In what locals termed as a “200 year flood”, residents of northern Bangladesh along the Brahmaputra River had to contend with unusually high levels of flood waters that inundated farmlands and low lying homesteads killing 142 people and directly affecting an estimated eight million people. Many people lost property and had to move to higher grounds as a means of survival.

USAID/FFP has funded CARE Bangladesh to implement SHOUHARDO III, a food security program designed to achieve gender equitable food and nutrition security and resilience for poor and extreme poor households living in Char and Haor of Northern Bangladesh, specifically in the Hoar and Char areas. The program operates in eight districts, four of which are on the Brahmaputra River. The program provides participant households with skills to improve production and incomes, achieve better health outcomes for women and children, improve community capacities to cope with and respond to disasters, and increase the responsiveness of government to public service needs.

CARE staff came across Shantona, 25, a young mother expecting her second child from Miapara Village in Islampur Upazila, Jamalpur district. Shantona and her three year old were about to enter into their tiny makeshift shelter they fled to as the flood waters rose. She shyly remarked, “This is all we have for now, “as she showed the inside of the shelter with the few items they were able to grab as they fled their home; but she concludes “we shall return to normalcy soon”. While she has grown up with seasonal flooding, Shantona said that this year it was different for her family. Primarily, the flood was heavier and more intense, but with a smile she says that joining SHOUHARDO III was best thing she could have asked for. When the floods came, she, like all of her neighbors, had to move to higher ground. But this time, she had two things that she did not have before, namely: (1) sufficient food stocks and cash saved for emergencies that she and her husband brought along as they fled, and (2) critical information about the floods about how to build a livelihood that could withstand shocks.

The program has offered Shantona and her husband lessons on health and disaster preparedness that have made them healthier and ready for the challenges such as those the flooding August 2017 inflicted upon them. They have diversified their production by adopting the growing early maturing rice and chilies; and rear goats and chicken whose products they eat and sell as appropriate, the goats are seen as a quickly convertible to cash in times of need to meet emergency and other developmental needs. “The floods will always come but starting this year, my husband and I have learned how to prepare and cope while we wait for the water to recede, thanks to SHOUHARDO,” Shantona concluded.

The program connected with Shantona and her husband two weeks after the water had receded. Shantona and her husband were back in their home with their three year old son and their newborn daughter; Shantona had given birth to their second child as the waters receded. Their house showed signs of repair as Shantona’s husband had fixed damage caused by the flood waters. It was also evident that her husband had learned to be more attentive to the needs of his wife, and to help with child care, as he gently rocked their healthy, sleeping baby girl so that his wife could rest. She also explained that income earned from selling chilies had paid for her caesarin section during childbirth. She expressed how much she looked forward to being able to step out again to help with farming and other work. For households like Shantona’s, being able to anticipate, prepare for, and respond to shocks is critical to ensuring that they don’t fall into destitution in spite of the magnitude and recurrence of the shocks.