



# Communicating Disasters



An Asia Pacific Resource Book

Edited by  
**Nalaka Gunawardene and Frederick Noronha**

Foreword by  
**Sir Arthur C Clarke**



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**UNDP Regional Centre in Bangkok**



**TVE Asia Pacific**

December 2007

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### **Edited by**

Nalaka Gunawardene and Frederick Noronha

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UNDP Regional Centre in Bangkok and TVE Asia Pacific

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### **Cover**

Caption: A mother hands over her baby to one of her relative to take him to a safe place. Migration never happens during flood, it happens when river erosion starts. But in Sirajganj, a northern district of the country river erosion and flood come together. Most of the northern district is under threat of flood. People have to move their homes with their belongings and take shelter on the highland. Continuous increase in water level causes inundation of river beds and marooning thousands of people. Sirajgonj, Bangladesh. July 30, 2007.

Photo credit: Tanvir Ahmed / DrikNEWS / Majority World

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*Information and communication technologies (ICTs) give us unprecedented power to reach more people faster on hazards and disasters. Technology alone cannot deliver this potential – it requires a mix of sociological, cultural and institutional responses by governments, corporate sector and civil society. This also calls for building or reinforcing 'bridges' between media practitioners and disaster managers who have traditionally been on two sides of a divide. In this section, our contributors offer personal perspectives on harnessing the power of information and communication to save lives, heal broken hearts and help disaster survivors rebuild their lives.*

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# Acknowledgements

This book is the culmination of a year-long process, which started with the TVE Asia Pacific and UNDP Regional Centre in Bangkok coming together in late 2006 to explore the nexus between communication and disasters in the Asia Pacific region.

A regional brainstorming meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, held on the eve of the Indian Ocean Tsunami's second anniversary on 21 – 22 December 2006, brought together over 30 leading media professionals, disaster managers and communication specialists from South and Southeast Asia. The discussions and recommendations of this meeting form a key part of this book, which has been compiled in the months that followed, pooling the knowledge, expertise and diverse perspectives of some meeting participants as well as other acknowledged practitioners in media and development spheres.

We would like to thank all participants of the Bangkok brainstorming, especially Chin Saik Yoon who co-moderated the meeting with Nalaka Gunawardene.

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***Nalaka Gunawardene and Frederick Noronha***  
***Editors***

# Co-publishers



## **United Nations Development Programme - Regional Centre in Bangkok**

The UNDP has established Regional Centres in Bangkok, and Colombo, as well as a multi-disciplinary Pacific Centre in Suva with focus on the Pacific Islands. A main priority of the Regional Centres is to provide UNDP Country Offices in the Asia and the Pacific with easy access to knowledge through high quality advisory services based on global applied research and UNDP lessons learnt. The second priority is to build partnerships and promote regional capacity development initiatives, which allow UNDP, governments and other partners to identify, create and share knowledge relevant to solving urgent development challenges. The Regional Centre in Bangkok mainly focuses on support to Democratic Governance, Energy and Environment and Crisis Prevention and Recovery. The Centre also provides support to UNDP country offices in a number of cross-cutting areas, including capacity development, ICT for development, public-private partnerships and mine action. The Regional Centre in Colombo's primary focus areas are Poverty Reduction with an overarching effort on achieving the Millennium Development Goals and HIV/AIDS.

<http://regionalcentrebangkok.undp.or.th/>



**Television for Education – Asia Pacific, trading as TVE Asia Pacific** (abbreviated TVEAP), is a regionally operating non-profit organisation engaged in information, education and communication (IEC) activities on a broad range of sustainable development and social justice issues.

Set up in 1996, the organisation has over a decade's experience in using audio-visual media (television, video and film) and new media (Internet and Web) for development communication. It works closely with television broadcasters, civil society groups and educational organisations across the Asia Pacific to tell authentic and engaging stories of how individuals, communities and countries pursue better lives and a better planet. Its main strategy is to use 'moving images to move people'.

TVEAP produces and distributes editorially independent, journalistically packaged TV, video and online content on a broad range of topics and issues. TVEAP's media products are used by broadcast, educational and civil society organisations across the Asia Pacific region for education, awareness, advocacy, training or activist purposes. TVE Asia Pacific is registered as a guarantee company in Sri Lanka, where its office is located. It is governed by an international Board of Directors.

[www.tveap.org](http://www.tveap.org) | [www.digits4change.net](http://www.digits4change.net) | [www.childrenoftsunami.info](http://www.childrenoftsunami.info) | [www.savingtheplanet.tv](http://www.savingtheplanet.tv)



# Preface

Information is a powerful tool, especially in a disaster. Media can be an invaluable conduit to alert communities of impending disasters, to update the situation during a disaster, and to profile real-life stories when the rebuilding begins. Media can bring us up close and personal to the site of the disaster, and show us images as they unfold in real time. Journalists have the power to both inspire positive action as well as ignite fear, depending on the nature and content of the stories they shape.

