

The radio may be largely diminished as a medium for conveying information in modern urban life, but community radios in rural areas of Bangladesh are actually helping save lives during natural disasters. Throughout the course of the recent Cyclone Mora, community radio stations were sometimes the only link to the outside world when the storm confined families indoors.

Since May 29 (the day before the cyclone), seven community radio stations in coastal regions of Bangladesh continuously broadcast programmes focused on cyclone preparedness. These included weather bulletin updates every 15 minutes, public service announcements, and interviews of disaster response authorities to help communities prepare for Cyclone Mora.

Community radio stations, active in this regard since 2011, have been operational through Cyclones Mahasen

disaster preparedness

A report by BBC Media Action titled Climate Asia which studied people's everyday experience of climate change in the region in 2012, revealed that 49 percent of the 3,578 households surveyed in Bangladesh felt informed about how to respond to climate change. It found that information helped people to respond—67 percent of those informed then felt prepared to face extreme weather events. These people would subsequently take action such as making home adjustments and setting up early warning alerts. Though radio figured below television and mobile phones in terms of media used most frequently, 21 percent of people who used their phones also listened to the radio on it.

Currently, 17 community radio stations are on air around the country. Regular programmes range from English language programmes to phone-in sessions to special features which

number four is issued, a control room is set up by BNNRC as a bridge between the community radio stations and disaster response authorities such as the Bangladesh Meteorological Department (BMD).

Pre-disaster, early warning messages issued by the BMD and interviews of local government representatives (such as the deputy commissioner and the upazila nirbahi officer) and of cyclone preparedness programme officials are broadcast. According to AHM Bazlur Rahman, CEO of BNNRC, these interviews are important because local people respect the views of such authority figures. This way, important updates are imparted in the local dialect and technical information is simplified for listeners' convenience.

A cyclone signal number 5-7 means television is not an option anymore as the power grid is down by then. "At this time, community radio is the only hope,"

clock connection to the affected rural communities," says Md. Kamaruzzaman, in-charge of the Disaster Control Room at BNNRC. During other disasters such as flooding, frequent updates are all that is needed, he concludes.

Each community radio station has around 20 to 30 youth volunteers. In 2013, BNNRC launched a three-month fellowship programme to induct young women into community media and journalism, focusing on their own communities. These rural women journalists, including young Dalit women, go on to write scripts, broadcast news, and host special programmes.

Joya, a bright young broadcaster at Radio Naf, was actively involved in cyclone awareness efforts on May 29 and 30. The first day, she was hosting programmes advising people to stay safe, take refuge in a cyclone shelter, and keep food stores handy. The next morning, she could not make it to the

COMMUNITY

HEALTH

First comes the wheezing. It happens decades before the skin lesions appear – the telltale signs of arsenic poisoning. It is the first symptom of a life-story that ends for many in cancer of the lungs, among others. For some, it happens before they learn to walk.

That is what had happened to all of Sajeda Khatun's three boys. "They used to have very frequent bouts of asthma. They had to try so hard to breathe that their stomachs would flatten out beneath their rib cages," says the mother of six who lives in Matlab upazila in Chandpur.

The asthma dissipated by the time they had left toddlerhood, but other

Sajeda Khatun's children's poisoning can be managed with treatment and arsenic withdrawal. The symptoms will reduce.

The Human Rights Watch report came out last year, after the fear over arsenic had died down. The last time the government did any nationwide study on drinking water was in 2013, when 12.4 percent of the samples exceeded the state-mandated safe limit of 50 micrograms per litre (WHO argues that only 10 micrograms per litre is safe). Unfortunately, this did not reflect any improvement; levels were almost the same as the 2006 study of drinking water at people's homes where 14 percent were found to be at risk, the report argues.

Locals explain that the green-marked tube well is a deep tube well set up by the government. Since these pipes are installed to draw water in from deeper places, the workers used a slurry of cow dung to soften the clay. The slurry makes the water smell.

