

connect2: Bangladesh

Sharing lives across the world

A brief history



A relatively new country, formed in 1971 when it gained its independence from Pakistan, low-lying Bangladesh is in south Asia. Bordering India and Burma/Myanmar, the country is at the head of the Bay of Bengal, and more than 10,000 square kilometres are permanently covered in water.

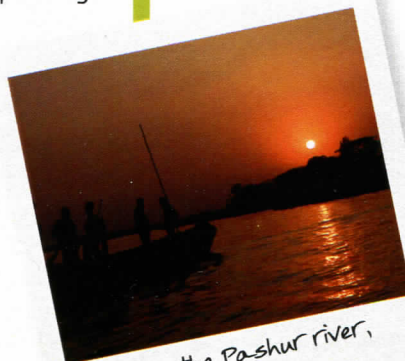
Frequently hit by cyclones and floods, it is feared that if the sea level rises by one metre in this century, 15 per cent of the land in Bangladesh will be underwater. As the population is larger than Russia despite the country being 120 times smaller, millions of Bangladeshis could be forced to leave their homes.

The economy has grown rapidly in recent years due to a booming garment industry in the towns and cities. But despite this, the majority of people in rural areas still live in extreme poverty.

Southern Bangladesh was recently hit by two cyclones in quick succession. Many villages were devastated, but local communities recovered well putting plans in place to prepare for future disasters. Despite this, many people are still living in an extremely vulnerable position should a major disaster hit again.

Fast facts

- A population of 162 million people
- Currency is the Bangladeshi taka
- Main language is Bengali, but many people also speak English
- 81 per cent of the population live on less than two dollars a day
- Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali poet in the late 19th century, was the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for Literature
- The Sundarbans, which is home to the endangered Royal Bengali tiger, is the largest single block of mangrove forest in the world
- Two-thirds of the population rely on agriculture to survive
- The national sport is cricket, which is now more popular than football



Crossing the Pashur river, Mongla town



Produce that grows well in soil affected by salty water

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CAFOD in Bangladesh

CAFOD first started working in Bangladesh in 1986. We supported our Catholic partner, Caritas Bangladesh, to help families start kitchen gardens to improve their nutrition and earn an income. We have also helped women to start their own businesses and provided vital emergency relief to communities devastated by repeated cyclones and floods, including Cyclone Sidr in 2007 and Cyclone Aila in 2009.

More recently we have been working with our partners to help people find ways to be more resilient when disaster strikes. We work with several local organisations, particularly in the southern Mongla region, helping people to find alternative ways to earn an income and raising awareness about the changing climate and how to prepare for future disasters. We are also working with disabled people, helping them to fight for their rights and gain access to emergency relief and government services. We also provide nutritional advice and spiritual counselling to people affected by HIV and AIDS.

Today, in the Mongla region, we focus on two key areas of support:

- **Earning an income** – helping people to adapt to their changing climate by enabling them to set up businesses that will thrive in the local conditions, make a good profit and be more able to cope when disaster strikes
- **Responding to emergencies** – providing vital relief when disaster strikes, raising awareness and putting systems in place that help people be more prepared for natural disasters

Welcome to Kainmari

A short bicycle-rickshaw ride from busy Mongla town, down a narrow winding path, past St Paul's Catholic Church and over a slightly rickety bridge is the village of Kainmari. Home to 250 families, the village is almost completely surrounded by water.

The main street is busy – cows amble past looking for new pasture and children chat noisily on their way to school. A man whizzes by on a motorbike, while locals gather at the local teashop where steam whistles out of kettles and small glasses filled with hot tea clink onto tables.

Beyond the hustle and bustle of the village centre are the expanses of the shrimp ponds. Still, flat surfaces punctuated by narrow grass ridges that stretch into the distance, shimmering under the morning sun.

But the calm turns into chaos in cyclone season, when the people of Kainmari are threatened by unrelenting storms and thrashing rains. In recent years, the village has been hit by two big cyclones – completely devastating people's homes and ways of making a living.

