



Towards tighter ropes

■ **Resilience star:** Facilitator Afsana Moni counts down before she drops a pumpkin at the start of the resilience star exercise in Paschim Lakhir Para.

The 'pumpkin drop' illustrates resilience: 11 villagers hold elastic ropes, each representing a dimension of resilience. The tyre at the centre represents the community, the pumpkin a hazard. If all ropes are held tightly, the tyre bounces back (it doesn't if some or all ropes are loose).

For this evaluation, we played this game at the start of resilience star exercises. It shows how the two perspectives of resilience are related: the [outcome](#) perspective (the vertical bounce-back) depends on the [functional](#) perspective (the tightness of the horizontal ropes). In essence, measuring resilience is checking how tight the ropes are. Photo: P. Bolte

How to reinforce resilience at scale: insights from the RRR project in the Gaibandha and Kurigram districts of Bangladesh

The accelerating impact of the climate crisis must be an impetus for swift, scaled, and holistic efforts to reinforce community resilience across Bangladesh. Insights from a new evaluation report illustrate what can be achieved, and may serve as inspiration for renewed efforts on strengthening resilience.

The RRR project

Entitled 'Reinforcing rural resilience through a strong National Society' (RRR), the project reached 235,200 residents of 88 flood-prone communities in Gaibandha and Kurigram districts of north-western Bangladesh. Implemented between 2021 and 2024, it was the third iteration of resilience programming by Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) and Swiss Red Cross (SRC) in the Jamuna basin.

Utilising lessons from previous rounds, the project was **multi-sectoral in scope** (disaster risk reduction, health, water & sanitation, livelihoods, food security, and natural resource management) and **centred on empowering communities and their connections** with local government agencies.

The project combined **enablers**, such as more than 20,500 awareness sessions on disaster risk reduction (DRR), health, and sanitation, with **tangible results**. These included the construction or upgrade of more than 10,000 latrines, wash blocks, tube wells, community clinics, as well as road repairs.

Early warning systems (EWS) were improved and now reach 99.5% of the population (up from 36.2% in 2021). Furthermore, the project supported the set-up of elevated homesteads, which include 8-9 households on grounds that were raised one meter above the highest flood markers. These homesteads include latrines, tube wells, vegetable gardens, and space for livestock. The concept proved popular: in addition to 453 households supported by the project, 394 adopted this model independently.

Results: resilience, reinforced

The evaluation used the same two tools that had been applied at the baseline in 2021: the **resilience radar** is a survey-based tool that converts survey results into scores (ranging from a minimum of 0.00 to a maximum of 1.00) for all resilience dimensions (*see the radar chart overleaf*). The **resilience star**, meanwhile, is based on focus group discussions and generates patterns for each sampled community.

The overall resilience score increased from a medium-level **0.493** in 2021 to a high-level **0.795** in 2024. The most significant improvements were noted in terms of disaster preparedness (+160.2%) and connectedness (108.0%). Significant improvements were recorded on all nine dimensions. Notably, all *social* dimensions of resilience — (community capacity, social capital, connectedness, and inclusiveness) are now rated as very high, representing a strong foundation that communities can build on.

In 2021, the evaluation of the preceding BDRCS-SRC project had been entitled 'a level up' — poignantly illustrating that the project had raised community resilience by 31.2%, thereby lifting the average score from the 'medium' to the 'high' band.

Three years on, the current evaluation illustrates that the RRR project raised the bar even further. The average score was lifted by 61.3% — nearly twice the rate of its predecessor.

In essence, reinforcing the resilience of communities is about strengthening social foundations and connecting communities with sources of support. Combining enablers and tangibles is key in this process. BDRCS branches can be vital connectors and enablers.

Lessons: a recipe for resilience

Having learned insights from previous iterations in nearby areas of the Jamuna basin, the RRR project team refined the original model. Here are five lessons for programming.

1. Invest in your team.

Having a solid and experienced team is the prerequisite of successful projects. The RRR project retained staff from the previous project (and their experience), and staff turnover was minimal. Sound internal communication, quick decisions, adequate training, and a strong team spirit were seen as RRR success factors.

