

# ASSESSMENT REPORT

## Qualitative assessment for new program development



### Participatory Qualitative Assessment on Gender, Climate Resilience, Livelihoods, and Community Systems in Barguna Sadar Upazila, Barguna, Bangladesh

Timeline  
March 2026

#### **Data Collection & Transcription:**

Samima Aktar (Program Manager: CCA Project, JN)  
Md. Abul Kashem (Project Officer: ACT-II Project, JN)  
Md. Boshir (Field Facilitator: CCA Project, JN)  
Tool development, Data analysis & Report writing:  
MD. Hasan Shahriar (Director-RME, JN)

**JAGO NARI, Ashahi mansion(2nd Floor),  
College Road, Barguna.**



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## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This assessment presents a qualitative, evidence-based analysis of the interconnected challenges shaping vulnerability and resilience of Barguna. Using participatory and inclusive methods—including focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and key informant consultations—the study captures the lived experiences and perspectives of women, men, youth, and Indigenous (Rakhain) communities.

The findings reveal that vulnerability in the community is not driven by isolated issues, but by the interaction of three reinforcing systems: gender inequality, climate vulnerability, and economic insecurity. Women play a central role in sustaining households and contributing to livelihoods; however, their work remains largely unrecognized, and their participation in decision-making processes is limited. At the same time, agriculture—the primary source of income—is increasingly fragile due to climate variability, with farmers lacking access to climate-resilient practices, information, and institutional support. Livelihood options remain seasonal, unstable, and insufficient, contributing to persistent economic stress and limited coping capacity.

Despite these challenges, the assessment highlights strong community potential. Women and youth demonstrate high motivation to engage in income-generating activities, skill development, and collective action. Existing social capital, including informal volunteerism and community networks, provides a foundation for sustainable engagement. However, this potential is constrained by structural barriers, including restrictive social norms, limited access to services and knowledge systems, weak institutional functionality, and the systemic exclusion of Indigenous populations.

The findings also point to cross-cutting gaps in child well-being, particularly related to nutrition and hygiene practices, which are closely linked to poverty, limited awareness, and inadequate access to services. These issues underscore the need for interventions that explicitly integrate child-focused outcomes within broader community development efforts.

Overall, the assessment underscores the need for an integrated, community-led approach that simultaneously addresses social, economic, and environmental dimensions of vulnerability. Key strategic priorities include gender-transformative programming, climate-smart agriculture through FARRM Schools, skill development and economic empowerment for women and youth, strengthening of community-based organizations and volunteer systems, promotion of child nutrition and WASH practices, and enhanced inclusive governance and institutional linkages.

Such an approach aligns with a holistic vision of community transformation, where strengthening local capacity, promoting inclusion, and improving livelihoods collectively contribute to enhanced child well-being and long-term resilience.

## 2. CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

Bangladesh is globally recognized as one of the most climate-vulnerable countries due to its low-lying geography, dense population, and high exposure to climate hazards. Ranked 9th in the 2023 World Risk Index, the country's coastal belt faces increasing threats from sea-level rise, salinity intrusion, cyclones, tidal surges, and erratic rainfall. These risks are particularly acute in southern coastal districts such as Barguna, where communities experience repeated climate shocks that disrupt livelihoods, damage infrastructure, and deepen poverty. The impact of recent events, including Cyclone Remal in 2024—

which affected over 4.6 million people and caused damages exceeding USD 1.2 billion—highlights the growing intensity and frequency of such disasters and the urgent need for locally grounded resilience-building interventions.

