

Reducing Vulnerability to Climate Change (RVCC)
In Southwest Bangladesh

Report of the Monitoring Mission

Jan. 9 – Jan 20, 2005

by

Barry Smit

To Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)

Feb 26, 2005

1. Mission Purpose and Mandate

The broad purpose of the mission was to verify progress in the RVCC project toward achieving the expected results, primarily at the outcome level, and to provide recommendations.

The specific objectives were:

- a) To assess achievements or results with respect to project Outcomes.
- b) To review the RVCC's handling of previous recommendations.
- c) To note lessons learned overall regarding the project.
- d) To provide recommendations regarding a subsequent phase.

This report is based upon information gathered from

- the reports of the RVCC project, including the most recent Annual Report (period to June 30 2004),
- internal documents and reports of RVCC, including 2 policy reports by A.U. Ahmed, and Early Lessons reports of RVCC.
- presentations by RVCC staff and discussions with RVCC staff, at headquarters and in the field,
- meetings with PNGO personnel at the Co-ordination meeting (incl survey of RVCC lessons), at their offices, and in the field,
- meetings with representatives of government, notably the newly established Climate Change Unit,
- field observations meetings with householders and community representatives in communities where PNGOs are operating,
- presentations and discussions with NGO and agency representatives (Bangladesh and international) at the International Workshop on Adaptation.

3. Schedule

- 8-9 Jan. ● Travel
- 10 Jan. ● Climate Change Cell, Bangladesh Dept of Environment, Dhaka, Ralf Ernst and Dr Thomas Tanner.
 - Canadian High Commission, Briefing, Sylvia Islam.
 - Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, Dhaka, Dr Atiq Rahman and Dr Saleemul Huq
 - RVCC Project, Dhaka, Claudia Schaerer.Travel to Khulna.
- 11 Jan. ● RVCC Project Team: Documents, Discussions, Presentations (Technical Co-ordination, Monitoring and Evaluation, Partnerships, Accomplishments re Outputs and Outcomes, Advocacy)
 - Satkhira District field visit, PNGO IDEAL, with Knut Pelzer, crab producers and marketing group, crab depot, Parulia, Dedhata Upazila.

- 12 Jan. ● Hartal.
- Meet with RVCC staff, review project reports, flip charts, etc.
- 13 Jan. ● PNGO Coordination Meeting, Khulna. Achievements and Lessons from 14 PNGOs
- Bagerhat, NABOLOK visit, alternative incomes, livelihoods, waterlogging, floating gardens.. meet UP members.
- 14 Jan. ● Satkira, SUS 1, salinity, alternative incomes, potable water,
- Uttaran, public meeting with Civil Society, water, salinity.
- 15 Jan. ● Goroikhali, SUS 2, Rain Water Harvesting System (RWH) and Pond Sand Filter(PSF), alternative livelihoods.
- 16-18 ● Jan Dhaka, International Workshop on Community Level Adaptation to Climate Change, discussions with RVCC staff, representatives of several PNGOs, and representatives of several other NGOs and government agencies working in the area.
- 18 Jan. ● Special Advisory Committee meeting at CBHQ
- 19 Jan. ● Dhaka, Debriefing with Sylvia Islam.
- 20 Jan. ● Depart.

4. RVCC Accomplishments

The RVCC project has demonstrated very impressive progress in achieving its overall goal: *To increase capacity of communities in southwest Bangladesh to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change.*

The achievements described in the Annual Report were shown to be validated in all cases where a comparison was possible. The mission was able to sample a range of PNGOs and household and community initiatives. The evidence shows that more has been accomplished (January 2005) than is documented in the Annual Report. For example, in many of the PNGO field sites there are many more households now adopting alternative livelihood strategies and many more households benefiting from alternative water supply systems than is indicated in the report.

4.1. Outcome 1.

There is ample evidence that the RVCC project has contributed to the improvement of the capacity of vulnerable households to innovate their livelihood strategies, and thereby reduce their vulnerability to climate change. This Outcome was identified as a strength in previous reviews, and this has been maintained. The use of PNGOs has proven to be an effective means of promoting the adaptation strategies at the household level across the region. It is clear that the role of these locally recognized organizations, with established networks, local knowledge and credibility is a critical feature of RVCC, and a key part of the success on Outcome 1. The various methods (awareness raising, training modules, learning sessions, cross visits, demonstration plots, individual follow-up, ...) appear to have been very effective. The project also managed the need to remove a PNGO very effectively.