On the second anniversary of the tsunami in December 2006, the UNDP Regional Centre in Bangkok and TVE Asia Pacific organised a meeting on *Communicating Disasters: Building on the Tsunami Experience and Responding to Future Challenges*. It provided an opportunity for over 30 media professionals, disaster researchers and managers, and development communication specialists from tsunami-affected countries in Asia to take stock of media coverage, personal experiences, issues and lessons learned from the tsunami.

The meeting specifically explored the role of media professionals and their use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). They shared incisive lessons and reflected on their role during the tsunami and its aftermath. Their experiences helped to shape guidelines for engaging the mass media and ICTs for more effective communication before, during and after disasters.

This joint publication of UNDP Asia-Pacific Development Information Programme and TVE Asia Pacific seeks to capture the essence of the discussions and provide a forward-looking insight into the role of the media in disasters. Their personal observations, and in many cases, dramatic participation in covering the tsunami, offer a new perspective on the many facets of journalists' work.

There are certainly great benefits to be reaped if strengthened understanding and common ground can be forged between different media outlets, government departments and development agencies when disasters strike. This publication is one contribution toward leveraging the reach of the media and ICTs to better inform citizens and save lives.

**Elizabeth Fong**  
**Regional Manager**  
**UNDP Regional Centre in Bangkok**

# Foreword

## Communicating Disasters: A Century of Lessons

By Sir Arthur C Clarke

Disasters have been a favourite element of story tellers over millennia – and we science fiction writers have used more than our fair share, sometimes involving calamities beyond our home planet.

In my own novels and short stories, I have imagined many and varied disasters that happen at the most inconvenient moments, just when everything is going according to plan. A tsunami arrives towards the end of the story in *Childhood's End* (1953). In *The Ghost from the Grand Banks* (1990), an ambitious plan to raise the *Titanic* is wrecked by a massive storm in the north Atlantic. And *The Songs of Distant Earth* (1986) suggested a planetary rescue plan for the ultimate disaster: the end of the world when our Sun explodes.

In real life, however, I have been enormously lucky not to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when Nature unleashes her fury, or humans bungle matters on their own.

But two tragedies that happened 92 years apart have left deep impressions in my mind: they illustrate how communications failures can compound the impact of a disaster.

I was born five years after the biggest maritime disaster the world had known: the sinking of the 'unsinkable' *HMS Titanic* while on her maiden voyage. My home town Minehead, in Somerset, was not more than a couple of hundred kilometres from Southampton, from where the *Titanic* set off. All my life, I have been intrigued by the *Titanic* disaster. In fact, one of the earliest short stories I wrote (now mercifully lost) was about a spaceship that collides with a large chunk of ice (a comet). No prizes for guessing what I called that doomed spaceship.

I have been particularly interested in what happened to the *Titanic's* distress call after she hit the iceberg at 11.40 pm on the night of 14 April 1912. When Captain Smith gave the order to radio for help, first wireless (radio) operator Jack Phillips used the Morse Code to send out "CQD" six times, followed by the *Titanic* call letters, "MGY". It was the second wireless operator, Harold Bride, who suggested half-jokingly, "Send SOS -- it's the new call, and this may be your last chance to send it." Phillips, who perished in the disaster, then began to intersperse SOS with the traditional CQD call.<sup>1</sup>

As things turned out, responses to this distress call came too late to save the ship's 1,500 passengers and crew who perished. A series of unfortunate factors compounded the disaster. The most ironic among them was that the wireless operator on the *Californian*, located closest to the *Titanic*, had shut down for the day just 30 minutes before the first distress call was sent out. Had the *Californian* been listening, it could have responded hours before the *Carpathia*, the eventual rescue vessel.<sup>2</sup>

Official enquiries into the disaster also revealed that the wireless operators on the *Titanic* had, in fact, received alerts from other ships about massive icebergs in the vicinity. But the operators, overworked transmitting private messages of the ship's wealthy passengers, failed to pass that vital information on to the bridge.

The *Titanic* disaster prompted the shipping community to introduce a 24-hour radio watch on all ships at sea. It also consolidated the role of maritime radio in distress signalling and rescue operations. We can only guess how many thousands of lives at risk have since been saved thanks to timely warnings or distress calls.

But the absence of a timely warning once again characterised the second disaster to touch my life. Arriving 10 days after my 87<sup>th</sup> birthday, the Asian Tsunami of December 2004 left a massive trail of destruction in my adopted country Sri Lanka and several other countries bordering the Indian Ocean. (While Colombo, where I live, did not suffer any damage, two thirds of Sri Lanka's coastline were battered, killing nearly 40,000 people and causing much damage.)

Astonishingly, a full century after the invention of radio, the Tsunami arrived without any public warning. The disaster's death toll could have been drastically reduced if its occurrence -- already known to scientists -- was disseminated quickly and effectively to millions of coastal dwellers living on its predictable path. Even a half hour's notice would have allowed people to run away from the coast, and in many affected locations there was just enough time to get to safety. But alas, that didn't happen -- and tens of thousands perished.