Within Barguna Sadar Upazila, M. Baliatoli Union represents one of the most climate-exposed and vulnerable areas. Surrounded by river systems and located close to the Bay of Bengal, 8 out of its 9 wards are highly risk-prone, regularly affected by cyclones, tidal surges, river erosion, and flooding. Communities frequently face crop losses, destruction of fish enclosures, damage to homes and infrastructure, and prolonged periods of food insecurity. Salinity intrusion and scarcity of safe drinking water further exacerbate vulnerabilities, while limited access to healthcare and basic services increases the risks faced by already marginalized populations. More than half of the population lives in poverty, relying on climate-sensitive livelihoods such as agriculture, fishing, and daily wage labor. Agricultural losses—often driven by flooding, river erosion, and unpredictable rainfall—directly translate into increased economic hardship and food insecurity. These environmental challenges are compounded by deep-rooted social inequalities. Women, particularly those from poor and landless households, face restricted mobility, limited access to resources and services, and exclusion from decision-making spaces. Despite playing a critical role in household survival and adaptation, they remain largely absent from formal systems of disaster response, livelihood planning, and local governance. In addition, limited awareness, lack of access to climate-resilient agricultural practices, and weak institutional linkages further constrain the community’s ability to cope with and adapt to climate shocks.

The assessment was therefore conducted to ground the proposed intervention in the lived realities of the community, ensuring that program design responds directly to locally identified risks, capacities, and priorities. It aimed to identify practical entry points for strengthening climate-resilient livelihoods, promoting gender-equitable participation, improving child well-being, and building sustainable community systems. The findings underscore the urgent need for integrated, community-led approaches that address both environmental vulnerabilities and social inequalities to achieve long-term, inclusive resilience.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative and participatory research design was adopted to generate an in-depth understanding of community experiences, perceptions, and underlying drivers of vulnerability. This approach enabled the exploration of diverse perspectives across gender, age, and social groups, ensuring that the voices of marginalized populations were meaningfully represented.

Data collection was conducted using multiple qualitative methods. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were organized separately with women, men, and Rakhain women to create safe and inclusive spaces for open dialogue. In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) were carried out with women, farmers, youth, and indigenous participants to capture individual experiences, coping strategies, and livelihood challenges. In addition, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with UP Chairman, Female UP Member, and local school teacher to gain institutional and systems-level insights.

The analysis followed a rigorous qualitative process. Data were systematically coded using a thematic analysis approach, allowing key patterns and recurring issues to emerge. Findings were validated through triangulation across FGDs, IDIs, and KIIs, ensuring consistency and reliability. A comparative

analysis was also applied to examine differences across gender, social groups, and stakeholder levels. This analytical process enabled the identification of critical patterns, contradictions, and structural factors shaping vulnerability, resilience, and access to resources within the community.

#### 4. ANALYTICAL FINDINGS

##### 4.1 Gender Roles, Time Poverty, and Invisible Labor

Women's daily lives in the community are shaped by an intense and continuous cycle of labor that spans household responsibilities, caregiving, and unpaid contributions to agriculture and livelihoods. Many women described working between 14 to 16 hours a day with little to no rest. As one participant expressed, "We work all day... but at the end of the day we hear—'you did nothing'." This reflects not only the scale of their workload but also the deep social undervaluation of women's contributions within the household and community.

From a qualitative perspective, this issue extends beyond workload and is rooted in entrenched structural gender inequalities. Women's labor remains largely unpaid, unrecognized, and excluded from formal economic valuation, despite its critical role in sustaining household livelihoods. This invisibility reinforces unequal power dynamics and limits women's ability to influence decisions. At the same time, the burden of "time poverty" significantly constrains women's participation in training, community meetings, and income-generating opportunities, effectively excluding them from development processes intended to benefit them.

These findings suggest that without explicitly addressing women's time constraints and the social recognition of their labor, interventions targeting women's empowerment are likely to face limited engagement and impact. A more effective approach requires integrating strategies that reduce women's workload, promote shared household responsibilities, and create enabling conditions for their meaningful participation.

##### 4.2 Participation vs Power: The Illusion of Inclusion

Findings indicate that while women's participation in community spaces has increased in form, it remains limited in substance. Women reported attending meetings and group discussions; however, their engagement is often passive. As one participant shared, "We attend meetings, but we don't speak." This experience was further reinforced through key informant interviews, which highlighted that only a small proportion of women actively contribute during discussions, and even when they do, their perspectives are frequently overlooked or undervalued.

