

Fully prepared — Learning to live with the monsoon floods

Human Interest Story

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*Koh Pra community members verified details in the map
Photo by: Warittha Wannathong, ADPC, 2016*

Ayutthaya, Thailand — Around two hundred families in Ban Koh Pra were among the millions who witnessed the devastation of the 2011 floods in Thailand. Having lived in a village located on a flood-plain island in the middle of the Chao Phraya River, the people are no strangers to annual flooding, but the consequences of the 2011 inundation were too devastating for them to cope with. Despite having traditional houses elevated a few feet above ground with tilts or posts, this time, the water rose to insurmountable levels and houses could not avoid the gushing waters.

The community was not ready for the chaos that ensued as people evacuated and fled their homes. Locals had no choice but to rent private boats at expensive rates to buy necessary supplies such as drinking water and food. They had no life-saving equipment and coordination system in place to deal with flood emergency.

“There was no system established to manage and help local flood victims at the time,” said Mr. Somsak Waijara, 58, a member of Ban Po Sub-district administration organization, a body which oversees Ban Koh Pra.

ADPC gets involved

To ensure that the Ban Koh Pra community could prepare and help themselves during future incidents, Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) selected it as one of the pilot sites to implement the Program for “Reduction of Vulnerability to Floods in Thailand” focused on Community Based Flood Risk Management (CBDRM). Together with the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, Thailand (DDPM), ADPC carried out integrated vulnerability reduction activities and equipped the community with essential CBDRM skills and systems with funding support from USAID’s Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA).



Somjai Rung-utai (front right), Deputy Village Head and CBDRR Committee member, trained in Community Action for Disaster Response
Photo by: Warittha Wannathong, ADPC, 2016

Through consultations, training and drills, community members learned how to select safe sites and shelters, develop flood hazard maps and evacuation plans, and identify vulnerable groups that may need special attention during floods. A flood simulation exercise gave participants a chance to practice what they learned in real time, following pre-determined flood scenarios.

“We always wanted to do something because we’ve experienced flooding every year. But we just didn’t know how to start,” said 31-year-old Mr. Akekaluck Montreechon, who is a core leader of the program. “With the knowhow we have learned from the program, we’re confident that we’re more self-reliant and have more capacity to cope with flooding.”

Early warning system

Part of being prepared for floods is having a functional monitoring system. After learning that locals had no system in place to measure the river’s water level, ADPC, along with the DDPM and other relevant authorities, installed a gauge and offered training for the community on early warning systems.

Following the training on early warning system, selected community members have learnt how to read a staff gauge to measure water level of the Chao Phraya River. Now they record the water level twice a day (morning and evening) during the monsoon season. Three color codes – green,

yellow and red – are used in the water level gauge. Green indicates normal water level at 1 to 2 meters above mean sea level; yellow means cautious water level at 2 to 3 meters; and red means critical water level at 3 to 4 meters. If the gauge ever gives a red signal, the CBDRM committee, established by ADPC to ensure the community handles future floods systematically, will request external aid from the local administration and private sector in the areas.

The local community also learned to trace water data from the Internet through an online community group called Mr. Warning Chao Phraya. This network communicates through mobile phones to report water level measurements at different spots along the Chao Phraya basin.

Working together for everyone’s safety

Information acquired from online sources is also useful for the CBDRM Committee. Recounting the challenges of the response to the 2011 floods, Mr. Waijara from the district administration organization explained that the community didn’t divide up the tasks for who would be responsible for specific matters. He said that people just ran to local leaders whenever a problem occurred because they had no idea where to go.

With the committee divided into five taskforces – rescue, first aid, evacuation, coordination and public relations – locals can now turn to the committee and heads of taskforces for help with challenging situations instead of

having to approach their leaders. CBDRM Committee is helpful for the people to coordinate with authorities and with one another during a crisis. Committee members include the village headman and deputy, local administration representative, health volunteers and the youth. The diverse age, gender, occupation and religious backgrounds of members promotes inclusive decision-making.

Public-Private partnership

As Ayutthaya grew over the years, more industrial estates and property developments have replaced traditional flood retention areas. Chao Phraya River, which snakes through the central plain of Thailand before draining into the Gulf of Thailand south of Bangkok, imposes a threat of flooding to the area. With fewer flood retention areas available, locals understand that they should engage with the private sector to ensure development projects do not create new risks or add to existing ones.

“[I]f we can participate in management [of water and disaster preparedness], we can be more certain that the community will be better,” said Somjai Rung-utai, deputy head of village, resident of Ban Koh Pra, and a core member of the first aid division under CBDRR committee.

ADPC established a public-private partnership committee for disaster risk reduction in Ayutthaya that provides a platform to bring community and private sectors together to discuss mitigation measures. Furthermore, ADPC and Canon Hi-Tech (Thailand) Ltd. gave the community a rescue boat and a set of life jackets, while Marigot Jewellery (Thailand) Co., Ltd. provided fire extinguishers.

Steps to a safer tomorrow

The community of Ban Koh Pra plans to continue its flood risk reduction activities in the future. While the program has done much to build capacity on an individual level, it has also enhanced the relationship between local community members because of how the program encouraged them to share their opinions with each other.

“During previous floods, we had a situation where each family would prioritize protecting their own households from water. Their first focus was their own survival. Now we can see the benefit of working as a whole,” said Ms. Somjai.

Local participation and collaboration to build disaster resilience is central to CBDRM, and the community of Ban Koh Pra presents a model of sustainable change for disaster preparedness.



Mr. Akekaluck Montreechon, CBDRR Committee member, trained as a trainer on the Safe Site Selection and Shelter Management Training course
Photo by: Goragod Chamgamon, ADPC, 2016

Program for Reduction of Vulnerability to Floods in Thailand

Project information: ADPC - supported by the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) - initiated a five-year program for ‘Reduction of Vulnerability to Floods in Thailand’ to enhance flood risk mitigation and management. The program goal is to promote sustainable development while enhancing Thailand’s resilience to floods and other associated natural hazards. It achieves this goal by strengthening the capacity for disaster risk management in Thailand and providing support for flood vulnerability reduction. The program works in partnership with Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, and other stakeholders and target provinces in the central and lower Chao Phraya River Basin.

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