In addition to technical staff at its Gaibandha office, the team comprised eight field officers (one per union) and 121 community resilience volunteers (CRV) who had been recruited from communities. The strong dedication of the team and an effective structure enabled programming that was both broad and deep (82.4% of survey respondents said they had been in contact with project staff or volunteers at least three times in the past six months).

2. Go for scale and scope.

The RRR project benefited from economies of scale: with a large coverage of more than 235,200 beneficiaries across 88 communities in 8 unions, the overhead costs were proportionally small. Actual project expenditures of CHF 1.2 million equated to just CHF 24.86 per household (BDT 3,200). The contiguous project area also helped: one central project office in Gaibandha served as the operational hub.

Rather than doing a little in many places, the RRR project did a lot in one large area. With 8 field officers and 121 community volunteers, the project reached broad and deep coverage.

In terms of **scope**, the RRR project was truly multi-sectoral, as it addressed all resilience dimensions (albeit to different degrees). Some interventions benefited the general public (e.g., early warning systems, community clinics), while others targeted the most vulnerable households (e.g., plinth-raising, latrines). The broad scope allowed for a targeted approach and enabled responsiveness to locally identified needs (such as road repairs in some places).

3. Let locals lead.

The dramatic increase in resilience would not have been possible without the strong leadership of communities. The project team facilitated assessment and planning processes and was responsive to locally identified issues. This nurtured strong trust and reliable working relationships.

4. Be the connector.

The focus on connectedness emerged in previous rounds of BDRCS-SRC programming. This included three streams. **First**, the project promoted greater community participation in legally ordained processes: ward shavas and open budget sessions are opportunities for citizens to express needs and thus to inform government planning (participation in ward shavas rose from 9.6% to 96.8%). **Second**, the utilisation of available social safety nets was promoted (with benefits such as widow, elderly, or maternity allowance). With project support, enrolment of persons eligible to safety nets increased from 6.9% to 55.6%.

Third, planning was aligned between project, communities, and government agencies. The collaborative planning helped establish stronger links between communities and governments — an aspect that is critical to further development and sustained outcomes.

5. Require contributions.

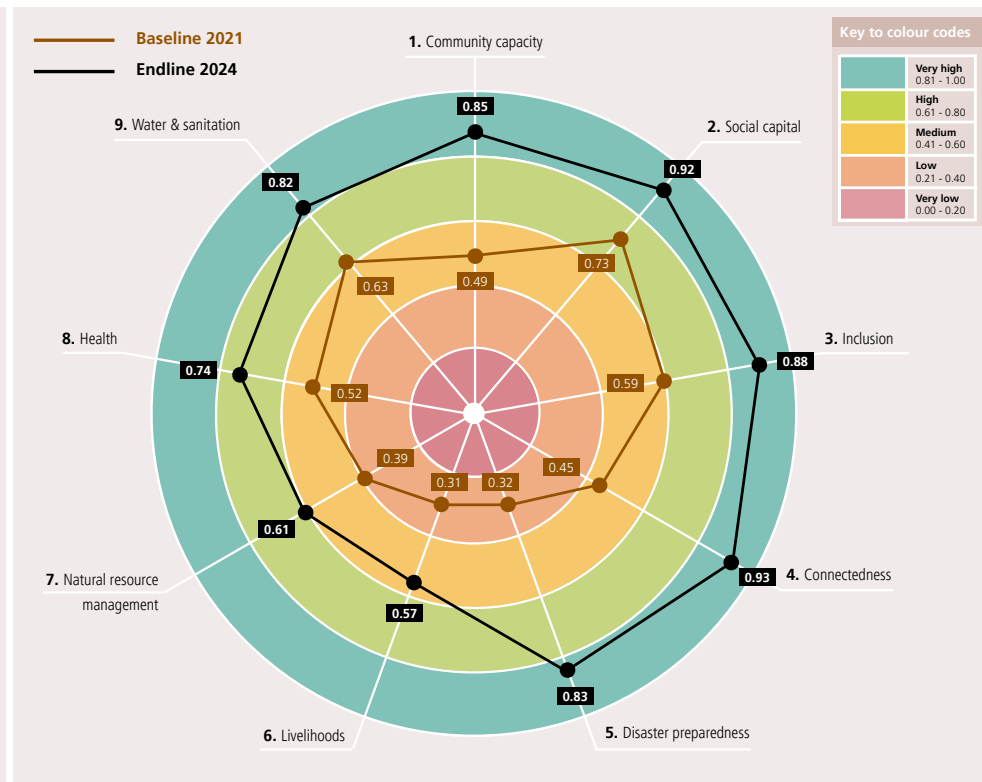
The RRR project required that local partners would contribute funds to all structural measures (such as tube wells or raised plinths). Typically, 10% were contributed by beneficiaries and 20% by local governments.