It was appalling that our sophisticated local and global communications systems completely failed us that fateful day. The communications satellites that I invented, and the global Internet that one of my stories inspired, could have spread the warning, with the hundreds of radio and television channels across coastal Asia amplifying it.

What happened, how and why has been analysed repeatedly since then. It is now known that the failures were human, not technological. To ensure better results next time, we need to achieve an optimum mix of technology, management systems and community preparedness -- not just for tsunamis, but for many other hazards that we live with. We have to remember that delivering credible early warnings to those who are most at risk is both an art and a science.

Shortly after the Boxing Day Tsunami, I was reminded that, I had, in fact, written about another tsunami that happened more than 120 years earlier. My first book about Ceylon, *The Reefs of Taprobane* (1957), contains this description:

"One August day in 1883, the water suddenly started to drain out of Galle harbour. Within a few minutes, the sea bed was exposed for hundreds of feet from shore. Myriads of fish were flopping around in their death agonies, and many wrecks, from small fishing boats to large iron steamers, were miraculously uncovered by the water that had concealed them for years.

"But the inhabitants of Galle did not stop to stare and wonder. They knew what to expect, and rushed to high ground as quickly as they could. Fortunately for the town and its people, the sea did not return in the usual tidal wave; perhaps because Galle was on the far, sheltered side of the island, it came back smoothly and without violence, like a swiftly incoming tide.

"It was many days before the people of Galle learned why the sea had so suddenly deserted their harbour, when they heard for the first time the doom-laden name of Krakatoa."

Half a century later, I can no longer locate my original notes, but one thing baffles me: *how did the people of Galle in 1883 know big waves were coming up soon after the sea receded? What made them rush to high ground?*

In contrast, in twenty-first century Sri Lanka, most people simply did not know this fact. (An exception was the village of Galbokka, where a retired sailor recognised the tell-tale signs and rushed the entire community to safety.<sup>3</sup>) Hundreds of men, women and children were killed because they had rushed out to see the spectacle of a suddenly receding sea.



TICAP image archive

Referring to the Krakatoa-inspired tsunami, I had written: "It was a moment unique in recorded history, and one which will probably never come again. I would have given anything to have been present then with a camera, but would probably have been too terrified to use it."

Well, never say never. On 26 December 2004, many holiday-makers on affected beaches were armed with video cameras, and it was their 'amateur' images that later showed us the full force and fury of the unfolding disaster. Because it was distributed over a large area and occurred during peak holiday season, the Asian Tsunami was probably the most widely filmed disaster in history. And we shall never know how many others were consumed by the very waves whose onset they started filming.

It was hours later that professional journalists and camera crews arrived at the multiple scenes of disaster. Then something remarkable happened. Concerned ordinary people continued to offer first hand narratives and personal perspectives to a world anxiously following the unfolding humanitarian crisis. Relief workers, volunteers and other public-spirited individuals turned to the Internet where they kept publishing their own personal web logs. These blogs developed a wide following among those who wanted a counterpoint to the fleeting coverage -- or helicopter journalism -- coming out in some sections of the mainstream media. In some cases, bloggers went where no news reporters or camera crews could reach, partly because so many locations had been affected.



TVEAP image archive

This was not the first disaster that 'citizen journalists' covered, but it marked a turning point in the growing phenomenon enabled by information and communications technologies (ICTs). The post-Tsunami coverage showed that the professional and amateur divide had now blurred; there is a clear (and complementary) role that each can play.

The Tsunami also reminded us how disasters can make our information society vulnerable. When electricity and telephone services -- both fixed and mobile -- went down in the worst affected areas, a century old technology came to the rescue: amateur radio enthusiasts restored the first communication links with the outside world, sometimes using the Morse Code to economise the power of car batteries. Courageous and resourceful 'radio hams' were at the forefront of relief efforts in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India, and Hambantota in Sri Lanka. In those early hours and days, Marconi's faithful followers helped save lives and allowed a rapid appraisal of damage. As the President of the Radio Society of Sri Lanka remarked, "When all else is dead, short wave is alive."

Communicating disasters -- before, during and after they happen -- is fraught with many challenges. Today's ICT tools enable us to be smart and strategic in gathering and disseminating information. But there is no silver bullet that can fix everything. We must never forget how even high tech (and high cost) solutions can fail at critical moments. We can, however, contain these risks by addressing the cultural, sociological and human dimensions -- aspects that this book explores in some depth and detail, from the perspective of both media professionals and disaster managers.

The lessons of history are clear: if we are not careful, we can easily lull ourselves into the same kind of false confidence that doomed the *Titanic*.