And although there's water everywhere – finding water suitable for drinking is hard. Some people have to travel miles, or drink water from local ponds that has been contaminated by sea water.

But the people of Kainmari will do whatever it takes to secure their homes and way of life. With the help of our partner, Caritas Bangladesh, they are adapting to their changing environment, finding new ways to earn a living and preparing for future disasters.



Sabita Biswas
cooking



on the road in Kainmari

CAFOD spends
about £400,000
in Bangladesh every
year on life-changing
work

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Meet the people

Sabita Biswas, 45

Sabita was at home with her husband and son when Cyclone Sidr hit Kainmari in 2007. She and her family fled to safety, but their house was completely destroyed.

Now the president of the women's group and a key member of the disaster committee, Sabita helps other people in the community prepare for disasters.

"When Cyclone Sidr hit, I knew what to do because I'd had training from Caritas Bangladesh. I collected our identity documents, put them in a polythene bag and buried them in the ground so they would be safe.

"I saw a tree falling down and God held me back. Then I saw my husband and son following me.

"We had rainwater and mud all over us. The next morning we returned to our house and it was completely washed away.

"I have no alternative but to live here and cope with tidal surges, cyclones and floods. This is my family house, I cannot leave. So we are trying to adapt. In the disaster committee we have three flags for different levels of cyclone. Caritas Bangladesh gave us the flags, along with a radio and a megaphone.

"We can't stop natural disasters, but we can try and minimise the damage. My priority is for my son to finish university so he can get a good job."

Sabita's wishes

- To excavate a big pond for drinking water near my house
- To expand my duck farm so I have 1,000 ducks
- For my son to graduate from university with honours and become an accountant

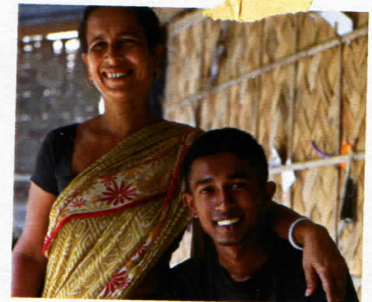
"We had rainwater and mud all over us. The next morning we returned to our house and it was completely washed away."



Tapati and Sabita in a women's group meeting



Sabita making a sari



Sabita and her son

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Pobitra, 28

Pobitra is a man of unrivalled energy. When he's not working on his shrimp farm, he's serving drinks to locals at his tea shop, or tending his vegetable garden. But his shrimp farm and crops were badly damaged by Cyclone Aila in 2009.

He lives in a small house belonging to his sister, with his wife, Mollika.

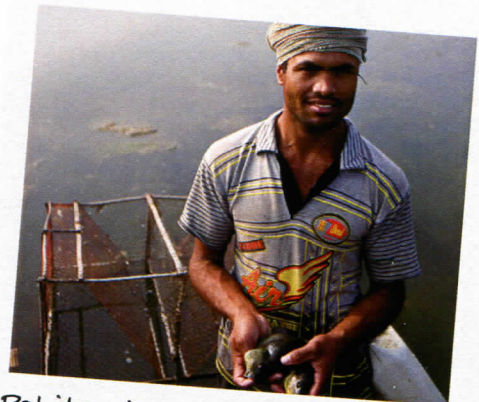
"Cyclone Aila was more destructive than Cyclone Sidr in some ways. Sea water came right up to our house. My shrimp farm was damaged and our crops too.

"I got training from Caritas Bangladesh in how to grow vegetables in soil affected by sea water. I learned how to preserve seeds, how to make a raised bed so the crops are less affected by salt and how to help the vegetables thrive organically.

"If there's enough rain and no cyclones I'm hoping our vegetable garden will recover and we can grow as many vegetables as we did before the cyclone.

