REACH ME – OXFAM IN SRI LANKA AND CAMBODIA

A GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE EARLY WARNING SYSTEM THAT IS RESPONSIVE TO THE PROTECTION NEEDS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

DIF 2019 CHALLENGE
INVITATION
This challenge brief serves as an open invitation for other organisations to join Oxfam’s development of a gender transformative EWS. With your help we will write a project proposal for the DRA call for innovative proposals to increase safety and protection before, during and after humanitarian disasters. This challenge brief forms the basis of a shared innovation project. The invitation is for your organisation to join us and share your knowledge, skills, expertise and (parts of) potential solutions.

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PROBLEM STATEMENT
The 16 members of the DRA (Dutch Relief Alliance) have identified a major problem that is pertinent to solve through innovation: “How to improve approaches to addressing social/gender norms (harmful) & power structures in humanitarian settings?”

CURRENT CHALLENGE
Within the above problem we’ve identified an important challenge we want to solve. Our challenge is situated in Sri Lanka and Cambodia, but can be found in any context with high risks of sudden onset disasters. The 2019 Global Climate Risk Index Report places Sri Lanka as nr 2 (nr 96 in 2017) most vulnerable country in the world for natural disasters. Improving disaster response is an urgent priority in Sri Lanka1 and Cambodia2.

Research (2017-19) shows that women and girls have limited access to early warning and response systems3, which reduces their ability to:

1. take timely and effective action in a disaster;
2. access protection-related services and assistance;
3. communicate their needs or protection concerns to responders;

Early warning systems are often not designed to meet the specific needs of women and girls, and offer poor information flow between response actors. They are largely designed in a top-down manner without the participation of women and girls themselves. As a result most EWS are likely to increase the marginalization and vulnerability of women and girls (and other gender minorities) who have less power and influence.

Specific needs of women and girls regarding protection and safety are not considered. Current systems prioritise immediate practical needs (e.g. food, water, etc.) over protection and safety concerns such as gender- and sexual based violence (GSBV). EWS need a gender sensitive approach, with adaptations to activities to mitigate the negative impact on marginalized gender groups.

All this points to an urgent need for a new type of platform that can act as a two-way information portal in times of disaster with the ability to exchange information about safety and protection services and real-time data on needs of all affected people, including women and girls.

2 Cambodia’s Government has a priority objective to protect its economic and social gains from climate-induced disasters, upgrade its disaster risk management system, and a key part of this is the development of the new Strategic National Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction 2019–2023.
https://policy.practicalaction.org/resources/publications/item/gender-transformative-early-warning-systems
This project will focus on 8,000 most at-risk households in 2 districts in Sri Lanka and 1,750 most vulnerable households in 30 villages in 4 districts of Pursat Province in Cambodia to improve the early warning system, access to information and raise awareness.

**IMPACT GOAL**

We at Oxfam are known for our commitment to gender justice. With your help we will develop a gender transformative EWS in Sri Lanka and Cambodia, both countries that prioritise women’s and girls’ protection needs. When proven concept we can use the design to advocate for adaptation of the many existing EWS around the world, be it for rapid or slow onset disasters.

A gender sensitive EWS ensures disaster preparedness, response and contingency planning, and proactively considers gender, making some adaptations to respond to the specific needs, concerns, and capabilities of marginalized gender groups.

Our ambition for which we seek partners is to move beyond a gender sensitive EWS to a gender transformative EWS. A gender transformative EWS proactively redesigns approaches, policies, and practices to reduce gender-based inequalities and to meet the needs of all people.

After this project women and girls, including elderly, disabled, pregnant and with young babies in 9,750 households will be able to:

• take more effective action and leadership in disaster preparedness and response;
• receive information and communicate their protection and assistance needs to responders;
• access information about safety and protection issues from response actors and service providers

The way we develop the EWS will shift responders from seeing women and girls as passive recipients to supporting them taking the ‘driving seat’. Women are key agents in knowledge transfer to the next generation: it will contribute to positive transformational change and consequently to strengthening overall resilience. It will create impetus for responders to react to safety and protection concerns and contribute to a more transparent and accountable culture within the disaster response. Our solution will rely on existing capacity and local resources, and actively promote women’s participation and leadership.

In Sri Lanka we have tested our initial ideas on how the EWS can be more responsive to the needs of women and girls, how it can better organise resources, and improve coordination between response actors. These ideas include a platform with a dashboard for coordination between the responding organisations in the area and an app through which women and girls can interact. The feedback on the first design is encouraging and we have insights how the platform can be adapted for both countries, but it is clear we need to do more human centred design that includes women and girls as co-creators and we need to learn from ICT platform developers, Data scientists and need to include local women organisations and CSO’s.

We will need support to creatively tackle issues of limited literacy amongst the most disaster-vulnerable people, including digital-literacy and the gendered divide in access to mobile phones and digital space. The solution will need to function in situations with unreliable connectivity and electricity supply.

**ASSUMPTIONS MADE**

Working assumptions include: the Sri Lankan government’s continuing inability to lead an effective response; lack of information for effective planning; poor participation of the affected communities at the planning stage especially women; and the top down nature of the responses.

When a disaster strikes, government’s main priority is to save the lives of people, but the pressure to react
to immediate physical needs means many responses are not gender-sensitive and do not address ‘hidden’ needs more likely to affect women and girls. They hardly address the specific requirements of women and children during and after disasters. Lack of availability of timely information will continue to reinforce previously experienced vulnerabilities and issues in times of disasters.

**RISKS IN PURSUING THIS CHALLENGE**

- The communities, especially women and girls are not familiar with or literate enough to use the mobile application and may have limited access to smartphones – we will address this in the design.
- Women might not use the mobile application as their priorities, during disaster onset, are to giving care to others, collecting assets, etc.
- Lack of GSM coverage restricting information flow. System might break down due to the disaster (lack of electricity) – we will address this in the design.
- Unexpected government regulations and controls imposed on the use of social media tools – we will monitor this risk.
- Working in multi-country context will have risks such as adapting to the culture, getting the support from different stakeholders, etc.
- Existing poverty prevailing among the most at-risk populations will lead to inability of maintaining a credit balance in the phones and a strong power source – we will address this in the design.

**NEXT STEPS**

1. **Collaborate and Learn:** We invite you to contact us (see paragraph 1) to discuss collaboration on this innovative project. Please do so before May 10, 2019. When we both experience a good match we will invite you to join a (virtual) round table for NGOs and Private Sector that are interested in joining the platform (both in Sri Lanka and in Cambodia).

2. **Design research:** We will do more design research on the needs, putting women and girls and other marginalized groups in the lead, recognizing specific intersectional needs. We will redesign the current draft platform after understanding better the level of (digital) literacy, preferred communication means and access to smartphones amongst, men, women, boys and girls in the target area; we will research connectivity and electricity reliability in disasters and potential back-up options (e.g. solar chargers).

3. **Horizon scanning:** Check existing joint responses and other relevant interventions by the formal humanitarian sector and other actors, which have used user-centred participatory design/approach, to understand their processes/bottlenecks; learn from existing mobile applications, especially those designed to target women and users with low literacy levels.

4. **Co-creation:** We will work with all target groups to redesign the platform and mobile application to improve coordination through timely information and develop an integrated response.

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5 For example, a widow living with a disability from a minority ethnic group may have higher vulnerability than an individual facing only one area of marginalization.