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Within weeks of
a devastating
cyclone, an NGO
had a volunteer
effort under way
in Bangladesh.

by Libby Ellis
photos by Keely Kernan

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Sidr was a monster: a Category 4 beast barreling across the Indian Ocean.

And in November 2007, it had Bangladesh firmly in its crosshairs.

Even for a nation accustomed to tropical cyclones, Sidr was unique. Its birth in the wide-open ocean gave it strength beyond the Bay of Bengal-bred storms that typically threaten the nation.

Traveling at 260 kilometers (160 miles) per hour with top winds of 215 kilometers (135 miles) per hour, Sidr slammed into the densely populated Bangladesh coast on 15 November 2007. Despite early warnings and evacuations, the Red Cross estimates more than 3,000 people were killed, close to 500,000 homes were ruined and millions of acres of crops were destroyed. In all, 8.7 million people felt the impact.

raising the roof

When Sidr came roaring through Rayenda, Bangladesh, it took the roof of the Morrelganj Hindu Temple right with it. Teaming up with the U.S. Department of Defense, Hands on Disaster Response (HODR) set to work repairing the damage. But the temple was such an integral part of the community, the team had to sometimes work around the worshippers.

That made for some rather unpredictable workdays.

"Part of the religion is that prayer is informal and people can come anytime. We tried to be respectful of worshippers and would stop work when someone arrived," says Marc Young, HODR. "Then the owner of the hardware store in front [of the temple] would bring us tea and we would all have a break together."

The temple's location also made the otherwise straightforward two-week project tricky. To access the worksite, volunteers had to walk through the store in front and then through the owner's living quarters.

And to get to the town where the temple was located, team members traveled an hour each way by public bus. "The bus ride added a lot of time to each day but they had fun riding on the roof," Mr. Young says.

Halfway around the world in Pisco, Peru, Marc Young and Stefanie Chang were wrapping up work on an earthquake-recovery project with Hands On Disaster Response (HODR), a Carlisle, Massachusetts, USA-based non-governmental organization (NGO). They packed their bags and headed for the next project, not knowing what to expect. On 1 December, they arrived in Bangladesh's rain-soaked capital city, Dhaka, to meet with HODR's executive director David Campbell.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

HODR is a niche NGO. Unlike many of the bigger groups out there, it focuses on embedding itself in a community after disaster strikes and doing the hands-on work of rebuilding.

"We make big impacts in small areas," says Marc Young, HODR's director of international operations. "We can't do what an Oxfam or the Red Cross can do and we recognize that, so we create projects that rely on using human resources to address survivors' needs."

HODR works with local governments and other NGOs, forming partnerships with larger groups.

"We might be asked to serve as project managers for other organizations like UNICEF and run a rebuilding project. We're always looking for 'the meeting'—that connection that allows the community to be better served and the organization to provide a better program," Mr. Young says.

The first phase of every HODR project is assessment. And because the rest of the phases can't be determined until the team is in place, planning ahead is nearly impossible and flexibility is a necessity.

Typical budget planning doesn't apply. The group determines what funds are available—in this case about US\$100,000—and then executes the project. For Sidr, that project became a four-month stint in Rayenda on the country's southern coast rebuilding schools, latrines, houses and playgrounds. But first, the group had to get past some cultural, logistical and, initially, political challenges.



CULTURE CLASH

In Bangladesh, the group discovered a community well-acquainted with NGOs.

“When we got to the site, locals asked us where our white SUV was,” Mr. Young says. “The amount of NGO savvy in the country was a challenge—they were expecting big groups doing distributions. We’re not giving handouts. We’re helping and educating by doing. When we showed up with shovels wanting to dig out a tree that had fallen through a roof, they didn’t understand at first.”