This points to a deeper dynamic of "participation without power," where inclusion is largely procedural—ensuring women's physical presence—without translating into meaningful voice, influence, or decision-making authority. Social norms, confidence gaps, and entrenched power structures continue to shape whose voices are heard and whose are dismissed, limiting the transformative potential of participation spaces.

These findings suggest that simply ensuring women's attendance in meetings is insufficient. For participation to be meaningful, programs must intentionally create enabling environments that strengthen women's confidence, amplify their voices, and shift decision-making power dynamics within households and community institutions.

### 4.3 Social Norms as Structural Barriers:

The findings reveal that women's participation and mobility are constrained by deeply embedded social norms that operate at multiple levels. Women described facing a combination of religious and cultural expectations, restrictions on movement, fear of social judgment, and limited self-confidence. As one participant noted, "If we go outside, we have to listen to negative comments." This reflects a broader social environment where women's public presence is closely monitored and often discouraged.

From a qualitative perspective, these barriers are not isolated or individual—they are structurally embedded and socially enforced. Community norms actively regulate women's behavior, while repeated exposure to criticism and restriction leads many women to internalize these expectations, resulting in self-censorship and reduced confidence. Over time, these patterns become normalized and are reproduced across households and generations, reinforcing gender inequality.

This suggests that addressing women's empowerment requires more than individual capacity-building. Interventions must engage with the wider social environment, including men, community leaders, and institutions, to shift norms, reduce stigma, and create supportive conditions for women's meaningful participation and mobility.

### 4.4 Climate Vulnerability and Agricultural Fragility

Farmers consistently described their livelihoods as being under constant threat from a range of climate-related shocks, including cyclones, salinity intrusion, irregular rainfall, and recurring crop losses. As one farmer explained, "Tidal surges, lack of timely rain, salinity... crops are being damaged." These experiences highlight the growing instability of agriculture in the area, where traditional farming practices are no longer reliable under changing climatic conditions.

From an analytical perspective, agriculture in this context is highly climate-dependent and increasingly unpredictable, exposing farmers to significant financial risks. The absence of adaptive practices, limited access to climate information, and inadequate institutional support further exacerbate this uncertainty. As a result, households are caught in a recurring cycle of vulnerability: climate shocks lead to crop failure, which reduces income, weakens coping capacity, and increases exposure to future risks.

These findings underscore that climate adaptation is no longer a complementary intervention but a central requirement for sustaining livelihoods. Strengthening farmers' capacity to anticipate, adapt, and respond to climate variability is essential to breaking this cycle and building long-term resilience.

### 4.5 Absence of Climate Adaptation Capacity

Despite facing frequent and severe climate-related risks, farmers demonstrated very limited capacity to adapt to changing environmental conditions. Participants consistently reported a lack of knowledge on climate-resilient agricultural practices, absence of access to formal training opportunities, and minimal use of weather-based information for decision-making. As one farmer shared, "We are not connected to any modern technology." This gap was further reinforced through key informant interviews, which confirmed that most farmers remain unaware of climate-smart agriculture methods and available advisory services.

From a qualitative standpoint, this reflects not a lack of willingness among farmers, but a broader gap in knowledge systems and service delivery. Farmers are operating within constrained environments where access to information, training, and institutional support is limited or absent. As a result, they continue to rely on traditional practices that are increasingly ineffective under current climate variability.

These findings highlight a critical opportunity for intervention. Strengthening access to knowledge, climate information, and practical skills is essential to enable farmers to adapt and reduce risk. In this context, the introduction of structured learning platforms such as FARRM Schools represents a highly relevant and potentially transformative approach to building adaptive capacity and resilience at the community level.

#### 4.6 Livelihood Insecurity and Economic Stress:

Households in the community rely primarily on agriculture, fishing, and day labor as their main sources of income. However, these livelihood options are highly seasonal, unstable, and often insufficient to meet year-round needs. As one participant expressed, “This income is not enough for the whole year.” Such experiences reflect a broader pattern of economic uncertainty, where households struggle to maintain consistent income and are frequently forced to cope with periods of financial shortfall.