*Colombo, Sri Lanka*  
27 June 2007

Endnotes:

- 1 In fact, SOS had been adopted internationally in 1908 as the new distress call, but was not widely used by British wireless operators.
- 2 A good account of wireless in the Titanic disaster, written by Allan Brett, is found at: <http://jproc.ca/radiostor/titanic.html>
- 3 <http://www.azcentral.com/specials/special11/0114victor.html>

# Introduction

Nalaka Gunawardene and Frederick Noronha

*“In a disaster, everyone is a victim in one way or another; no one is spared. We as media are not there to merely and dispassionately report. We invariably become a vital link between the scene of the disaster and the rest of the world.”*

*“The under-reporting and non-reporting of many human interest and human development stories is a scandal. There are many silent emergencies that never attract sufficient media coverage or public attention...”*

*“As journalists, we’ve been trained to do quick, sharp and precise stories that will have the most impact with our viewers. In doing so, we lose many nuances in a story like the Tsunami.”*

*“If they want to engage the media, development professionals must first understand the complexity, nuances and diversity in what is collectively labeled as ‘media’. In fact, the very term ‘media’ is a plural!”*

*“The priority of development organisations arriving at disaster scenes is not primarily to communicate, but to respond to the emergency situation on the ground. This frustrates many journalists. It is therefore necessary for development organisations to see information as a ‘commodity’...”*

These were among the many wide-ranging observations and perspectives exchanged during an Asian regional brainstorming meeting held on 21 – 22 December 2006 in Bangkok, Thailand, on 'Communicating Disasters: Building on the tsunami experience and responding to future challenges'. Convened by TVE Asia Pacific and UNDP, the meeting brought together 33 leading media professionals, disaster managers and communication specialists from South and Southeast Asia to probe the role of the mass media and communication in times of disaster inspired crises and emergencies.

The meeting sought to discern the key communication lessons of the Indian Ocean Tsunami (December 2004), Pakistan earthquake (October 2005) and other recent disasters that impacted the lives of millions of people. It discussed both recent successes and failures in timely communication using a range of information and communication technologies, or ICTs.

Early on during the meeting, it became clear that both media practitioners and disaster/development professionals had different attitudes and approaches to managing information before, during and after disasters occur. Some of these arose from a failure to appreciate the different needs and priorities of these two groups. Yet, this division blurred as they agreed on the essential functions of information and communication, and recognised the need to serve the public interest over individual, corporate or agency interests.

The meeting agreed that the mass media must evolve their own ethics, guidelines and strategies for covering hazards and disasters, balancing the public's right to know with the right to privacy and human dignity of disaster affected persons. These cannot and should not be imposed from outside. At the same time, greater understanding among media

practitioners, development professionals and disaster managers on each sector's needs and limitations would engender more sharing and collaboration. The final report of the meeting, presented as Appendix 1 of this book, captures highlights and recommendations of the Bangkok meeting.

The discussion on the role of information and communication in disaster situations continues. Media-based communication is vitally necessary, but not sufficient, in meeting the multiple information needs of disaster risk reduction and disaster management. Other forms of participatory, non-media communications are needed to create communities that are better prepared and more disaster resilient.

The recent spate of trans-boundary mega-disasters in Asia and elsewhere offers a firm reminder, if any were needed, of the increasing frequency and intensity of such calamities. Climate change, which the scientific community now acknowledges as already unfolding with far reaching consequences, will only exacerbate our vulnerability to new forms of emergencies at national, regional and planetary levels.

This presents formidable challenges to governments, aid agencies, civil society and the media. It calls for more strategic and collaborative approaches in our preparedness and response. It also demands that we think and act beyond the conventional framework of disaster risk reduction to take advantage of new technologies, methodologies and opportunities.

Old and new ICTs -- ranging from telephones, radio and television to computers, Internet and mobile devices -- can certainly play a part in responding to these challenges. But success depends less on technologies, and more on policy, institutional and human resource factors. After the Indian Ocean tsunami, Asia realised the inadequacies of existing communications systems and arrangements in relation to hazard warning dissemination. The region that leads the world in many areas of modern communications -- for example, having the world's largest TV audience and fastest growing Internet and mobile phone markets -- failed to provide any public warning of the disaster.

As the *Digital Review of Asia Pacific* (2005/2006 edition) noted: "Many of the communities struck by the waves were hit about two hours after the earthquake that triggered them. Anecdotal reports emerging in the aftermath of the catastrophe told of isolated teams of experts who tracked the progress of the tsunami remotely but did not have the means to raise the alarm among the communities that were in harm's way. There were also disturbing anecdotes of other experts who had forewarning about the tsunami but held back from raising the alarm owing to apprehensions about reprisals from restrictive gate-keeping regimes in case disaster did not occur."<sup>1</sup>

The tsunami communication failures inspired much reflection in the global humanitarian community. In the *World Disaster Report 2005*, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) made a strong case for a greater role for information and communication in disaster situations.