Then there were the other more typical cultural issues. Volunteers en route were warned that travel would be far less than posh. Once in Dhaka, they could elect to take either a “hair-raising” 12-hour bus ride or a 22-hour boat trip to Rayenda. Without tourism infrastructure in place, there’s little English signage, roads are bad and crowds can be overwhelming. Additionally,

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playing in the mud

During the first two weeks of the project, 12 Hands On Disaster Response (HODR) volunteers from three countries got quite familiar with mud.

"The Bay of Bengal is a massive delta. The soil is just mud. People use mud to make homes and stoves, basically for everything," says Marc Young, HODR.

When Sidr hit, thousands of mud homes and foundations were washed out. So volunteers learned to cut and move mud from the riverbanks, bringing it into the community and allowing people to begin rebuilding.

The landscape turned out to have its advantages. "One thing we encountered was a group of men hand-drilling water wells—900-foot (274-meter) deep water wells," he says. "There was a team of guys turning a pipe, walking around in circles, until it hit 900 feet! And, that flatness allowed us a unique advantage because cellular towers can transmit and receive forever."

Bangladesh is a primarily Muslim country, so both men and women team members were urged to be respectful and dress modestly, even while working.

But there was one cultural difference the team wasn't expecting. "When we were on a project in Indonesia, we had trouble engaging with locals and we wondered if we'd have that difficulty in Bangladesh," Mr. Young says. "Little did we know ..."

"Bangladesh is not a place that is frequented by Western travelers so to see any foreigner is a curious sight," says Ms. Chang, the project's coordinator. "It was very routine, anytime you were out on the street, for a crowd of 50 people to just gather and stare at you. There wasn't any malice but it was a crushing amount of attention."

Although volunteers could take refuge in their quarters, the intense



exposure turned out to be biggest challenge of the project. Because the organization relies on manpower more than money, keeping volunteers comfortable is of great importance. Although most team members found ways to cope, a few couldn't take it.

"It's impossible to overstate the amount of attention you get," Mr. Young says.

Despite the culture shock, HODR teamed up with Save The Children within the first weeks of the project and immersed its volunteers in the heart of the community, setting up Safe Space play areas throughout the region. To reinforce its ties with the stakeholder community, HODR volunteers even joined the children three times a week.

"NOT AVAILABLE. DHAKA."

Rather than arrive on site with everything it needs, HODR travels light and buys locally to help devastated communities reestablish commerce.

"We provide income for the man who peddles the rickshaw, the blacksmith and the farmers," Mr. Young says. "It's a struggle but it goes back to that sense of global community."

But that didn't always prove possible. The team quickly became familiar with the phrase: "Not Available. Dhaka."

Without mechanized transportation in the region, most people walked, took rickshaws with a flatbed attached, or hired massive two-wheel car-like devices with a truck axle and cart to carry heavy loads. The organization relied on locals to hand-forged and fit tools and asked incoming volunteers to stop in Dhaka and bring supplies they couldn't get on site.

"We spent a tremendous amount of time on sourcing," Mr. Young says.

Those early weeks also provided HODR the opportunity to team up with Agroduct Foundation, a Bangladeshi NGO, to help install more than 400 latrine systems. With rebuilding going on all around the community, some demolition also was necessary. Using handsaws, hatchets, wedges and a

simple rope-winch technique, volunteers and locals moved huge trees from precarious spots. The group also unearthed an important path that was impassable because of debris.

POLITICAL POWER

Initially, HODR was concerned about working with Bangladesh's caretaker government. On the project site, local officials were most interested in having their own buildings repaired while HODR wanted to concentrate on schools and homes for residents.

"We always work within the parameters of the local government. We let people know who we are and where we are, we go to coordination meetings, we notify them within the course of the program," Mr. Young says. "Ninety percent of the time, they are very open and gracious and listen to how we can help."

With help from a high-ranking official, the group was able to reach an agreement. "It was a mutually beneficial, easy relationship," Mr. Young says.

