The Association for Community Development (ACD) works to support the empowerment of women and children in northern Bangladesh. One of the communities it works with is the indigenous Santal community. The Santal people live in remote rural areas and rely on agricultural work to make a living. However, this region of northern Bangladesh is prone to extremely high temperatures and droughts are common. This places huge pressures on families’ livelihoods and parents are often forced to migrate seasonally to work in cities or to rely on their children to earn money in factories or on tea stalls, thus abandoning their education.

ACD coordinates disaster management committees in indigenous communities to address the issue of climate change and its negative impact on families’ and children’s lives. This includes helping communities to understand each other by working together to improve their engagement and understanding of their cultures and traditions.

In addition, ACD runs groups for children in indigenous communities to learn about their rights and trains them in leadership skills to encourage their participation and engagement in local government. It also runs groups for women, helping them understand how national laws can affect and be applied to their lives through the exchange and learning facilitated by How We Care.

ACD sees children become more confident, able to express themselves and speak out on specific topics. ACD has run 15 Child Rights Groups in Santal communities for 12-18 year olds. Groups meet on a monthly basis and cover topics such as child protection, understanding the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, health and nutrition and how to use government hotline numbers. ACD’s Child Rights Clubs are intentionally mixed, in order for girls and boys to better understand each other by working together to improve human rights.

The government has become more responsive to addressing how climate change is affecting vulnerable people as a result of the community disaster management committees meeting regularly.

ACD sees children become more confident, able to express themselves and speak out on specific topics. Children from indigenous communities have been selected to be representatives on national-level government committees on child welfare and disaster management, and have taken part in international meetings online, including a children’s consultation on child sexual abuse & exploitation organised by the South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children.

Most indigenous families don’t have their own farmland, which means they often work long distances from home, so it can be very difficult to organise meetings.

Lack of mobile connection in rural areas makes it difficult to communicate with indigenous community members.

Finding funding for this work and ensuring it is aligned to donors’ priorities can be challenging.

Projects are often too short and don’t allow for a sustainable long-term approach.

There are several indigenous groups in Bangladesh. Together they make up a small minority of the country’s population of 169 million people. The Santal community in Bangladesh numbers approximately 130,000. Indigenous people often experience discrimination from the mainstream population, due to a lack of understanding of their cultures and traditions.

Established in 1989, the Association for Community Development (ACD) works to establish the rights of women and children in Bangladesh by promoting social justice and developing community-care support mechanisms.

Its work focuses on three key areas: women’s rights and empowerment; child development and participation; and sustainable development. ACD has been working with indigenous communities in Northern Bangladesh since 2003.

Find out more about ACD at www.acdbd.org or contact Subrina, Programme Director at subrina@acdbd@yahoo.com.