The report argued: "Information is a vital form of aid in itself -- but this is not sufficiently recognised among humanitarian organisations. Disaster-affected people need information as much as water, food, medicine or shelter. Information can save lives, livelihoods and resources. Information may be the only form of disaster preparedness the most vulnerable can afford. Yet aid organisations focus mainly on gathering information

for themselves and not enough on exchanging information with the people they aim to support...”<sup>2</sup>

Asia's recent experiences have shown how governments, civil society and aid agencies mismanage information and communication, aggravating the agony of affected people and wasting limited resources. There is growing recognition on the need for a culture of communication that values proper information management and inclusive information sharing. The 19 chapters in this book explore the different elements and combinations that could help evolve such a culture in Asia, home to more than half of humanity.

Our 21 contributors -- most of them from Asia, and representing media, development or humanitarian sectors -- do not engage in mere theoretical discussions. In 19 chapters of this book, they draw on their rich and varied experience working in either preparing disaster resilient communities or responding to humanitarian emergencies triggered by specific disasters. Some are journalists who have reported on disasters from the 'ground zero'; others are aid workers, public information officials or development professionals who have been at the forefront in emergency responses or are engaged in disaster risk reduction.

Diverse as their backgrounds and experiences are, our contributors share a belief in the central role that communication can play before, during and after disasters occur. Within this, they offer a kaleidoscope of perspectives as well as a great deal of practical advice on how to communicate hazards and disasters at inter-personal, inter-agency, inter-sector and public levels. The tools, technologies and methods may vary, but there is a broad consensus that to be effective, communication needs to be two-way, inclusive, participatory and sustained over time. It is not an 'add on' to other development interventions, but an integral component in its own right.

This book comes out at a time when both the media industry and the global humanitarian sector are undergoing rapid change. Our contributors are among the 'change agents' leading or consolidating these changes, and thus able to offer insights from the cutting edge in their respective spheres.

The proliferation of ICTs has enabled many forms of new media with higher levels of interactivity and audience engagement than is typically possible in newspapers, radio or television. This, in turn, has inspired a movement of citizen journalists who provide independent reporting and analysis on many areas of public interest, including post-disaster situations.

It marks the media's return to the grassroots where most stories originate and develop.

As Sir Arthur C Clarke, futurist and communication guru who has written a foreword to this book, noted in an essay written in 2005: "Historically, organised and commercialised mass media have existed only in the past five centuries, since the first newspapers – as we know them – emerged in Europe. Before the printing press was invented, all news was local and there were few gatekeepers controlling its flow. Having evolved highly centralised systems of media for half a millennium, we are now returning to a second era of mass media -- in the true sense of that term. Blogs, wikis and citizen journalism are all signs of things to come."<sup>3</sup>

The new media tools and platforms provide more opportunities for disaster affected persons to directly voice their concerns, influencing how the mainstream media and humanitarian players react to ground realities. For too long, media professionals and aid

workers have carried out their professional work with little or no meaningful interaction with the affected people (sometimes called 'victims'). As we find out in this book, the affected people are not only asserting their place in the relevant discussions, but expressing themselves using digital technologies ranging from mobile phones to grassroots radio.

The humanitarian community recognises this sea change and is reorienting itself. While this book was under compilation, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) convened the Global Symposium +5 on 'Information for Humanitarian Action' in Geneva, Switzerland, from 22 to 26 October 2007. Representatives from governments, aid agencies, non-governmental organisations, academia, private sector and the media discussed and debated the state of humanitarian communication in the digitally-empowered and media-rich world. Their statement (still in draft as this book went to press in November 2007) attempted to define a common vision of the central role of information and communication in support of effective humanitarian preparedness, response and recovery.

It noted: "Information [and knowledge] has always been a key element in humanitarian action but recent emergencies and disasters have demonstrated how vital its role is in providing a basis for effective and informed advocacy, decision-making and resource allocation for affected population as well as humanitarian actors. Timely, accurate [and independent/objective/impartial] information is central to saving lives and strengthening recovery; the power lies in its effective management, analysis and application..."<sup>4</sup>

What does all this mean to a reporter or aid worker who is thrust into the midst of an unfolding humanitarian emergency, challenging all professional training and norms that work well under 'normal' circumstances? How can a community development worker or school teacher add elements of disaster risk reduction to their regular work, trying to raise awareness and preparedness at the local levels? And how can everyone enhance their capacity to listen, reflect and learn -- essential steps in good communication?

This book does not claim to provide all the answers, but we hope it has at least raised many pertinent questions. Instead of trying to be comprehensive or definitive, our contributors are being provocative and imaginative.

As editors, we have resisted imposing our heavy hand on their diverse styles of expression, allowing a free play and free flow of ideas. Thus, the book reflects the plurality that is characteristic of both the mass media and wider communication processes. If this comes across as a cacophony as a result, that is as intended.

This book is aimed at media professionals, disaster managers, development workers and civil society groups across Asia -- in short, all who share an interest in using information and communication to create safer societies and communities. We hope the contents of this book challenge and engage them in ways that expand their horizons.

