



Projects Come and Go: How Do Communities Retain Impacts and Information of Development Projects?

Implemented by Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies (IDMVS), University of Dhaka
Location: Char Jatrapur and Char Ghughumari, Kurigram District, Bangladesh
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5.1 Background

Kurigram, one of Bangladesh's most flood-exposed districts, is located at the confluence of the Brahmaputra-Jamuna River system bordering the Indian state of Meghalaya. Recurring monsoon floods, riverbank erosion, and the seasonal displacement of char (river island) communities define everyday life here. Over the years, development organisations have invested heavily in community-based disaster risk management (CBDRM) initiatives like enhancing community preparedness, training volunteers, and establishing early warning dissemination networks, and so on. Yet a persistent pattern has emerged that with the end of a project or termination of funding for it, all community-led activities gradually decrease or come to an abrupt end. Thus, many of the gains, including the lessons learnt, fade away to weaken the DRR impacts and community resilience.

Project Objective:

To address the problem, the Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies (IDMVS) at the University of Dhaka implemented a sub-grant research initiative under the SIDRRA programme, commissioned by the DN network. The central question driving the research was "What actually sustains after a project phases out?" In partnership with three implementing organisations, Centre for Disability in Development (CDD), Association for Alternative Development (AFAD), and Friendship Bangladesh, IDMVS analysed four completed DRM projects in Kurigram following a participatory community-based process to co-design a tool. This is called the Project Retention Tracker for Disaster Risk Management (DRM), which is capable of measuring sustainability from within the communities rather than from outside.

Key Activities:

- Planning, Inception, and Desk Synthesis - covering meeting with partners, a multi-stakeholder consultation workshop in Kurigram involving 13 national and local NGOs/Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and a desk review profiling ten historical DRR initiatives, narrowing to case studies for deep-dive retention analysis
- Field Data Collection and Group Mobilisation – to gather field data in the char islands, to establish 2 Community Tracker Piloting Groups (CTPGs) to transition community into data owners /stewards and to conduct Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions with state officials and community.
- Field-Based Validation and Tool Co-Design – included the drafting of the tracker tool and presenting it to local NGO networks in Kurigram Sadar to test real-world feasibility. It was followed by grassroots validation workshops with CTPG networks in the remote chars, checking for clarity, usability, and local-language accessibility
- Final Handover, Dissemination, and Close-Out – the tracker with the 30 indicators across six balanced components and a user manual was finalised. The tracker and manual were used to carry out orientation sessions with partner field networks to integrate the tool into their ongoing programmes. A formal administrative handover was also done with the District Commissioner and other state officials aimed at getting the indicators incorporated into public development budgets. In the close out phase the CTPGs were graduated to fully autonomous units, with the intention to continue to capture data on projects without external prompting

Project Reach:

The information gathering exercises reached out to men and women, including those with disabilities in the community, local state officials and NGOs.



Discussions with the key implementing partners on their experience with project implementation in Kurigram.

Photo credit: IDMVS project photos

5.2 Realities from the Ground: A Predictable Pattern of Collapse

The research began with an uncomfortable reality articulated plainly by local NGOs. Across Kurigram, disaster preparedness committees often existed in name only once external funding stopped. Volunteer networks trained during project periods gradually dissolved. Monitoring systems shut down. Communities were left with the knowledge that something had been built for them but without the institutional support to keep it standing.

"Our local disaster management committees often exist only on paper. Without funding or training they can't function, and that reduces community ownership once the NGOs leave."

— NGO Practitioner, Kurigram Stakeholder Consultation

The IDMVS retention analysis, drawing on structured interviews with implementing organisations and field visits to project locations in Kurigram, documented this pattern across four completed projects. Using a six-dimensional framework: community ownership, institutional alignment, funding continuity, inclusion and equity, knowledge retention, and accountability mechanisms, the team assessed what conditions enabled or blocked the continuation of DRM outcomes after project closure.

Two geographic areas became focal points for the community engagement work: Char Jatrapur and Char Ghughumari in Saheber Alga Union. Both are remote and flood-prone chars, reachable only by boat. In Jatrapur's case, after a horse-cart journey to the riverbank and roughly ninety minutes on the river. This isolation was not merely a logistical inconvenience. It was identified as a structural driver of vulnerability, creating what fieldworkers termed an 'NGO vacuum' where few organisations remained active after their project cycles ended.

"Being three hours away from the mainland makes us feel isolated, but these floating toilets and gardens prove that our isolation doesn't have to mean our destruction."