"I believe there's opportunity here if you go out and look for it. A few years ago I only had my tea shop. I worked early in the morning and in the evening – but I didn't have anything else to do for the whole day. Now I have lots of ways of earning money."

"I believe there's opportunity here if you go out and look for it. A few years ago I only had my tea shop. Now I have lots of ways of earning money."



Pobitra in his shrimp pond

Pobitra's wishes

- To own my own house
- To make my businesses more successful

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Augustine Baroi, 44

Augustine has worked for Caritas Bangladesh for more than 20 years. He lives in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka with his wife and ten-year-old son.

Inspired by his Catholic faith, Augustine is passionate about what he does and works tirelessly day and night to ensure that the work of Caritas Bangladesh helps the poorest and most vulnerable people.

"In the light of Catholic social teaching there should be no poor, no hunger, no injustice. I work by these gospel values. My faith is related to "option for the poor", irrespective of caste or creed. We work with people of all religions. It's the dignity of the human that's important.

"In Bangladesh, natural disasters are happening more frequently. We only used to get a major cyclone once every 12 years. But recently there have been two major cyclones in the space of only three years. And there are other disasters that don't make the headlines.

"Cyclones make it more difficult for people to develop because if they have to restart every few years then they can't get anywhere. This is what's happening in Kainmari."

Bijoli, 31

Mother-of-two, Bijoli, is lucky. When her father-in-law retired, he gave Bijoli and her husband some money to build a secure house with concrete pillars that could withstand cyclones. But despite this, they still have trouble getting clean drinking water and are often ill as a result.

"I collect water from our own pond. I guess we're lucky, but the water isn't really safe to drink. Drinking water is a problem in this area. Most of the clean water is polluted by sea water when it comes inland during cyclones.

"Everyone in the family suffers from diarrhoea and dysentery. As soon as one person is better, another one becomes ill. It's a constant problem."

"We have a rainwater harvester – but this only lasts for a month after the rainy season. We need a bigger water tank that can last for four months.

"My husband works as a porter in the hospital. He earns a good wage, but we could only just about manage.

"Then Caritas Bangladesh showed us how to grow vegetables and I can make extra money. Before the training the land wasn't being used for anything.

"I think education is the only thing that can lead to a better life. I hope my daughters will be more successful than me."



Augustine

"In the light of Catholic social teaching there should be no poor, no hunger, no injustice."



Bijoli

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Tapati, 35

One of six children, Tapati left school at 10 and got married when she was 14 years old. She now lives happily with her husband, but is quietly determined that her 17-year-old daughter, Tunpa, will become a nurse.

Tapati's wishes

- To educate my children.
- To have my own drinking water pond
- To build a better house that can withstand cyclones

To realise her dream for her daughter, and to earn extra income, Tapati has started her own duck farm, with support from Caritas Bangladesh.

"With Caritas's help I bought 25 ducks and took part in training where I learned how to look after them. The ducks aren't producing eggs yet, because they're too young. But in a few months I will be making money by selling the eggs.

"My daughter, Tunpa, helps me look after the ducks. She wants to be a nurse, but I'm worried that I won't be able to afford the college fees.

"Our family was big – so my parents couldn't afford to educate all of us. If they'd had more money I could have finished school and I wouldn't have had to get married so young.

"I have seen so many changes in this area since I was a girl. When I got married women rarely left the house. But now I'm a member of a women's group. We talk about how to plan our families and why it can be beneficial to have fewer children. If people have fewer children, they have more money so girls don't have to get married when they're under age.

"I hope that if I can earn some extra money, Tunpa can fulfil her dream."

"Our family was big – so my parents couldn't afford to educate all of us. If they'd had more money I could have finished school and I wouldn't have had to get married so young."



Tapati's daughter, Tunpa at college

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Ananda, 37

Ananda is based in the Caritas Bangladesh field office in Kainmari. When Cyclone Sidr hit, he played a vital role in warning the community and making sure they got to the cyclone shelter. A devoted father, he is gentle but energetic and is motivated by his Catholic faith.