There is an impressive array of alternative livelihood options that have been identified (some drawn from other regions), with apparent suitability for the chosen sites. Similarly, there is a variety of alternative water supply systems being employed. The scope of these innovations is impressive, and there appears to be genuine uptake by households of most of the livelihood and water strategies being introduced. Of course, it is a little too soon to be able to really evaluate sustainability and spread of the strategies, but there is evidence that the beneficiaries are continuing to employ the strategies, modifying them to meet their needs, and benefiting from them in terms of their capacity to meet immediate and longer term needs. There is also evidence of progress in exploring marketing opportunities beyond just supplying local buyers.

Householders who are engaged in alternative livelihood strategies (crab fattening, duck or chicken rearing, floating gardens and household gardens, mele production and mat making, ...) seem to be enthusiastic about the options, and indicate that they are benefitting significantly from them. It is not clear that they see these as activities to address “climate change” specifically, but they do represent practical activities that enhance capacity to deal with conditions that are likely to be exacerbated by climate change. The innovations certainly help the householders improve their wellbeing and their incomes in light of such conditions as increasing salinity, water logging, extremes, etc., and this will reduce vulnerability to many changing conditions, including climatic ones.

While the vast majority of beneficiaries are certainly very poor and vulnerable, it seems that the initiatives have not been able to reach the absolute poorest in the region. Most of the alternative livelihood activities require some resources and sometimes some access to credit – even for those involved in project-sponsored activities.

The RVCC project has been responsible for a vast number of households now undertaking alternative livelihood practices and benefiting from improved food supply, drinking water, sanitation and safety. RVCC’s estimate in June 2004 was approx 8000 beneficiaries practicing measures. While this may include some “double – counting” of beneficiaries (one beneficiary engaged in more than one measure), it was also evident in the communities visited in January 2005 that there were many more beneficiary/measures than reported in June 2004, sometimes as much as double the number.

There is also some evidence of non-beneficiaries adopting some of the initiatives after observing their success in the community. By June of 2004 RVCC estimated 500 “secondary adopters”, a there are likely to be more now.

The RVCC accomplishments under Outcome 1 are very impressive.

4.2. Outcome 2

At the community level there is evidence of some progress in improving the capacity to develop and implement community level adaptation strategies. Some of the household activities are cooperative, and involve community decisions – floating gardens, community water supply and filter system. There is a close relationship between the community-level issues (eg, waterlogging, water management, fish farming, salinity, access to common property) and the household level initiatives. It is clear that addressing the broader issues, that involve more stakeholders, and more influential stakeholders, is a significant challenge. Outcome 2 is to improve the capacity of communities (notably UPs) to develop and implement adaptation strategies and plans.

Earlier reviews recommended focusing Outcome 2 activities on those PNGO/UPs where there was a higher chance of achievement in the project timeframe. This was done. Numerous activities have been undertaken addressing Outcome 2, including community workshops and civil society meetings and the formation of pressure groups, aiming to influence decisions of government agencies. A RVCC VSO volunteer focused on this aspect of governance.

There is some evidence of progress, with access to “common” water bodies facilitated for some people, several UP plans in the works, and some engagement on the issues of potable water and tidal river management. But the issues here are large and complex, involving influential stakeholders and high levels of government.

The initiatives being pursued are invariably issues that exist quite apart from climate change, and wisely, the RVCC activities are undertaken through the issues as they are addressed and/or managed in the region, ie. “mainstreaming”

4.3 Outcome 3.

Outcome 3 has two related elements, both focusing on the issues of salinity and potable water in the context of climate change: awareness raising (Output 3.2) and advocacy (Output 3.1):

Output 3.2.

The earlier recommendation was that the awareness raising material should not be presented as if it is entirely separate from the vulnerability-adaptation work, and mainly a climate science and long term impact issue. There is evidence that the awareness material is connected to the vulnerabilities identified by the households in the region.

Several activities address this output, including Pot songs, awareness sessions, eco-clubs, school programs, information collection and dissemination (to many stakeholders), and media.