This had multiple benefits. It made joint planning indispensable and served as an inbuilt relevance check (after all, neither governments nor beneficiaries would likely waste money on something that is not needed). Furthermore, it also increased local ownership (and thus, sustainability), and raised the leverage of project funds: each CHF 1.00 of donor money became CHF 1.43 (with 0.43 being local contributions).

Added urgency: the quest to adapt

With the RRR project concluded, the BDRCS-SRC partnership is moving forward to the next iteration of community-based programming in the Jamuna basin. A new project is expected to launch later in 2024 and run until 2028. Focussing on new areas in Gaibandha and Kurigram as well as in Bogura and Sirajganj districts, the new 'Jamuna' project will increase the focus on adaptation to climate change, and seek further capacity strengthening of local branches.

The baseline for the new project highlighted extreme levels of vulnerability amongst new target communities (the average resilience



score was just 0.32, lower than the one recorded at the RRR baseline in 2021 (0.49).

The impact of the climate crisis is palpable, but both the physics and ways to adapt are poorly understood. While most respondents say they observed common manifestations of the climate crisis (such as increasing trends in crop failures, animal and human diseases, more extreme weather and less predictable rainfall), less than 10 percent understood how climate change may affect them, or could list appropriate adaptation measures. This is in the context of high sensitivity to climate stressors and a low levels of income diversification.

Climate change adaptation (CCA) under the Jamuna project must educate communities on what it is they need to adapt to — this is an indispensable precursor. Common climate impacts expected for the area, principles for adaptation (what are no-regret options and risks, such as maladaptation), as well as main options and techniques, should be covered.

The new project should retain many aspects that have proven to be effective, and extend its portfolio to include a broad suite of adaptation options. With the dramatically increasing climate impact (observed and predicted), the quest to adapt is a matter of urgency that must be applied at scale.

The role of BDRCS branches

Bangladesh Red Crescent Society and its branches are in a *principally* strong position to support communities on a path towards greater resilience (which includes adaptation to climate

change), and the RRR project has shown what is possible. Invoking (and bringing to vibrancy) the auxiliary role to the government, branches can utilise networks and partner with governments from the district level downwards, advocating for communities. Their volunteers can be trained to assume roles as envisaged in the IFRC Road Map to Community Resilience: accompanying, enabling, and connecting communities offers great leverage to advance resilience, even when with modest funding.

In *practice*, the potential of branches is not yet fully harnessed. Branches must have sustainable sources of funding, strong management and skilled volunteers if they are to support communities' path to greater resilience. But resources are very variable, and some branches are 'owned' by individual men from local elites, with much revolving around patron-client networks. Fundraising, for instance, is often based on personal networks rather than on institutionalised processes.

To reinforce the resilience of communities at scale, the capacity of branches must be strengthened too. The Jamuna baseline report recommends a stronger framework with clear benchmarks for branch development, improved vertical support structures within BDRCS (including regional hubs or centres), and branch-specific development plans to foster upscaled service delivery. Recognising that work towards greater community resilience goes hand in hand with branch development, BDRCS and its Movement partners should renew efforts to stronger local capacities, including the planned regional hubs.

This summary paper was prepared by Patrick Bolte for Swiss Red Cross.

For further details on resilience programming in the Jamuna basin, see the following reports:

- ▶ **Resilience amidst the river.** Project evaluation: Reinforcing rural resilience through a strong National Society. Swiss Red Cross, July 2024.
- ▶ **Jamuna baseline.** Baseline study for the project: Joint actions for mitigating climate uncertainties and natural adversities (Jamuna), 2024-2028. Swiss Red Cross, July 2024.