The group worked with local officials to identify the community's neediest residents for a housing project. The team began by designing a house in a local

dialed into the system

Hands On Disaster Response came into Bangladesh with 50 volunteers from 10 countries who stayed an average of 31 days.

"From a project manager's standpoint it's a bizarre status that we have," Mr. Young says. "We may be totally dialed in on how to operate in Bangladesh but as soon as we understand the system, we leave. Of course the knowledge we gain could be valuable again but the main thing is that we, as an organization, have figured out how to figure out what we need to do. We have learned how to learn the system."

At our nightly group meetings we strongly encouraged people to express their feelings. We were all going through the same situation and it formed a support group.

—Marc Young

style that could be easily expanded. After beginning construction of the prototype, the group sought advice and assistance from local elders and the recipient families, who sometimes pitched in on the effort. By the beginning of February 2008, HODR had developed a familiarity with the design, materials and techniques necessary to implement the prototype—making it easy to replicate.

According to Ms. Chang, the project became much easier to manage once they knew better how to navigate relations with their host community and how to engage the beneficiary families they were working with. HODR made the decision to extend its stay until mid-April, entering phase two of the project and calling for more volunteers.

The group partnered with Save the Children UK to transition the benefits of the Safe Space program into permanent playground structures at five local schools. Teams of eight to 10 volunteers traveled to remote villages and lived in classrooms or in cyclone shelters during the on-site builds.

double time

Hands On Disaster Response (HODR) has two sets of stakeholders to satisfy. It obviously must help communities struck by disaster, but it also has to keep its volunteers happy. The organization makes no secret of asking a lot of its people, yet it does boast a 61 percent rate of return.

Eager to pitch in and get their hands dirty, volunteers stream in from around the world, dedicating anywhere from a few days to a few months of their time and bringing various skills with them.

Managing a volunteer crew is fairly easy because the people are drawn from a self-selected group driven to succeed, Mr. Young says.

“Once you’re here you can fill whatever role you want to fill. We have attorneys come and want to shovel, and brick workers come who want to help in the office, and we think that’s great,” he says. “We also see motivated volunteers step up to lead crews—and we sometimes target people who we think would be good leaders.”

No matter what task they take on, though, Mr. Young says it’s seeing the difference they make every single day that keeps volunteers coming back to HODR projects.



The intense scrutiny continued.

“While we were building some of the playgrounds, volunteers stayed in classrooms. They were in a fishbowl and it was mentally challenging,” Ms. Chang says.

She and Mr. Young took steps to help ease the pressure and create a sense of community among volunteers.

“At our nightly group meetings we strongly encouraged people to express their feelings. We were all going through the same situation and it formed a support group,” Mr. Young says.

The living quarters also provided sanctuary. In Rayenda, volunteers lived on the second floor and were able to retreat when they needed a break. Those on site working on the playgrounds lived in cyclone shelters—massive structures on stilts that Mr. Young chose specifically to give volunteers a bit of privacy.

Under the community’s watchful eyes, the team helped erect a 30-foot by 12-foot (nine-meter by four-meter) multiroom structure. It then went on to rebuild two more schools, repair an active, 100-year-old Hindu temple and

wrap up the housing project with five more homes going up in record time.

During the last five weeks of the project, members of the community began inviting volunteers to their homes for meals.

“We had ... I don’t know how many meals in community homes,” Mr. Young says. “If someone asks you, you refuse because you know they cannot afford to feed so many people. They ask again and you refuse. The third time, you say yes. What can you do? It’s Bangladeshi *shopota*, or culture and hospitality. We’d sit and have a joyous, chaotic feast and the whole community would watch through the cracks in the wall.”

As HODR prepared to depart, volunteers completed an exhaustive inventory and assembled a list of the 95 most needy families who then were invited to the HODR house for a lottery of the remaining supplies, including wood, beds, sheets, tin and chairs.

“There was clapping and smiles all around,” Mr. Young says. “It was fabulous.” PM