— Resident, Char Ghughumari, Saheber Alga

5.3 What the Research Found: Six Dimensions of Retention

Across the four analysed projects, CDD's disability-inclusive preparedness initiative, AFAD's BMZ-PT livelihood and resilience project, and Friendship's two CIDRR interventions, the research identified recurring patterns in both what lasted and what did not.

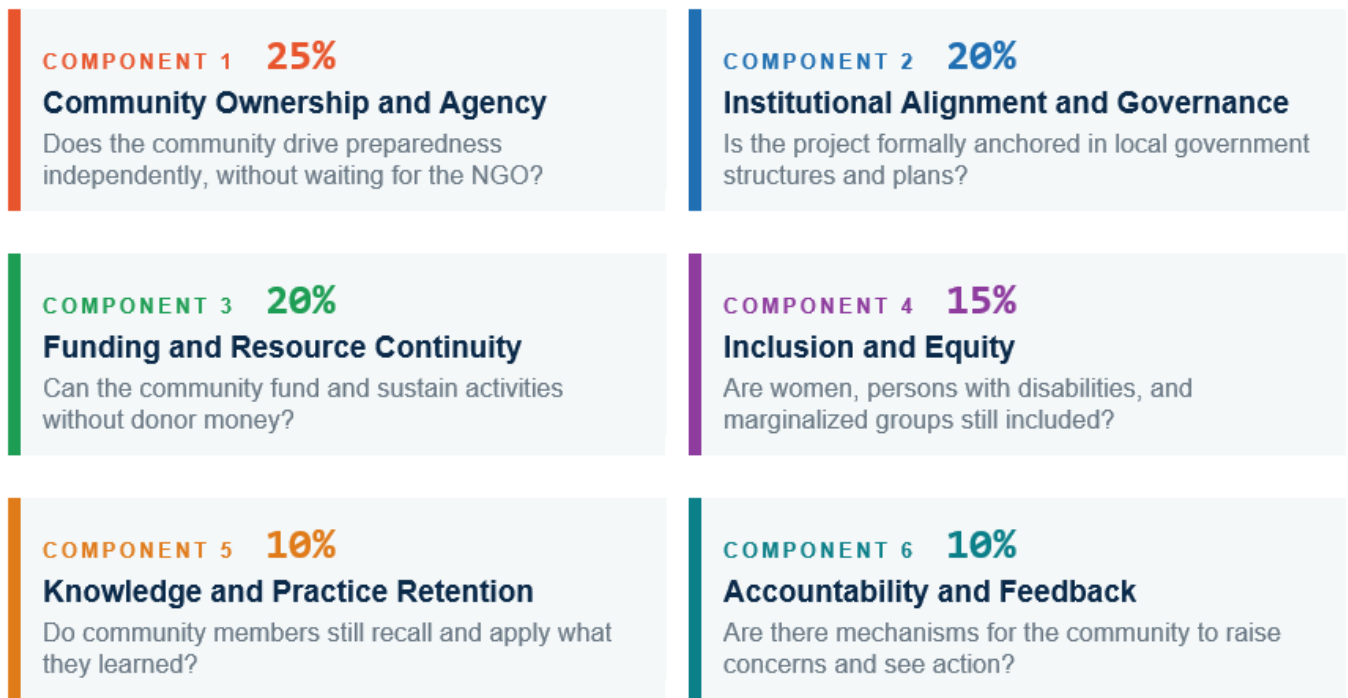


Figure 1: Findings under the six dimensions of retention that were also weighted by the stakeholders (Source: IDMVS)

The community-based structures developed by NGOs proved to be the most durable retention mechanism. Self-Help Groups established by CDD continued to meet periodically in several locations and remained as active platforms for persons with disabilities to discuss preparedness issues. AFAD's Self-Reliant Groups (SRGs) maintained group savings practices even after project support ended, with members contributing to shared funds that could provide emergency liquidity during floods. Friendship's Disaster Management Committees continued operating in a number of communities, primarily driven by local volunteers.

However, the same structures also revealed their fragility. In char areas, high seasonal migration meant that trained volunteers frequently relocated, breaking the continuity of preparedness networks. Engagement with local government disaster management institutions remained largely informal, committees interacted with Union Disaster Management Committees (UDMCs) during floods but had no formal, sustained coordination mechanisms. And without refresher training or structured follow-up support, learning (knowledge/lessons) from the project began to erode.