That the water from her tube well has been tested as having 30 times the safe limit by ICDDR,B makes little difference to Sajeda Khatun. The numbers go over her head. "We've always had water from this. Our children's school has a red-marked tube well. My paternal home – their grandfather's house – has a red-marked tube well. Nothing has happened to us yet," she says. She does not regard the symptoms that her

arsenicosis. Early screening could have prevented this."

They are mostly all in their forties, she says, "People do not get lung cancer at such a young age, unless there was an external factor like arsenic."

That doctors' recognition of early symptoms and intervention do make a difference can be seen from Sefayat Ullah's case. Unfortunately he only got help when he got skin lesions. He knew then that he had to change his water source. And in good time too, since all of Sefayat Ullah's children have been exposed to arsenic in the uterus.

His family now uses a safe tube well, but not until years after his water source was marked red. "It is expensive to install a deep tube well. My eldest son got a job in Oman cutting tiles, and we finally saved enough money to repair the house and install a different tube well two years ago," he adds. The water of that tube well is yet undergoing tests the results of which he'll get to know soon. Anecdotally, the villagers said that a deep tube well can cost anything from Tk 50,000 onwards, while Human Rights Watch put the figure at \$850 and up.

From outside Sefayat Ullah's house is the gleaming picture of health and

COMMUNITY RADIO

HELPING SAVE LIVES DURING CYCLONE MORA

MALIHA KHAN

(2013), Roanu (2016) and Mora (2017). Before, during, and after a cyclone makes landfall, community radio stations forego regular programming to run almost continuous programmes on cyclone preparedness.

Siddiqur Hossain, station manager of Community Radio Naf, gathered representatives of the 29 listener clubs in Teknaf the day before the cyclone hit to raise awareness about cyclone preparedness. These members in turn went back to their communities to urge members of their listener clubs and locals to stay tuned to Radio Naf for crucial updates on the cyclone. "It was all hands on deck," says Hossain. Four young broadcasters (two boys and two girls) and several other staff and volunteers shared the duties of broadcasting for 24 hours straight. A large segment of listeners of Radio Naf are fishermen around Teknaf who depend on this vital service for important information related to their livelihoods—timely weather forecasts and market prices—but especially so when natural disasters strike.

Community radio engaging in



PHOTO COURTESY: BNNRC

address social issues such as child marriage and eve teasing. The total number of listeners is around 6.18 million, roughly 25 percent of the population in the broadcasting areas.

The Community Radio Policy of 2008 was an effort to create radio stations exclusively dedicated to marginalised grassroots communities, broadcast in their own dialects. Community radio stations fill the gap left by mainstream media, largely urban radio channels focused on entertainment. Instead, they focus on bringing forth the voices of rural people by regularly featuring them on programmes and by training local journalists, especially young women, in these very communities.

Since 2000, Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC) has worked to improve recognition for the community electronic media sector. Though this sector encompasses community television and community film as well, it is community radio that has been successfully adopted by rural communities at present.

As per the government's Standing Orders on Disaster, when a signal

says Rahman. On radio, only Bangladesh Betar (the national radio) and community radios are available for affected communities. The latter's focus on disaster preparedness makes it crucial in helping people in affected areas prepare for the cyclone. In distant Teknaf, for example, Bangladesh Betar is often disrupted and Radio Naf is thus the main medium of information on the cyclone.

At cyclone signal number 8-10, disaster management programmes run almost continuously, with the community radio stations depending on generators for uninterrupted electricity supply. "As long as their phones are charged, people have a channel of information open to them," says Rahman. Post-cyclone programmes give updates on damages incurred, points at which aid can be collected, and measures such as how to effectively treat water before drinking.

"We do disaster preparedness programmes for other types of natural disasters too, but community radios are particularly relevant during cyclones when electricity is disrupted. Cyclones are harrowing and require a round-the-

radio station in the morning due to the cyclone's strong winds, but still came later that day.