The civil society meeting organized by Uttaran showed considerable public interest, and an awareness of issues relating to climate, water management, shrimp farming, salinity and access. No doubt many people, including householders, community representatives, and representatives of organizations and governments have been reached. It is difficult to assess the overall lasting effectiveness of the campaign, but a very thin sampling of people in communities suggested a mixed understanding of climate change and its implications.

There was a question about the accuracy or reasonableness of the message being given in Bangla in some of the instruments, including the pot song. These should be checked, and modified as necessary as soon as possible.

Output 3.1

The advocacy on a significant issue (salinity – drinking water) is closely linked to the activities under Outcome 2 and Outcome 4. There is progress in promoting grassroots awareness and organizations, through water (pani) committees and student water forums, and Upazilla and district level workshops, a media campaign, as well as the awareness activities under Outcome 2. In some communities there has been little activity or accomplishment. But in others, there have been rallies and submissions to district levels and to the Prime Minister’s office. These initiatives included a push to include a

consideration of salinity in the National Water Policy and National Water Management Plan.

Awareness and advocacy are probably necessary conditions for action at levels higher than community, but there would also appear to be a need for a clearer articulation of what can be done about some of the issues for which people are seeking attention.

4.4 Outcome 4.

The earlier recommendation was that, given the scope and complexity of engaging in national level policy, this interaction should be undertaken only where a clear connection existed between the RVCC activities and a specific area of policy.

To help identify possible areas of policy connection, RVCC undertook two review projects (both by Ahsan Uddin Ahmed). One reviewed the broad sweep of policies as they relate to climate change. The other addressed issues of salinity and potable water in national policies. Both are thorough critiques, and even offer some suggestions for national policy. However, they do not strongly show connections with RVCC.

It appears that the newly established Climate Change Unit, in the Bangladesh Department of Environment, is the contact for RVCC at the national level. This is appropriate, but the unit is still being established, and its connection or influence with such policies as the National Water Policy, are not clear.

The mission was advised by several sources (though not corroborated) that a Prime Ministerial declaration had been made relating the extension of water supply policy from urban to rural areas, and that the letter writing and other advocacy activities likely contributed to the decision.

It would appear that there has been very limited interaction with national level climate change stakeholders.

It would also appear that there is an opportunity to influence national level decisions (either directly or indirectly) through major NGOs, including CARE Bangladesh.

The minimal achievement on this Outcome is consistent with the emphasis given the household and community initiatives. And it is apparent (eg. at the international workshop in Dhaka) that the success of the project at the grassroots level has not gone unnoticed elsewhere in Bangladesh and in some international organizations.

4.5 Outcome 5.

This is about project management and implementation, and not really considered an outcome by this reviewer. The project would appear to be effectively managed, especially given the large number of partners, each with their own backgrounds, cultures and styles.

5. Previous Recommendations

Most of these have been noted in the previous sections, and most have been addressed in a reasonable fashion.

There was a recommendation that the Monitoring and Evaluation exercise be structured to meet a clear and practical purpose, and not become an end in itself, creating data bases without clear utility, consuming more time and energy than is warranted. There has been a consideration of the central purpose of the M and E activity, and it is more focused.

However, there is an on-going need to ensure that the M and E exercise is scaled to meet its purpose, and is undertaken efficiently.

6. Lessons

The overall approach taken in this project has proven to be quite effective. Key elements that have been shown to contribute to the success are the community based vulnerability assessment as an important starting point for the exercise, the focus on issues that are currently important to people, the integration of climate change issues into related pressing issues, the attempt to address vulnerabilities at several scales and the incorporation of adaptation initiatives into established development processes, and the use of partner NGOs with local experience and credibility from the outset. These lessons were recognized and acknowledged by many of the participants at the international conference in Dhaka. Several of these positive lessons are developed further:

- By incorporating climate change into issues of current concern to communities, people were able to identify with the aspects of climate change that were important to them, and were interested in exploring ways of dealing with it. The activities were ways of enhancing their livelihoods, improving their incomes, improving their water quality and improving their safety as much as they were activities about adapting to risks of climate change. This can be seen as a win-win, with adaptations to longer term risks being connected to current and ongoing challenges and development needs.
- It is certain that this project could not have achieved anything like its accomplishments without the partnerships with the Partner NGOs (PNGOs). The lesson here is that in this part of Bangladesh effective grassroots development initiatives are commonly implemented (and often designed) by NGOs, and very frequently by local NGOs or local offices of larger NGOs. These organizations have levels of local knowledge, connections, familiarity and credibility that would take an outside organization years to gain (if ever). This enables the PNGOs to orient the activities intended to meet the aims of the project in ways that address the particular needs of their communities and that build on their particular expertise, experience and networks. This is reflected in the differing orientations and activities among the PNGOs, yet each following the broad approach of RVCC and contributing to the RVCC Outputs and Outcomes. Such partnerships are not without problems, but the benefits here were clearly fundamental.
- There are numerous lessons from the various means by which the PNGOs introduced adaptive strategies to households, and hence to communities, including the importance of awareness raising, training sessions, targeting innovators, gender sensitivity, follow-ups, cross visits so that people could see first hand how something worked somewhere else, marketing assistance, and so on.
- The use of PNGOs (above) reflects a broader lesson from this project, namely the importance of integrating adaptation initiatives into existing decision making structures, development processes and policy regimes, rather than attempting to establish a discrete “climate change adaptation” mechanism. The partnerships with PNGOs worked in RVCC because of the important role NGOs play in Bangladesh civil society and development. The attempts in RVCC to influence

community decision making and policy that relates to the issues important to communities was through the established institutional arrangements (UPs etc). Influencing change at the higher levels of policy is a major task anywhere, and RVCC did not really give high priority to this. Yet it was apparent that prospects for affecting change are enhanced when initiatives are targeted to, or integrated with policies or management structures.

There are also features of RVCC that represent questions or items that need to be considered in the future, and in that sense are lessons:

- This is an extremely ambitious project, particularly in terms of the huge scope (approx 17 PNGOs, vast areas, numerous districts, dozens of communities, engagement at households and communities and UPs, thousands of beneficiaries, many livelihood strategies and water systems, broad awareness raising, wide information dissemination, attempt to inform the policy process). The benefits of such a broad scope may be questioned, and some of the connections among components may not be strong (eg. between some awareness materials and household initiatives, or grassroots work and higher level policy development), yet the large number of direct beneficiaries can only be applauded, and many of the components would not be credible without others. For example, the vulnerability assessments identified the targets for both household initiatives and community planning (salinity and water). The awareness program also built on the findings of the vulnerability work, and helped set the stage for acceptance of household and community initiatives.
- There are certainly many lessons regarding partnership arrangements for the effective engagement of PNGOs. The RVCC project devoted considerable effort to the PNGO selection process and to establishing contractual arrangements to structure the partnerships. This monitor questioned the seemingly large amounts of time and resources devoted to this early in the project. Yet, such careful selection and the establishment of formal collaborative arrangements was essential to RVCC's management of a wide range of partners, often with their own agendas. It is important that RVCC and CIDA continue to acknowledge the role of the PNGOs in the project.
- There is also a lesson about the time needed for projects of this kind. RVCC has been very time efficient, and has delivered on Outcomes in substantive ways in a time period that was quite tight considering the need to establish teams, design the program, select and train PNGOs, undertake vulnerability assessments, develop household strategies, prepare training packages, implement, and so on, not to mention the tasks need to address Outcomes 3 and 4.
- Is there a lesson in terms of the legacy of RVCC, or what will remain should the project end? Obviously, it is too soon to tell, and many of the household and community level strategies are still being established. Nonetheless, it would appear that a good number of the household livelihood strategies and most of the water supply initiatives have been adopted and maintained, and are largely self-sustaining. Furthermore, the evidence of "secondary adopters" suggests that many of these activities will spread where they make sense and where the means for initial start up exist.

- Another measure of a project's success is the take-up by other organizations, governments or NGOs. There would not appear to be any likelihood that government agencies would pursue work along the lines of RVCC. There may be some influence of the project in some government initiatives, such as Bangladesh's UNFCCC National Communications or in the newly established Climate Change Unit. With regard to take-up by NGOs, this reviewer is not aware of any explicit adoption of RVCC initiatives by other NGOs. Adoption by one of the big NGOs would certainly broaden and sustain the effect. An important indicator of the project's success will be its promotion and take-up by the parent NGO, CARE. Whether or not CARE (or CARE Bangladesh) incorporates lessons from RVCC into its on-going initiatives will be an important message. Of course, to a degree, many of the distinctive features of RVCC (livelihood enhancement, etc) are already central to CARE's modus operandi.