On funding and resource continuity, the research found a critical asymmetry: projects that embedded economic mechanisms like savings groups, livestock transfers, skill-based livelihood activities demonstrated significantly stronger retention than those that relied on volunteerism alone. AFAD's approach, which combined community organisation with income-generating activities and savings, produced higher levels of continued collective action. This finding reshaped how the research team and community members alike understood what 'sustainability' actually required.

"A few cash in hand disappears quickly, but a goat is a growing asset; by focusing on livestock instead of just cash, we are building a safety net that stays with us."

— Resident, Saheber Alga Char

5.4 The Community Tracker Piloting Groups (CTPG) and the Tracker

The most transformative element of the IDMVS project was not the analytical framework itself, it was the decision to ground the Retention Tracker's design in community experience rather than institutional logic. During field visits to Char Jatrapur and Char Ghughumari in November and December 2025, the team established Community Tracker Piloting Groups (CTPGs): locally constituted bodies whose members were positioned not as research subjects but as 'Data Stewards', people with the authority and responsibility to maintain, monitor, and interpret retention data themselves.

The distinction mattered profoundly to community members. In a context where data about communities had historically flowed to NGO offices and district administration files, rarely returned to the people it described, the CTPG model represented a deliberate inversion. Community members were trained to track the continuity of DRM interventions in their own areas, using indicators they helped design. According to a member of a community group:

"In the past, we felt like 'NGO data' was something for people in offices, but through the CTPG, we are finally turning our lived experience and local knowledge into evidence."

— CTPG Member, Char Ghughumari

Validation workshops held in Kurigram between March and April 2026 brought together community members, NGO representatives, and local government stakeholders to review the draft tracker. Feedback from these sessions was consistent: the tool needed to prioritise simple, binary or scale-based indicators that community members could update without technical assistance. It also needed to capture what communities themselves considered evidence of resilience, not just committee meeting records, but, for example, the survival of goat herds, the continued operation of floating gardens, the activity level of emergency savings funds. A contemplative field animator says:

"We always report on what we did while the money was there, but we are blind to what happens two years later. This tracker is the 'eye' we have been missing to see which of our seeds actually grew into trees."

— NGO Representative, Kurigram Sadar

Fieldwork in Char Ghughumari provided a vivid illustration of what community ownership could look like when properly nurtured. When heavy rainfall destroyed a key market access road, residents did not wait for an organisation to file a report or seek funds, they mobilised independently and repaired it. The team documented this as a 'local ownership case study': concrete, observable evidence that the project's ethos of community agency had taken root.

5.5 'Inclusion' as a Retention Condition

A distinctive thread running through the IDMVS work was its insistence on 'inclusion' not as an add-on concern but as a core retention condition. CDD's project on disability-inclusive humanitarian preparedness demonstrated that when persons with disabilities are meaningfully involved (through Self-Help Groups, flood first responder networks, and feedback channels) they become active agents in sustaining preparedness systems, not merely beneficiaries of them.



Initial data gathering session with representatives of NGOs implementing projects in Kurigram.

Photo credit: IDMVS project photos

Retention analysis of the CDD initiative found that disability Self-Help Groups remained active in several communities after project closure, continuing to provide both a social support network and an informal accountability channel. Flood first responder volunteers trained through the project retained their preparedness knowledge and continued to be recognised by community members as resources during flood seasons.

The CTPG validation process in 2026 built on this finding explicitly. Female CTPG members raised gender-specific retention barriers, notably that livelihood interventions for women, such as sewing or poultry, were frequently undermined after project closure by the logistical isolation of the chars, which cut women off from the markets on which their income depended. These insights were incorporated into the tracker's design, with market access connectivity added as a retention indicator for livelihood-linked interventions. In this connection a CTPG member in Ghugumari has this to say:

"We used to think data was only for experts in offices. But through the CTPG, we found a way to turn our real experiences into evidence that matters. Now, we're not just receiving help; we're also measuring our own strength."

5.6 Retention Tracker: A Tool Built from the Ground Up

By early 2026, the DRM Project Retention Tracker had moved from a conceptual draft to a community-validated instrument. Its six analytical dimensions (described in section 5.2) emerged not from pre-existing theory but from the empirical evidence gathered across four completed projects and two rounds of deep community engagement in Kurigram's char areas.

