

INTRODUCTION : Promoting self-help for safer housing

Background history

During its first field study in Bangladesh in 1997, the Housing & Hazards group (H&H) piloted a series of Building for Safety workshops (Carter, 1997). The workshops aimed to reduce poor people's vulnerability to disaster by motivating them to improve the strength and therefore the hazard-resistance of their homes. This workshop approach was developed after an in-depth study in country, covering:

- Assessment of current government/ NGO approaches to rural housing
 - A survey of rural housing and village mapping in the study area
 - Interviews with local builders and householders
 - Evaluation of local media and teaching/ learning strategies
 - Development of house strengthening techniques with a local builder.
- The study reinforced the argument for a community based approach to building for safety programmes (Dudley and Haaland, 1993), and provided the basis for the development of the workshop approach. The pilot series of workshops was conducted in Sundarban Union, Dinajpur District (see Fig. 1 - Map of Bangladesh), in cooperation with Chetonar Dak, a small village-based non-governmental organisation (NGO).

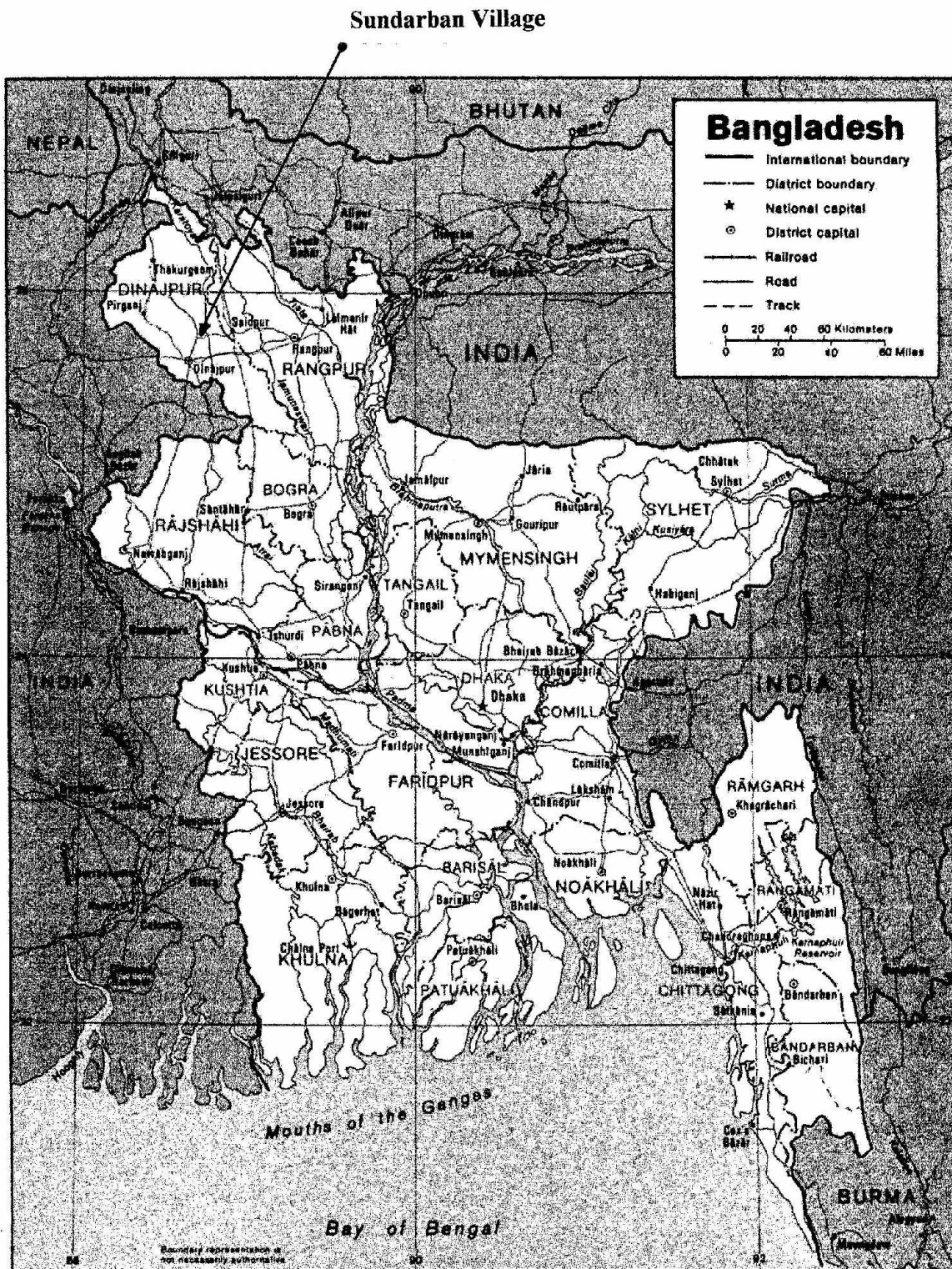
The principle at the core of H&H's workshop process is support of low-income communities' own strategies for survival. The workshop format is flexible so as to accommodate localized and personal circumstances. Thus the aim was to enable H&H to work with villagers to find ways of strengthening their homes using affordable and locally appropriate ideas. Participants worked through a series of discussions and practical exercises under the guidance of local facilitators to examine their local building methods and materials. From their analyses of the causes of vulnerability they derived "best practice" building techniques which would strengthen their homes and reduce the damage caused by natural hazards. This process resulted in the identification of marginal cost improvements which would make more resilient homes affordable within the villagers' means and circumstances.