7. Recommendations

There is a very strong basis to recommend another phase to this work.

The RVCC project is one of the most effective climate change adaptation projects (of approximately 20 familiar to this reviewer), in terms of actually making a difference for vulnerable people.

The RVCC project is increasingly being recognized in Bangladesh and particularly in the international Climate Change-Development community for its distinctive approach and accomplishments. It would be a shame if this exceptional foundation was not used to continue work of this kind.

There is considerable prospect for building on the existing frameworks, approaches, networks and lessons to date, and achieving considerable accomplishments in a new phase very efficiently. In addition to the project's accomplishments in terms of reducing vulnerability of households, it has built considerable capacity to continue this kind of work – in CARE/RVCC, in the PNGOs, and in the communities and their organizations. A new phase would benefit from the work to date so long as the commitment to a new phase is made quickly, otherwise many of the benefits will be diminished or lost, including momentum, connections, goodwill, and crucial staff with their experience and networks.

There is flexibility for another phase to move in any of several directions:

- a) Same foci, same area, continue to complete and spread capacity to adapt at households and community and influence related policy.
- b) Narrower focus on an area and an issue, working up the levels of decision making.
- c) Extend application to much larger area, with focus on household livelihoods and community strategies.
- d) Direct major effort to community level planning, management agencies and policy.
- e) Move to a new area altogether, eg. coastal zone, and integrate adaptive strategies with coastal zone management.

Of these, my recommendation would be to build on the proven strength of CARE/RVCC, namely the partner-facilitated, “bottom-up”, practical enhancement of the capacities of vulnerable households and communities, to changing conditions (climate-related along with other pressing issues) in southern Bangladesh.

This builds on existing strengths, retains at least some of the partner agency capacity, maintains momentum in the southwest yet allows inclusion of new areas, permits completion of some initiatives still underway, allows assessment of the sustainability and spread of many of the strategies, and also allows for more effort in pursuing the higher level decision making that relate to the community vulnerabilities.

Of course, any subsequent phase need not retain the identical rationale and focus of RVCC, ie. vulnerability to climate change. As noted above, RVCC served that purpose, but, in practice, it was broader than that. There are excellent opportunities for the project to be transformed for a new phase in a way that both:

- addresses directly and substantively goals, objectives or issues in the CDPF and the MDGs, and
- does so by building on the capacity and contacts of CARE/RVCC, PNGOs, UPs, etc.

Possible themes, as main or subsidiary themes, in a subsequent phase are:

Environment: Natural disasters reflect numerous forces and conditions, which RVCC has already addressed via disaster risk management, preparedness, houses, etc., and adaptive capacity enhancement via empowerment of women and poor, livelihoods, etc. The Pressure on Natural Resources issue, and Environmental Sustainability, fit exactly with the water challenges in south Bangladesh, and the efforts of RVCC re water supplies, filtering, health, access, and advocacy and policy re water resources.

Social Development and Gender: RVCC targets vulnerable communities and the poor, identifies the most pressing issues for those communities, and introduces livelihood and income opportunities specifically to promote gender equity and empowerment of women.

Private Sector: RVCC’s livelihood strategies are essentially small enterprises for households, women especially, that usually involve credit, marketing and other aspects of small business. This relates also to MDG’s poverty reduction.

Governance: Many of the issues (access to resources, water, salinity, etc.) cannot be adequately addressed only at the household and community level. They also require attention at higher levels of authority, and involve many stakeholders, private and public. Enhancing the wellbeing of poor people, reducing their vulnerability, and sustaining the resources on which they depend requires attention to governance.

8. Conclusion

The RVCC project has an impressive array of accomplishments. It's distinctiveness and it's effectiveness in enhancing the ability of so many vulnerable households in southwest Bangladesh to deal with changing environmental conditions is recognized internationally. Thousands of households are now less vulnerable (Outcome 1). Many communities have improved capacity to promote adaptation strategies (Outcome 2). Local partners have developed capacity to inform people of climate change (many have been informed) and to advocate with government on climate change (and some have done so) (Outcome 3). The basis for national-level interaction has been established and the significant policy issue developed (Outcome 4). The project, particularly its partnerships with local NGOs, has been efficiently managed (Outcome 5). It is strongly recommended that this project be continued or reestablished in another phase.