The tracker is designed as a research and advocacy tool rather than a routine project monitoring system. Its primary purpose is to generate structured evidence on which DRM interventions sustain themselves, under what conditions, and for how long. By translating the six retention dimensions into measurable indicators, it offers development organisations, local government actors, and community members a shared language for discussing sustainability, one grounded in the realities of flood-exposed Bangladesh rather than donor reporting templates.



Jatrapur char relies on boats and horse carts for transportation and the area's remoteness significantly increases their vulnerability during disasters.

Photo credit: IDMVS project photos

5.7 Challenges

The challenges encountered were mainly institutional:

1. Accessing clear baseline metrics was consistently delayed by slow government bureaucratic processes and the confidentiality protocols of adjacent NGOs. The project utilised the combined local footprints of the local partners (AFAD, CDD, and Friendship) to cross-check data and maintain communication across sub-districts despite administrative delays.
2. Operational transitions – administrative transfers as well as the temporary absence of elected local government bodies extended the necessary advocacy timelines required to secure formal agreements with Union Parishads. These are also the main reasons why institutional memory is weak.
3. Aligning the schedules of diverse stakeholders (District Commissioner, NGO executives, and char group leaders) within the final weeks required intense logistical management.

5.8 Lessons Leant

For the practical application of the tracker - for community-level Data Stewardship - to maintain a tracking system without NGO support requires tools which avoid dense jargon and use simple, scale-based or binary indicators. In addition, standard M&E tracking focuses purely on immediate outputs (e.g., numbers of training events held). Sustained disaster resilience requires tracking long-term outcome retention (such as asset survival and committee functionality over multiple hazard cycles).

Several lessons from this initiative carry relevance beyond Kurigram. Community ownership is necessary but not sufficient: structures formed during project periods survive longer when they are tied to tangible economic benefits such as savings, livestock assets, and marketable skills. Furthermore, to achieve equity for marginalised individuals – especially more targeted intervention for people with disabilities for example – disability targeted design, programmes and funding is crucial rather than surface-level quota checklists.

Institutional alignment with local government bodies matters, but informal coordination during emergencies is a fragile substitute for formal integration. Inclusion must be built into retention design from the outset; without it, the most marginalised community members are excluded from sustaining what projects create.

What the IDMVS experience fundamentally demonstrates is that the communities most exposed to disaster risk are capable of monitoring and sustaining resilience systems when given the tools, the trust, and the institutional backing to do so. The Retention Tracker's core innovation is not methodological, it is relational. It treats community members as the primary custodians of knowledge about their own resilience, rather than as subjects whose vulnerability requires external measurement.

"Our committees often exist only on paper once funding stops. If this tracker can show the government exactly where the 'NGO vacuum' is, perhaps they will realise that a committee without a budget is like a boat without a hull – it simply cannot float during a crisis."

— NGO Practitioner, Kurigram



Initial data gathering session with representatives of NGOs implementing projects in Kurigram.

Photo credit: IDMVS project photos

5.9 Way Forward

The IDMVS, University of Dhaka, will lead the overarching strategy for the framework's integration and high-level policy advocacy. IDMVS will work closely with government institutions, development partners, and humanitarian organisations to integrate the Retention Tracker into existing DRM planning, monitoring, and evaluation systems. Formal engagement with UDMCs and relevant government agencies will strengthen institutional ownership and ensure that sustainability becomes a measurable component of disaster resilience programming.

To execute the immediate practical application of this model, strategic field piloting and partner deployment will roll out across partner networks this year (2026). Specifically, the partner organisation AFAD will integrate the Retention Tracker into their projects to execute its primary field-level piloting phase. Following this initial rollout, AFAD will systematically utilise the framework to track sustainability across all of their future project lifecycles. Alongside AFAD, partner organisations Friendship and the CDD will concurrently adopt and deploy the tracker within their respective regional DRR and climate adaptation portfolios to ensure widespread institutional adoption.

On an institutional level, deep alignment and policy integration will remain a core focus of the roadmap. Strategic collaborations will be forged to work closely with government institutions, development partners, and humanitarian organisations to embed the tracker directly into existing DRM planning, monitoring, and evaluation systems.

At the grassroots level, the initiative will focus heavily on data stewardship and the strengthening of community platforms. The CTPGs established during the foundational phase of this project will be worked as permanent, community-based 'Data Stewardship' platforms. Through simplified digital and paper-based reporting mechanisms, these grassroots data groups will be fully empowered to independently monitor retention indicators over multiple hazard cycles. This localised approach enables communities to generate their own evidence base, successfully shifting their role from passive aid beneficiaries to active, self-reliant decision-makers.