From a qualitative perspective, these livelihood systems are characterized by limited diversification, low stability, and weak resilience to external shocks—particularly climate-related disruptions. Heavy dependence on climate-sensitive sectors further increases vulnerability, as any environmental shock directly translates into income loss. This lack of economic buffers leaves households with few options to recover, often pushing them into cycles of debt, reduced consumption, or negative coping strategies.

These findings suggest that economic vulnerability in the community is not a temporary condition but a chronic and structural issue. Addressing it requires interventions that promote diversified, stable, and climate-resilient livelihood opportunities to strengthen household income security over the long term.

#### 4.7 Skills Gap and Aspirational Demand:

Across all participant groups, there was a strong and consistent expression of interest in acquiring new skills and engaging in income-generating opportunities. Community members—particularly youth and women—demonstrated a high level of motivation and readiness to participate in training initiatives. As one participant stated, “If we get training, we will definitely work.” This reflects not only a desire for economic improvement but also a sense of agency and willingness to act when opportunities are made available.

From a qualitative perspective, this highlights a significant gap between existing capacities and available opportunities. While the community possesses motivation and latent potential, there is limited access to structured skill development, market-oriented training, and pathways for practical application. This disconnect results in underutilized human capital, particularly among youth, who remain willing but unable to translate their aspirations into sustainable livelihoods.

These findings indicate that investment in skill development is likely to yield high returns, not only in terms of income generation but also in enhancing confidence, agency, and long-term resilience.

Targeted, context-specific training combined with practical support mechanisms can unlock this untapped potential and contribute to more sustainable and diversified livelihood pathways.

#### 4.8 Absence of Women's Collective Power (CBO Gap):

The assessment found that there are currently no functional women-led organizations within the community, despite a strong expressed interest among women to organize collectively. Many participants indicated a willingness to come together, share experiences, and engage in joint activities if appropriate platforms were created.

From a qualitative perspective, the absence of collective structures significantly limits women's ability to move beyond individual coping strategies. Without organized groups, women remain socially and economically isolated, with limited opportunities to build solidarity, share knowledge, or collectively advocate for their needs. This also restricts their negotiation power within households, markets, and community decision-making spaces. Furthermore, the lack of institutional platforms undermines the sustainability of interventions, as there are no locally rooted mechanisms to carry forward learning, resources, or initiatives.

These findings highlight that the formation and strengthening of women-led community-based organizations (CBOs) is not just a program activity but a critical entry point for enabling empowerment, collective agency, and long-term sustainability of development outcomes.

#### 4.9: Limited Youth Engagement and Absence of Structured Volunteer Systems:

The assessment revealed that while there are individuals within the community who are willing to volunteer and contribute to local development efforts, there is no structured system to support or sustain their engagement. Participants noted that volunteers exist, but they lack formal training, coordination mechanisms, and clear roles within community initiatives.

From a qualitative perspective, this reflects the presence of latent social capital that remains largely untapped. Youth, in particular, demonstrate willingness and potential to engage; however, in the absence of organized platforms, guidance, and capacity-building opportunities, their contributions remain informal, sporadic, and limited in impact. Without structure, volunteer efforts are neither sustained nor effectively linked to broader community development processes.

These findings suggest that establishing a structured and well-supported volunteer system could serve as a highly effective and cost-efficient strategy. By investing in training, coordination, and mentorship, such a system can transform existing willingness into organized action, strengthening community outreach, behavior change efforts, and overall program sustainability.

#### 4.10 Governance Gap: Access Without Inclusion:

The assessment indicates that while formal governance structures, such as the Union Parishad, are present within the community, their functionality and inclusiveness remain limited in practice. Participants noted that although meetings and decision-making processes are expected to occur, they are often not effectively implemented. As one respondent shared, "Meetings happen on paper, but not in reality." This reflects a disconnect between formal institutional structures and their actual operation at the community level.