"I first heard the cyclone warning on the radio. I had a meeting with the local government office and then came straight back to Kainmari to warn people. I hired a rickshaw and told my staff to travel around the village with a megaphone.

"Cyclone Sidr hit at 11.30pm. Trees were falling and there were cracking sounds coming from all around. It went on until about 2am.

"The next day we started clearing the road. Everyone was cutting trees. The whole village was helping.

"My father was a Hindu, but he converted to Catholicism, so I was raised a Catholic. I do this type of work because I want to serve people, support my family and the community. My mind is peaceful when I'm doing my work. The life of Jesus is my motivation.

"It is my duty to stay here during a cyclone. I love this area even though it's hard to live here. I like to be here because the people are hard-working and kind, and they know that education is important."

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Ananda talks to Profulla outside his shop



Ananda helps the community with its challenges

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Profulla, 56

Profulla's grocery shop is at the centre of village life in Kainmari. Selling everything from sacks of duck feed, to packets of biscuits and fresh vegetables, the business is thriving. But when his shop was destroyed in Cyclone Sidr in 2007, Profulla was left with nothing.

Starting again from scratch, Profulla built back his shop brick by brick. He now lives in a room at the back of the shop with his wife and daughter.

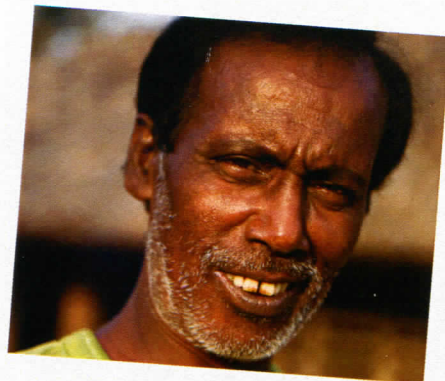
"I have never experienced anything like the Cyclone Sidr. It was very cloudy and the speed of the wind was increasing. Then it started to rain, and it got heavier and heavier.

"Everybody closed up their stalls, and made their way to the cyclone shelter. The next morning, I came back and there were trees lying all over the road. I used an axe to get through, and saw that my house and shop were completely destroyed. It was a terrible situation. You can't understand. It was our home and everything had gone."

"I decided I had to build my shop back stronger so I didn't lose it again. The money I got from the government wasn't enough, so I spent the money that I'd been saving for 20 years. The shop is now raised on a concrete plinth and I have peace of mind again.

"I didn't have enough money to rebuild my house too – so we live in the back of the shop. It's small, but we manage. My main priority is to make sure my daughter finishes her education."

"I decided I had to build my shop back stronger so I didn't lose it again. The money I got from the government wasn't enough, so I spent the money that I'd been saving for 20 years."



Profulla

Profulla's wishes

- To build the rest of the house in brick so it can withstand cyclones
- To expand my shop
- To help my daughter become a doctor

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Lovely Biswas, 38

For Lovely, her colleagues at Caritas Bangladesh are like family. A devout Hindu, she believes that if people of different religions work together, they can achieve great things.

Specialising in working with women, she knows that if Bangladesh is to move forward, women must take an active role in society.

"I believe in what Caritas is doing, because they promote human rights and they believe in morality and spirituality. We want to give women a chance to start businesses so they can become vocal in society.

"Women make up half of our population, so if they are not taking part and earning money how will a country like Bangladesh move forward? It is important that women know their rights, protect themselves and understand the issues their country is facing.

"At Caritas we are a family. And Caritas employs people of all religions, not just Catholics or Christians. It's important that people of different religions work together. If a garden has different flowers it looks more beautiful than if all the flowers are the same.

"CAFOD can change so many people's lives. There are many people who want to do something. We just need to give them the opportunity."

"If a garden has different flowers it looks more beautiful than if all the flowers are the same."



Lovely talking to Bijoli outside her house



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