

Redefining optimism an account of stimulating efforts by CADRE graduates

Case Study

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CHARSADDA, Pakistan – “During the flood I climbed up the electricity pylon and threw a thick rope across the power lines used to transmit high voltage current. People standing below tied the hanging rope to the four legs of an overturned traditional wooden cot weaved up of twisted ropes. We held the rope tightly and let the cot roll like a chair-lift towards a dozen of people stranded on the rooftop of a sinking mud house,” Mr. Musarrat Shah recalls his experience of rescuing people during the unprecedented floods that hit Abazai in 2010. “It was too dangerous a method but we managed to save a few precious lives,” he says.

Abazai is a thickly populated village of around 2000 houses in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. It is located 24 miles north of the provincial headquarters Peshawar and only a mile off the left bank of the Swat River. The river passes through Abazai with an astonishing speed before joining the Kabul River in the southeastern direction. Swat Lower Canal also flows through the village in the north from west to east.

“After heavy rains, it usually takes six to eight hours for the floodwater to reach Abazai. We may get more lead-time to evacuate if the rainfall is far up over the mountains. In 2010, people failed to anticipate the massive scale of flood. However, as water level rose, we tried to evacuate the area. For a few it was already too late,” Mr. Shah tells adding that he, along with other volunteers, extended basic help to marooned villagers before army helicopters and boats arrived to their rescue.

Abazai suffers from floods twice a year. In summer, as Swat River overflows due to monsoon rain and melting of ice up in the mountains, whereas winter rainfall causes flash floods between March and April. However, the local communities have, over the years, learned to co-exist with this unpredictable friend, says Mr. Shah making a reference to Swat River. “After all, it is a source of irrigation to sustain our primary livelihood,” he acknowledges.

The massive flood in 2010 destroyed the irrigation system unprecedented in the last century. Water entered the village and rose as high as 18 feet. It seemed that Kabul, Swat, and Jindi rivers as well as the Swat Lower Canal and other tributaries were flowing in unison in all directions washing roads and bridges away destroying houses and other community infrastructure.

“We learned a lot from this horrific disaster. People feel the need of shared responsibility and collective response. We experienced moderate level of flooding over the past four years and were able to manage things on our own. However, the biggest worry is that the Swat River is changing its course and this contributes to a slow but steady erosion of agriculture land. River



In Pakistan it is important that women receive emergency management training as they are the primary homemakers.



Downed powerlines can be a hazard, as flood waters can conduct dangerous electrical currents.

Swat is eating up our lands bit by bit,” laments Mr. Wajid Ali, a volunteer with Civil Defense Department of the district.

Trainings help ensure better emergency management

Mussarat Shah regrets the avoidable losses and use of extremely dangerous techniques to rescue people.

“The memory of tying a cot to high-voltage power lines to rescue people still sends shivers down my spine. It was very dangerous technique for all of us. Had we received training to deal with water emergencies, we would have handled the situation differently,” he sighs.

Emotions alone don’t offer much in saving lives, believes Shah. That’s why he decided to channel the enthusiasm of youth in the community by finding training opportunities for them. Soon after the community recovered from the devastation of flood, he established a group of volunteers in Abazai and requested Pakistan Red Crescent Society

(PRCS) to train them on emergency management.

Later, Mr. Shah received Community Action for Disaster Response (CADRE) training under the Program for Enhancement of Emergency Response (PEER) in 2012. The program trained 382 volunteers across Pakistan of which 102 were from Charsadda, the district headquarters of Abazai village.

Cultural sensitivities and women’s participation

Mr. Aamir Qayum, Project Coordinator of PEER Pakistan, explains that cultural sensitivities and tribal traditions of the area make it difficult for women to take advantage of capacity building opportunities.

“Unfortunately, female volunteers could not be involved in CADRE training in Charsadda district due to cultural constraints. Traditionally, women in Abazai do not work outside their houses. Men stay out till late and the women take care of children and elderly,” Aamir elaborates

adding: “We are working with PRCS on making some special arrangements for providing CADRE training to women so that they do not lag behind just because of their gender.”

The community, on the other hand, realizes the importance of women’s participation in emergency response training, but finds it hard to overcome the local norms.

“We have learned great lessons during the past few years, and our community acknowledges the need of imparting training to women as well. However, it has to be through women instructors because they cannot mix up with men,” said Mr. Wajid Ali, a CADRE graduate.

“Since most of the time women are alone at home with children, they should be the ones to get emergency management training,” Mr. Ali makes a point.

CADRE training pays off

Flood is not the only hazard people of



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CADRE participants are taught the importance of personal safety. Where community members used to act on natural instincts to save people, they have learned that careless attempts to rescue people could put many other lives at risk.

Abazai suffer from. Fire, drowning and animal bites are also very common. Mr. Mian Abid, a farmer and a CADRE graduate, believes he is now more useful for his community.

“Tobacco and sugarcane are the two major crops of this area that need some sort of fire to process them. However, this process is highly risky for maize crop and adjacent farms. We do not have any system to put down a crop fire in our area,” says Mr. Abid.

Mr. Abid greatly values the fire-fighting techniques taught in CADRE course as it proved to be particularly helpful in controlling fire that is required in processing tobacco and sugarcane. “We make sugar at our farms. Fire incidents during the sugarcane processing can devour the whole raw material. I taught ‘bucket brigade’ firefighting techniques to my fellow farmers. Ever since, we have avoided many potential fire incidents,” shares Mr. Abid cheerfully.

In the main town of Abazai, houses are

built using baked bricks, concrete and stone. However, most of the surrounding villages have mud houses that are prone to collapse in rain. A couple of months ago, the roof of a mud house caved in after a constant overnight downpour in Fageer Abad, a village four kilometers off the main road. Mr. Wajid Ali, who keeps a record of trained CADRE and PRCS graduates, mobilized his colleagues for help.

“We rushed to the scene and rescued three children, a man and a woman. A part of wooden beam had fallen on the woman. We lifted it off her back and carefully shifted her to the hospital,” said Mr. Ali adding that the CADRE trainings made it possible for them to manage things safely and efficiently.

Mr. Shah thinks that awareness and incident command systems are the most important elements of CADRE training.

“We used to act on our natural instincts to save people. Previously, we were unaware that a careless attempt to rescue

people could put many other lives at risk. People jump into water to save a drowning person without calling for help first. More often than not, the rescuer drowns too. CADRE gave us the concept of personal safety during emergencies. We realized that it is not cowardness or selfishness. Rather, it is about keeping your nerves and managing emergency by using incident command system without endangering more lives,” he concluded.

The group of CADRE graduates in Abazai is quite active. They have responded to many small-scale emergencies and are confident to lend a helping hand whenever needed. All the CADRE graduates have trained at least one member in their families to deal with emergency at the household level.

“I never knew that small tips and skills about dealing with emergencies can be so helpful in saving lives,” says Mr. Shah before setting off for daily chores.



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