



Climate heroine

Charkhali, Golachipa, Patuakhali near the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh: Salma's story

When 14-year-old Salma heard the loudspeakers at nearby mosques alerting people to the impending cyclone Sidr in southern Bangladesh, she immediately knew what to do: head for the emergency shelter.

But trying to persuade her family was another matter. Her mother, Amena Begum, didn't want to leave her home. She had three cattle, five goats and 100kg of rice, as well as all their possessions to protect.

Salma said she pleaded with her mother. She had learned in school that if people stayed in their homes until the last minute, when the storms came it might be too late to get to the shelter.

Salma was determined this was not going to happen to her family. At school, she had learnt what she needed to do before, during and after a disaster. Her teachers had been working with ActionAid and South Asia Partnership to help children understand how to keep themselves safe during a cyclone.

Salma had learned that families should bury their legal papers and precious crockery in a hole dug at their home, marked with a bamboo cane. They should also move their livestock to higher ground and go to the emergency shelter. After a disaster they learned that communities need to stick together and help one another rebuild their homes to get back to normal.

Salma refused to give up. She repeated her pleas to her mother and eventually persuaded the whole family to pack some possessions and move to the safety of the shelter at nearby Charkhali primary school. The family moved the cattle and goats to higher ground so they were safe too.

Salma saved 11 members of her family (including herself) that night: her grandmother, mother and father, brother and sister, uncle and aunt and her three cousins.

"When the storm hit it was terrible – we could hear banging and crashing outside and the walls shook... it seemed to last forever although it was all over in 15 minutes.

There were a thousand people in the shelter and we all had to stand because there was no room to sit. We were there for three hours from nine o'clock in the evening till midnight."

After midnight, Salma and her family returned home, but there was nothing left. They went to a relative's house and stayed there. The next day it became apparent that many people had not made it to the shelter and had died trying to reach to safety.



Salma near her home in Charkhali.

Learning to live a normal life again

Cyclone Sidr had destroyed Salma's house and valuable assets. Immediately after the cyclone, Salma's family received assistance from the government as well as ActionAid's local partners.

In December 2007, Salma took her school exams and passed successfully.

To repair their damaged house her parents took a loan of Tk30,000 (about £240) from a local non-governmental organisation and started repair work.

Six months after the cyclone, most of the work on their house had been completed and they were living there again. Salma and her family are slowly rebuilding their lives, getting back to normal and looking to the future.