From a qualitative perspective, this points to deeper governance challenges, including weak accountability mechanisms, limited transparency in decision-making, and the exclusion of marginalized groups—particularly women and vulnerable households—from meaningful participation. While institutional frameworks exist, they are not fully accessible or responsive to community needs, resulting in low trust and limited engagement from local populations.

These findings suggest that strengthening governance requires more than the presence of formal systems; it demands a focus on functionality, accountability, and inclusive participation. Targeted advocacy and community engagement efforts are therefore essential to ensure that existing structures become more transparent, responsive, and representative of all community members.

#### 4.11 Indigenous (Rakhain) Exclusion:

The assessment highlights that the Rakhain community experiences multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion within the broader social and institutional context. Participants described facing language barriers, cultural differences, and limited opportunities to engage in community processes. As one participant expressed, “We cannot speak like the mainstream community.” This reflects not only a communication gap but also a deeper sense of social distance and marginalization.

From a qualitative perspective, this situation goes beyond general marginalization and reflects a pattern of systemic exclusion. Structural barriers—such as lack of culturally appropriate communication, limited representation in decision-making spaces, and insufficient recognition of indigenous identity—restrict the Rakhain community’s ability to participate fully in development processes. These challenges are further compounded by social norms and institutional practices that are not designed to accommodate diversity.

These findings indicate that inclusive programming must go beyond general community engagement and adopt targeted, culturally sensitive approaches. Interventions should prioritize inclusive communication, representation, and tailored engagement strategies to ensure that the Rakhain community can meaningfully participate and benefit from development initiatives.

### 5. SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS:

The assessment findings reveal that community vulnerabilities are not driven by a single factor but are shaped by the interaction of multiple, interconnected systems. Three key systems emerged as central to understanding the current context.

First, a gender inequality system continues to limit women’s participation, voice, and economic engagement. Social norms, time poverty, and lack of collective structures restrict women’s ability to access opportunities and influence decisions.

Second, a climate vulnerability system significantly affects livelihoods, particularly agriculture, which remains highly dependent on unpredictable environmental conditions. Recurrent climate shocks—such as salinity, flooding, and cyclones—reduce productivity and increase livelihood risks.

Third, an economic insecurity system reinforces chronic poverty, as households rely on unstable, seasonal income sources with limited diversification and resilience.

These systems do not operate in isolation. Rather, they interact and reinforce one another, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of vulnerability. For example, climate shocks reduce income, which deepens economic insecurity; this, in turn, limits the ability of households—especially women—to invest in adaptive practices or participate in development opportunities. Similarly, gender inequality further constrains access to resources and decision-making, exacerbating both economic and climate-related vulnerabilities.

This synthesis highlights the need for integrated, multi-dimensional interventions that simultaneously address social, economic, and environmental factors to break this cycle and support sustainable, inclusive resilience.

## 6. CONCLUSION:

The assessment findings clearly indicate that the community is not lacking motivation or potential; rather, it is constrained by a combination of structural, social, and environmental barriers. Across all groups, there is strong willingness to engage, high interest in improving livelihoods, and existing social capital that can be built upon.

However, this potential remains largely unrealized due to interconnected challenges, including restrictive gender norms, limited access to knowledge and resources, climate-induced livelihood risks, and weak institutional support systems. These structural barriers limit the community's ability to translate willingness into sustained change and resilience.

The findings therefore point to the need for an integrated approach that goes beyond isolated interventions. Effective programming must simultaneously address livelihood resilience, gender equality, community capacity, and access to systems and services. Ensuring inclusion—particularly of women, youth, and marginalized groups—and strengthening local capacities will be critical to enabling meaningful participation and long-term sustainability.

In this context, a holistic, inclusive, and capacity-focused intervention is essential to unlock existing potential and support the community in moving from vulnerability toward resilience and self-reliance.

## 7. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the assessment findings, a set of integrated and context-responsive strategic interventions is recommended to address the interconnected challenges of gender inequality, climate vulnerability, and economic insecurity. These recommendations aim to build on existing community strengths while addressing structural barriers to sustainable and inclusive development.