Joya's dedication is evident—the 21-year-old works at the radio station alongside being a second-year student at Teknaf Degree College. She has worked at Radio Naf since December 2013. "I have learned a lot during my time here. We broadcast news, host programmes, and do editing, all by ourselves," says Joya excitedly. Though she does not get remuneration for her work, Joya does it anyway, taking pride in working in a radio for her community.

In Teknaf, and other broadcasting areas, locals are taking ownership of their community radio stations. Their participation is crucial to the functioning of community radios as programmes are designed with their opinions and in their interests. "For rural populations, their community radio station is like a friend," explains Rahman. During cyclones and other natural disasters, it proves to be a friend indeed as it helps people in need with vital information on preventive measures to protect their assets, and most importantly, their lives. ■

ZYMA ISLAM

symptoms customary of arsenic poisoning have started to appear. Her youngest is 11-years-old – although stunting makes him look three years younger – and has been consuming arsenic-laced water since he was a foetus. A thick tough layer of skin – almost like hide – tops his palms. It is called keratosis and this is one of the very first signs of advancing arsenic poisoning.

"This is nothing to worry about: all three of my boys have palms like that. It's probably because they are boys," laughs Khatun. That Sajeda Khatun thinks all boy children have coarse palms shows how arsenic poisoning has been entrenched in her family. Because of her long history of exposure, her boys are a part of a study by ICDDR,B (International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh). "We have been following a cohort of 650 children from early childhood—many of them from their time in their mother's uterus," says Dr Al Fazal Khan, one of the principal researchers of this study, "this cohort is unique in that way." Their aim is to observe the development of arsenic poisoning in cases of early childhood exposure, and perhaps also identify places of intervention.

For example knowing that Sajeda Khatun's children have arsenic poisoning, even though they haven't developed the customary black skin lesions, means that treatment can start early. This finding is important at a time when plenty of tube wells still remain untested and Human Rights Watch has estimated that 20 million drink water with arsenic.

ARSENIC
The largest mass poisoning of a population

2013 was the last time a nationwide study on arsenic in water was done by the government...

the study found **12.4%** of samples exceeded the Bangladesh standard.

Symptoms of poisoning start at infancy: **wheezing, coughing, asthma...**

...which develops into **skin lesions and cancer** into adulthood.

The replacement of unsafe tube wells is at best, **sporadic.**

Photo: AER | Infographic: Amiya Halder

SOURCE: HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, ICDDR,B

Human Rights Watch itself analysed 125,000 green tube wells installed by the Department of Public Health Engineering and found around 5 percent had become contaminated. They provide a caution however – this is not reflective of the true scenario since a majority of the wells were installed in areas where more than half of the people had access to safe water to begin with.

Sajeda Khatun has access to one of these green-marked deep tube wells but does not use it, choosing instead her old tube well. "Our tube well was marked red a long time back and we even had another safer one installed. We keep on using it because the green (safe) one smells," she says.

children experienced in childhood as effects of poisoning. The only person who could have made an impact would have been their doctor, but he diagnosed their chronic respiratory problems as the common cold, thus perpetuating the belief that the family is not actually poisoned. Her belief proves the necessity for doctors to keep up with recent research and prescribe solutions accordingly.

"No doctor would test for arsenic poisoning in a case of respiratory distress," says Dr Parveen Shaheda Akhtar, department head of medical oncology at National Institute of Cancer Research and Hospital. "Yet I have many cancer patients who also have

hearth. The walls have had a fresh coat of paint, the beaten earth floor has been covered with a jute mat, the ceiling is adorned with do-it-yourself chandeliers that his daughters made out of soda-bottle caps. Livestock runs about and his yard is heaped with piles of glittering yellow corn. He is definitely better off than many of his neighbours whose homes can be blown away by a storm. Yet, the fact that installing deep tube wells is an expenditure that even the better-off households can find difficult to provide out-of-pocket shows how inaccessible safe water actually is – and what a big public health disaster is being ignored. ■