This study

Housing & Hazards returned to the pilot project area in 1998, to conduct an evaluation of the workshops' impact, and to assess the issues requiring consideration in the development of this community based approach.

On arrival it was clear that the pilot workshops had been a popular success with the villagers, who still spoke in legendary terms of the H&H volunteer from the UK who had worked with them to create the methodology. Every one remembered exploring ideas about hazards and their effects and trying out the different building techniques. But the serious question to be asked in the evaluation study was whether the participants had put the ideas into practice in their own homes.

Fig. 1 Location of field study: Sundarban Village, Dinajpur District, Bangladesh.



OBJECTIVES

The overall aim of the field study was to make an impact assessment of the pilot 'building for safety' workshops, and to explore means for developing the approach and advancing its implementation.

The central objective therefore, was to conduct an in-depth study of the workshops' impact in terms of:

- whether learning objectives had been met (i.e. an assessment of the quantity and quality of learning points which have been retained by the participants)
- whether participants were in fact well placed (in domestic and personal terms) to take full advantage of the workshops and to put their learning into action
- the influence of the workshops on building practice and hazard mitigation
- the potential of the workshop approach to influence building practice in the future.

In preparing the study, it was recognised that since the study was to be carried out by a female engineer, there was an important opportunity to explore more closely the role of women in house building and their experience of hazard. Half of the workshop participants were female, but little was known about how much advantage could be gained by women from the workshops, given the social constraints on women's lives and decision making powers. Similarly, it was felt that little was known about women's potential to bring especial opportunities to the work of hazard mitigation. Hence, an underlying objective of the study was to pay particular attention to gender issues, and to highlight where further in-depth research of these issues might be appropriate.

Although much of the workshops' technical knowledge about vernacular building was supplied and developed by the participants themselves, a key input was provided by the research into safer-housing being conducted by the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). This research is being conducted under a link between BUET and the University of Exeter, funded by DfID and administered by the British Council in Dhaka. See Fig 2 for an organigram of the links in this research. The building techniques being developed at BUET are informed by international knowledge of building with bamboo and mud and by local knowledge and experience which was explored during the pilot workshops. An objective of the field study was to continue to supply BUET with local information about vernacular building and materials, and to ensure that BUET's developments continued to be appropriate to village conditions. In order to sustain the village-university link beyond the study period, relationships with Grameen Trust, a supporter of the workshop approach and a village based NGO, were also to be developed between Grameen Trust and BUET. A further objective in building that partnership was to create the opportunity to conduct future workshops through the Grameen Trust network.

The second phase of the study was then to assess how the workshop approach can be developed. The recommendations for progress were to concentrate on how implementation of the workshops' objective (i.e. appropriate, self-help improved housing) could be encouraged.

The principles set at the heart of the study were those of listening and learning.

Fig. 2 Organogram of field work relationships and linkages