Endnotes:

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1 [http://www.digital-review.org/05\\_preface.htm](http://www.digital-review.org/05_preface.htm)

2 <http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/wdr2005/>

3 <http://outlookindia.com/fullprint.asp?choice=2&fodname=20051017&fname=KC+Clarke&sid=1>

4 Symposium proceedings can be accessed at: <http://www.reliefweb.int/symposium/>



# Communicating Tsunami

The Indian Ocean Tsunami arrived without public warning. The first few days and weeks after the disaster were extraordinary for journalists and broadcasters: it challenged them professionally, personally, ethically and technically. Some of the region's leading communicators look back at their post-tsunami experiences, drawing insights and lessons.





*Facing an uncertain future in eastern Sri Lanka after the tsunami*  
Video Image, TVEAP image archive

# The 2004 Tsunami: An Unfinished Story

The Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 2004 was one of the biggest stories for the media. But there was much more to this story than merely reporting what happened, where and how. Some media organisations stayed with the story while many lost interest and moved on.

Johanna Son



*My Chilean friends didn't bat an eyelid when I asked, "Do you know what it means when the sea rushes back?"*

*"Oh," they replied matter-of-factly. "It means you have to run away -- and fast! Maremoto (tsunami)."*

*I thought I was sharing new and relevant information with them, given the global impact that had just been created by the tsunami of 26 December 2004 that severely hit five countries of Asia -- India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar. But then I found out that all schoolchildren in Chile are taught this and are thus familiar with tsunami warnings.*

*Chile, after all, has a 6,435-kilometre coastline and has suffered massive damage from the earthquake-tsunami of May 1960. It has experienced 28 great quakes measuring more than 6.9 on the Richter scale.*

*So, while Chile might be continents away from Asia, that conversation drove home a point – that information can indeed save lives. In contrast, many of the people near Thailand's beaches that December morning, except for some indigenous peoples familiar with the sea, were fascinated by the sudden, rapid retreat of the sea and rushed into the water seconds before the killer waves came.*





*Yenni with the tsunami's legacy in Aceh*  
Jungle Run Productions, TVEAP image archive



A natural disaster usually comes as a surprise, as the December 2004 tsunami was for many countries, but the real story does not end there. A disaster is usually defined and reported by media as an event. In reality, it is also a process, which means the complete story goes much beyond the deluge of column inches and soundbites about immediate damage, destruction and the must-do anniversary stories.

Today, over two years after the tsunami that killed nearly 230,000 people, how much do we really know about the communities and countries it affected? The stories were saleable in the weeks and months after the tsunami. Freelancers fanned out across the region, because disaster makes journalists sit up. But the usual definition of news also means that the media's attention span is limited.

The tsunami slid down the news ladder as the big international camera crews packed up, as the immediacy of the disaster faded. Soon, in the usual news parlance, nothing much new was 'happening'. How communities are coping, somehow, often seemed to be less newsworthy than describing death, or churning out the latest numbers of the dead and injured.

### Beyond what happened

In a global information society where there is a constant race for who delivers the news first, such news undoubtedly fill a need -- the need to know. But does reporting on disaster, conflict, international politics or other issues, throw up other questions beyond 'what happened'? Questions like: What does



Video Image, TVEAP image archive

this mean? How did this happen? How do other communities cope? Are the funds being put to good use? Is the kind of assistance coming in sensitive to different communities' needs? Which communities are left out from receiving aid and why?

These are some of the questions that beg to be delved into, and are the niche for media organisations, whose mission it is to try to look at the bigger picture and put the issues behind the events in context. This is not to say that some are always better than others. It is a way of stressing that 'media' are far from a homogenous crowd, and that different media organizations have different media products, stemming from different assessments of their audiences and mission.

How many ways are there to report on a disaster? I use examples from Inter-Press Service (IPS), a development news agency for which I am director for Asia-Pacific, to do a post-mortem of sorts in the spirit of sharing the challenges of covering disasters like that of the tsunami and of learning from one another.

On 26 December 2004, I was in Manila, the Philippines, for the year-end holidays when the newsbar across the screens of international TV networks began flashing reports that "scores" were believed to have been killed by a tsunami in the Indian Ocean. It was, we were told, triggered by an undersea earthquake recorded at up to 9.3 magnitude on the Richter Scale. (This has since been called the second most powerful earthquake ever recorded by a seismograph.)

In the following hours, the number kept rising – first to "hundreds" then to "thousands". Even without much detail and description, it was clear this was quite a different disaster. News desks around the world went into action.

The editor for my region was on holidays in Africa. So I was in touch with our regional correspondent, who was then on holidays in Sri Lanka, and also in contact with a regular contributor from Colombo, as well our correspondent in India. We agreed on a few story angles, trying to focus not on what had already been reported and added little to the avalanche of stories out there, but on how, for instance, the effects of the tsunami interplayed with the ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka.

