

NEWS RELEASE

Preparing for the tsunami: Lessons from a pilot project in Sri Lanka discussed at BUET

In Sri Lanka, a nation that suffered greatly from the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, researchers and community leaders have been working diligently to find technological and organizational solutions for the challenges posed by tsunamis and other rapid-onset hazards. The perception has been that if the challenges posed by tsunamis can be met, the risks from other hazards can also be minimized.

The chaotic scenes following the tsunami warning on the 12th of September in Southern Bangladesh as well as in other Indian Ocean littoral states demonstrate the importance of improving both early warning systems and community preparedness. Bangladesh can be proud of having reduced the fatalities from cyclones in the past decades, but increasing geological instability in the ocean south of the country poses a new challenge in the form of tsunamis, a rapid-onset hazard that can destroy lives and livelihoods on a massive scale unless the necessary preparations are made. Under current technology, authorities have 2-3 days to issue warning and evacuate people from the path of dangerous cyclones. Tsunamis allow only a few hours to prepare.

Intergovernmental and governmental organizations are improving the tsunami detection and monitoring systems in the Indian Ocean. But each government in the region must develop faster and more reliable methods to decide on the issuance of watch, warning and evacuation messages and to communicate such messages to first responders and the media. Communities must prepare themselves to receive these messages as well as generate their own information. To devise and implement effective last-mile warning systems and to maintain disaster response plans while successfully implementing them. The tasks are complex and large, requiring the cooperation of government, the private sector and communities.

Sarvodaya, Sri Lanka's largest community-based organization, and LIRNEasia, a regional ICT policy think tank, collaborated on a 32-village pilot project supported by the International Development Research Center of Canada (IDRC) that sought to identify the best technologies for reaching villages; to identify the significance of organizational strength and training for risk reduction; and to assess the participation of women in these activities. The community-based approach implemented in the project is different from a public-warning approach, but has lessons for government communications with first responders and for community organization and training as well.

For example, the project field tested addressable and remotely activated satellite radios developed at LIRNEasia's request by WorldSpace, which has coverage over the entire Bay of Bengal region. Other equipment deployed included Java and Symbian enabled mobile handsets capable of generating loud alarms and multi-language alert messages.



The project is also a world leader in multilingual application of the Common Alerting Protocol (CAP), an international standard for disaster communication that has exceptional potential for speeding up disaster communications and reducing errors and ambiguities.

The Bangladesh Network Office for Urban Safety (BNUS) of the Department of Civil Engineering, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) is co-organizing a workshop with LIRNEasia entitled “**Sharing Knowledge on Disaster Warning: Community-based Last Mile Warning Systems**” to discuss the findings of the Last Mile Hazard Warning System (HazInfo) Pilot Project as well as share the lessons of community-based last mile warning systems in Bangladesh. The workshop is part of a series of dissemination workshops that aims to gather experts, community volunteers and community organizations involved in early warning activities from the South Asian Region.

This workshop will be held at BUET on 25 October 2007 from 9:00am to 3:30pm.

For more information on this event contact:

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