communities beyond the project's end.



Disaster Management Committee treasurer Narmaiya Bisenke (right) and Lalmaiya Mundel (left) in Marse Village, Nepal, have used agroecological practices to make their agriculture much more resilient to climate change
PHOTO: TERESA ANDERSON/ACTIONAID

A design that promoted sustainability and flexibility

The *Ready for Anything* project was designed giving regard to the existing reach and work of ActionAid and its partner organisations in the four countries. The result was that the project capitalised on pre-existing relationships with communities and local authorities, enabling faster and deeper outcomes, and expanding ActionAid's own experience in areas which are particularly vulnerable to disasters. ActionAid drew from its existing staff in-country to lead the project, ensuring continued links to other programmes and activities by ActionAid in the project areas. This cohesive design contributed to the sustainability of project activities.

The design of the project also embedded flexibility and exploration of multiple different activities and approaches. The participatory approaches gave communities greater autonomy, and the ability to trial a range of activities that fit their specific needs. For example, in some communities, awareness-raising through simulations, mock drills, and drama proved effective. Other communities, in comparison, chose to invest some of their income into emergency preparedness funds to support the community in times of disaster. It was the flexible nature of the project which ensured that that such a large variety of approaches could be trialled.

Lessons learned from the *Ready for Anything* project

- While a budget of over £1 million GBP may have appeared large, when spread over more than three years and divided among 165 communities in four countries, the investment for each community was in fact fairly limited. Had additional resources been available, greater investment could have been made by ActionAid in areas such as awareness raising, technical support, alternative livelihood strategies, disaster simulations, updating community action plans, and much more. This could have increased the impact and sustainability of the project. **ActionAid has shown though that it has a sound model for resilience programming.** The next step could be to show the optimum levels of investment required in communities, to enable **deep as well as broad impacts.**
- **Communicating climate change** and its associated disaster risks to communities proved a challenge in some contexts. It is therefore important to facilitate continuous learning, for example embedded in ActionAid's 'reflection action' methodology. Creative ways to raise awareness, such as through drama and songs, or partnerships with specialised communication agencies, could be explored to generate a deeper and longer-lasting understanding of climate change and its related risks.
- By thinking creatively about how to maximise impact on resilience building, communities can be encouraged to build resilience in multiple ways, and for both the short and longer term. For example, some target communities in Myanmar were reached with income generating activities. The communities decided to set aside a portion of these profits as an emergency fund for use in times of crisis. Therefore there were **both immediate benefits** (of greater income) **and longer-term investment in safety nets** to promote resilience into the future. Rolling out this approach when considered appropriate could lead to increased community awareness on the risks, and opportunities, inherent in all activities.
- The success of activities building sustainable and alternative livelihoods depends largely on people's understanding about what markets are, how they operate, what buyers in the market are really looking for, and about establishing win-win relationships with buyers. In future, incorporating an **access to markets approach** in resilience programmes will increase the viability of these activities. In particular, we need to support poor and vulnerable women to be able to analyse the local market conditions and understand the risks, to enable them to make informed decisions and

- avoid unsuccessful livelihood alternatives undermining their resilience gains. A good opportunity may be found in the roll-out of ActionAid’s forthcoming *Gender Sensitive Access to Markets and Value Chain* handbook, which applies a more systematic market and risk analysis.
- The promotion of women’s leadership in resilience building is a very powerful approach. The *Ready for Anything* project has demonstrated real gains in this area, with women starting to engage in community spaces and decision-making processes. At the same time, community members and ActionAid staff emphasised the **importance of supporting women to overcome barriers to their active participation**. This includes addressing persistent gender stereotypes and practices, particularly regarding unpaid care work. It is crucial that the wider community, including men and community leaders, are taken along on this journey towards awareness raising and empowerment. Changing community attitudes will support women to safely take leadership roles, participate in agricultural and income generating endeavours, and share the burden of unpaid work caring for children and the home. This will also require increased advocacy and pressure on governments to invest in gender responsive services to support women to step into leadership roles.
 - Due to the nature and location of resilience projects, they need to be prepared for the eventuality of a disaster occurring. **Investing in disaster warning** or forecasting mechanisms would help the target communities prepare for and respond to a disaster. This need was also emphasised in ActionAid’s **El Niño: The Silent Emergency** policy brief. ActionAid has been supporting communities to read early warning signals and act as first responders. It has proven harder to develop an effective disaster warning mechanism at community level in case of slow onset disasters like drought. Innovative approaches combining awareness raising, skills training and sufficient funding need to be mobilised to address this challenge in the future and reduce the impact of disasters on the project and communities.
 - Countries experiencing **protracted conflicts** face numerous additional challenges. In Afghanistan, the project faced a 12 month delay when activities needed to be moved to a new area due to safety concerns and high staff turnover. Nonetheless, ActionAid should not shy away from resilience programming in conflict areas, but should instead build the necessary flexibility into programming and expectations to allow for these realities.

Case study - Lucy Sinkhani

Lucy Sinkhani, a 44-year-old woman from Neno district in Malawi, explains “*The ActionAid resilience training was for three days. It opened my eyes to simple but useful techniques. After the training I went home to work on my land and put these new techniques into practice.*” The 2015-2016 growing season started well but the effects of El Niño slowly started creeping in. For a month it did not rain, at a crucial time when maize was about to start tasseling. As a result of the drought caused by El Niño, Neno district experienced severe food insecurity. Hundreds of households watched helplessly as maize wilted in their gardens. Across Malawi and several countries in the Southern Africa region, millions of farmers experienced crop failure, and a state of disaster was declared. But Lucy’s story was different. “*When it rained the soil kept the moisture, and the mulch was like a blanket making sure the moisture did not evaporate. Weeds were suffocated by the mulch. My garden did not suffer like the rest of the community. It remained green and the stalks were strong.*” “*I will harvest a normal yield of 8 (50kg) bags of maize, thanks to ActionAid. Many people will harvest a third of normal harvest. From a simple practice I will get staggering results considering this is a year of poor rainfall.*”



Lucy in her garden laying the mulch.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID MALAWI

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ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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