A look back at the coverage on the IPS wire -- ipsnews.net -- at that time shows two different kinds of stories in the days and weeks after December 26. Some were more obvious, predictable ones, and other more contextual ones that, regardless of where they were filed from, hew more closely to the news agency's

mission of trying to provide reporting that explains – and not only records – what is happening.

Our Sri Lanka stories were among the richest, consisting of reporting from different datelines from areas affected by the disaster. Some articles, such as one from Batticaloa, looked into how the tsunami, which killed over 38,000 people in the South Asian island nation, was bringing temporary rapprochement among ethnic groups that had stayed away from each other despite a three-year ceasefire between the government and Tamil separatist rebels.

In a January 2007 story from Sri Lanka, the same contributor, Amantha Perera, follows how rehabilitation is going on some years after the disaster. ("Life is almost normal," says Mohideen Ajeemaat, whose home has been rebuilt.) But amid such successes, the writer documents the concern that the areas worst-hit by the tsunami, in the north and the east of the island nation, appear to have been grossly neglected at the cost of better rehabilitation and reconstruction in the Sinhala-dominated south, leading to charges of discrimination and political patronage.

### Stories from near and far

Other past IPS stories on the tsunami that complemented straight news reports at the time include one from Geneva, moved the day after the tsunami. It reported how the tsunami showed, once again, the lack of an early warning system for such disasters.



Action IEC Cambodia, TVEAP image archive

From Washington was a piece saying that while the world rushed to pour aid to the affected countries, very few were focusing on calculating the long-term economic cost of the tsunami. There were also subsequent articles on how the tsunami highlighted and exacerbated the discrimination that Burmese migrants experienced in Thailand.

In retrospect, some stories could have added more to what readers already knew. Some articles contributed from Thailand fell into the trap (and shortcut) of quoting mostly Western tourists who were victims -- and left out local interviewees. This was also significant, given later complaints, both in media in and out of Thailand, that international reporting appeared to give the impression the lives of foreigners was more than important than that of locals, and that foreigners' deaths made bigger news.

The pressure of deadlines does not make reporting on disasters easy, especially for a development news agency.

It was certainly a challenge for news organisations that could not easily send hordes of journalists into other countries or places. But like other media organisations with the same aim of trying to cover the other side or present other angles, the tsunami was also a time to take a second look at how we do the news.

It's not that news agencies like us cannot cover fast-moving news, because we have been doing it for decades. But the difference lies in the creativity and skill in finding the relevant, the different angles, the not-so-obvious viewpoints and the ones we might find if we stepped back and scratched the surface a bit more. After all, our news lens was never meant to consist of by-the-second reporting, but contextualised reportage that seeks to help audiences understand and feel the human story behind the event.

Certainly, though, there are a lot of media groups that continue to report on the after-effects of the tsunami since 2004, even if the space that these articles and TV material occupy are these days much less than at the height of the disaster.

### Returning to the scene

Our contributions to this effort also include a special series from the tsunami-hit areas in 2005, coordinated by IPS Asia-Pacific with the support of ActionAid International. One series, produced by Asian journalists who applied for these reporting slots, was released around the sixth month after the December 2004 disaster. A second one invited applications from journalists from tsunami-affected countries to report on another tsunami-hit nation, to do stories linking the two and learning from each other's experiences in disaster management and prevention.

Issues relating to tsunami-hit areas remain quite definitely in IPS' regional news priorities. However, more can certainly be done.

For instance, this could be achieved by designating specific writers to follow issues around the tsunami as a beat – not one designed by country or geography, but by issues such as aid and accountability, means of rehabilitation, disaster prevention and management. This conscious effort to stick to the tsunami story – resisting fully event-driven coverage -- could be one way to ensure intelligent, consistent reporting with a view to coping with disasters and contributing to their prevention in the future.

Meantime, the December 2004 tsunami may have ended, but its story continues.



# A Candle in My Window



*The aftermath of the tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia. Many locals took comfort knowing that the Mosque was not ruined.*

(c) 2006 Bruce Coyne, Courtesy of Photoshare

After the earthquake and tsunami of 26 December 2004, with a bunch of strangers from all over the world, Peter Griffin was part of an online initiative, the South-East Asia Earthquake and Tsunami Blog, known also as the SEA-EAT blog and Tsunami Help. This is a very personal view of that time; half narration, half attempt to understand it better himself.

Peter Griffin

As the magnitude of the situation seeped in, I shuttled between TV, computer and cell phone, seeking news, information, ways to help, anything. News there was, aplenty. But nothing about how one could help.

I had been exchanging SMSes with Rohit Gupta, founder of an online collaboration project I was part of; it struck us that the best thing we could do would be to collate information, put it all together in one place and tell people about it.

Collaboration was the only way to go: no single person could do this. I quickly set up a blog<sup>1</sup> on Blogger's web publishing service; it was free, familiar, permitted multiple contributors, and simple to learn. I put up a post stating our broad intentions, and we began hunting up information, simultaneously inviting bloggers we knew to join us.