- A. **Promote Gender-Transformative Programming:** Interventions should move beyond ensuring women's participation toward strengthening their decision-making power and agency. This requires engaging men, community leaders, and institutions to challenge restrictive norms, redistribute roles, and create enabling environments for women's meaningful involvement in economic and social spheres.
- B. **Implement FARRM Schools as a Core Climate Resilience Intervention:** Establish structured learning platforms to equip farmers with climate-smart agricultural practices, disaster preparedness knowledge, and weather-based decision-making skills. Strengthening linkages with

agricultural extension services will further enhance sustainability and access to ongoing technical support.

- C. Invest in Skill Development and Economic Empowerment for Women and Youth: Provide market-oriented skills training combined with entrepreneurship development and start-up support. This should focus on practical, locally relevant, and climate-resilient livelihood options to enable income diversification and long-term economic stability.
- D. Strengthen Women-Led Community-Based Organizations (CBOs): Facilitate the formation and capacity development of women's groups to enhance collective action, leadership, and financial governance. Strong CBOs can serve as sustainable platforms for social support, economic activities, and community engagement.
- E. Develop a Structured Community Volunteer System: Establish and strengthen a coordinated volunteer network, particularly engaging youth, to support community-level awareness, behavior change, and service delivery. Training, mentorship, and clear roles will be essential to transform existing willingness into sustained and organized action.
- F. Enhance Inclusive Governance and Advocacy Mechanisms: Promote functional and inclusive dialogue platforms between communities and local institutions to improve transparency, accountability, and service access. Special attention should be given to ensuring the representation and voice of women and marginalized groups in decision-making processes.
- G. Adopt a Targeted Indigenous Inclusion Strategy: Design culturally sensitive approaches that address language barriers, respect local identity, and promote meaningful participation of indigenous (Rakhain) communities in all stages of programming.
- H. Strengthen Community-Based Child Nutrition through GMP Campaigns: The assessment findings indicate underlying concerns related to child nutrition and care practices, particularly linked to livelihood insecurity, limited awareness, and restricted access to health services. Women and caregivers highlighted challenges in accessing regular health check-ups and nutrition information, while stakeholders noted gaps in early identification of malnutrition. In response, it is recommended to introduce Growth Monitoring and Promotion (GMP) campaigns targeting children under five to enable early detection of malnutrition and provide appropriate nutrition support packages. These initiatives should be implemented through community-led platforms, engaging trained youth volunteers and women's groups to ensure regular monitoring, awareness generation, and sustained outreach at the household level.
- I. Promote Community-Led WASH Behavior Change Campaigns: The assessment also identified WASH-related challenges as a cross-cutting issue, particularly in the context of salinity intrusion, water scarcity, and limited awareness of hygiene practices. Community members reported difficulties in accessing safe drinking water, while health risks linked to poor sanitation and hygiene practices were noted by both participants and key informants. To address these gaps, it is recommended to implement community-wide WASH behavior change campaigns focusing on safe water use, sanitation, and hygiene practices. These campaigns should be led by trained youth volunteers and women's groups, leveraging existing community structures to promote behavior change, reduce health risks, and improve overall well-being—especially for children.
- J. The assessment also identified emerging risks related to cyber safety among adolescents and youth, particularly as access to mobile phones and digital platforms is increasing in the target communities. While digital connectivity is expanding, awareness of safe online behavior, privacy

protection, and cyber risks remains very limited. Participants and stakeholders highlighted concerns around cyberbullying, online harassment, and misuse of social media, with adolescent girls being particularly vulnerable to online abuse and exploitation. Recent media reports in Bangladesh have also indicated a growing trend of cyber harassment and its negative impact on young people's mental well-being and social participation. From a qualitative perspective, this reflects a gap not only in digital literacy but also in protective knowledge and behavior among youth. Without early awareness and preventive measures, adolescents remain exposed to psychological harm, social exclusion, and potential long-term risks. These findings highlight the need to integrate structured, school- and community-based cyber safety awareness initiatives within the broader program, equipping young people with practical knowledge on safe digital practices, risk identification, and responsible online behavior.