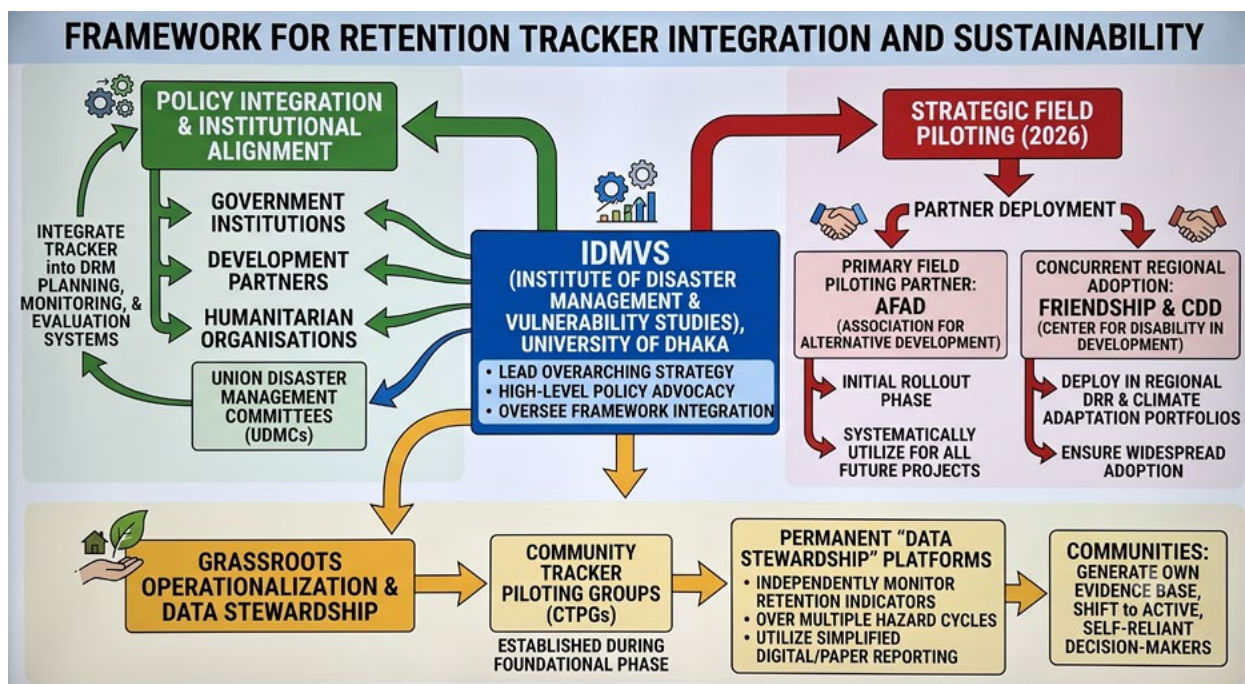


Figure 2: Framework for Retention Tracker Integration and Sustainability (Source: IDMVS)

The Strengthening Inclusive Disaster Risk Governance for Climate Resilience in Asia (SIDRRA) project was funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). It was implemented by a consortium comprising the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN), and Duryog Nivaran (DN) to strengthen resilience among at-risk communities in Asia and amplify local voices in disaster risk governance. Under this project, DN supported several network members – the Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies (IDMVS) in Bangladesh, Practical Action Consulting, and Dalit Women Rights Forum (DWRF) who worked with DanChurchAid in Nepal, and Hari Welfare Association in Pakistan — to operationalise inclusive, local-level disaster risk governance.

From Risk to Readiness: Community-Driven Local-Level Disaster Risk Governance compiles case studies and lessons from this work, strengthening the evidence base for inclusive local-level governance and adding to the wider knowledge on what works, for whom, and why.

Each case study is also available as a standalone publication.



Scan for the Document:
From Risk to Readiness: Community-Driven Local-level
Disaster Risk Governance
Published by Duryog Nivaran

Contact us:



Duryog Nivaran Secretariat
C/O Practical Action
No 5, Lionel Edirisinghe Mawatha
Kirulapone,
Colombo 00500
Sri Lanka

info@duryognivaran.org
coordinator@duryognivaran.org



**Institute of Disaster Management
and Vulnerability Studies (IDMVS),
University of Dhaka**
Room-6081, Fifth Floor,
Arts Building, University of Dhaka,
Dhaka-1000.
Bangladesh.

idmvs@du.ac.bd
idmvsdu@gmail.com



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