Dina Mehta, influential blogger and online acquaintance, was one of the first to jump into the effort.

Dina and Rohit were contributors on World Changing,<sup>2</sup> a highly-regarded blog. They posted there about TsunamiHelp, as we called our blog. One of WC's members, in turn, tipped off Boing Boing,<sup>3</sup> who linked to us. I had mailed Prem Panicker, then Managing Editor at Rediff<sup>4</sup> in the US; Rediff's coverage also immediately began to feature a link to us. From the Sitemeter<sup>5</sup> counter I had plugged in, I noticed that from the few hundred initial visitors our mass mailings brought in, we were now getting thousands every hour.

By the next day, the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* had written about us, and put our URL in their articles, and the BBC's site linked to us as well, listing us as a reliable resource. Many other news organisations followed suit.<sup>6</sup> Google put a (unprecedented) Tsunami Aid link on their home page, and linked to us from their dedicated tsunami page.<sup>7</sup> Bloggers and webmasters linked to us by the thousands. Traffic, as a result, was overwhelming: over a million visitors in the first eight days. Our mailboxes were bombarded with offers to help, and the team grew rapidly.

### **Adapt, improvise, innovate**

The group self-organised over email, SMS and instant messengers. An email list<sup>8</sup> became the main channel for group communication; instant chats and conferences<sup>9</sup> happened via Yahoo! Messenger.

From everyone trying to do everything at the same time, the team evolved sets of duties.

"Janitors" cleaned up posts; "Monitors" checked information that readers were leaving for us; "Linkers"

ensured that data stayed current; a few of us worked out a system for answering questions from the Press; those with the right contacts networked with NGOs and aid agencies.

Someone came up with the idea of using Flickr and its tags to help the Missing Persons effort, and quickly set up a Flickr pool.<sup>10</sup> Others set up a working-group page that tracked what needed to be done, and who was doing what, on space donated by SocialText.<sup>11</sup> Some took charge of creating versions in other languages. A designer corrected my ham-handed initial template, then created a new design, much easier on the eye, that organised the information far more efficiently.<sup>12</sup>

There was fevered discussion about what exactly we were trying to do. News organisations provided much better hard coverage than we could hope to. Wikinews, in its first real test as a news source, was doing a sterling job of newsgathering via collaboration.<sup>13</sup>

What was missing was a single repository of information about who needed help at ground zero. We hastily, but formally, defined our task: collate news and information about resources, aid, donations and volunteer efforts. We set some ground rules: no politics, no opinions, steer away from controversy, just find out about and link to aid efforts. Some of us felt that "Tsunami Help" as a name ignored the earthquake that caused the tsunami, so we renamed the blog "the South-East Asia Earthquake and Tsunami blog."

The blog grew. And grew!

Then, we discovered that while Blogger made collaboration easy, it had serious limitations: no native way to classify posts; no comment moderation or comment-spam protection.<sup>14</sup> Soon, searching within all those posts got confusing for us, its creators. How much more difficult would it be for a reader anxiously looking for something specific? The work-around: split the content into focussed sub-blogs. Teams began copying content into Tsunami Enquiries/Helplines/Emergency Services, Tsunami Missing Persons, Tsunami News Updates, Tsunami Help Needed and Tsunami Help Offered.

Someone suggested that a wiki<sup>15</sup> was a better vehicle. But so many organisations and individuals were already directing traffic to the blog URL. Moving base would mean extra clicks for visitors. Besides, not everyone was wiki-savvy. So, instead of moving to the wiki, we made it a parallel effort. Initially, we were part of Wikinews, but the administrators there had issues with it.<sup>16</sup> To end the squabbles, Dina paid to register a domain name, tsunamihelp.info, Rudi Cilibrasi provided server space, and a team of wiki-adepts began categorising and copying content from the blog.

## Pulling together (and sometimes, apart)

I have never quite figured out precisely how many people chipped in to help. Sure, you could tot up the contributors listed on the blog's side panel, the IDs and IP numbers on the wiki, the newsgroup subscribers, and wind up with more than 200.

That's just part of the story. Help came from *everywhere* -- Asia, Europe, North America, South America, Australia. Veteran bloggers, designers, geeks, poets, lawyers, executives, academics, teenagers, foodies, lit-lovers, database wonks, wikians, stay-at-home moms; they put their lives on hold and mailed in information, blogged, commented, wikied, sorted data.

Each time we needed something done, someone stepped up with the knowledge and expertise, and just did it. Solutions were improvised, and, somehow, it all worked. We kept each other motivated, encouraging one another to get some sleep, some food, some relaxation, while ignoring similar exhortations directed at ourselves. No one was indispensable -- willing hands took up the slack whenever someone had to leave.

Food? Sleep? These were dispensable luxuries. Party invitations were declined without a whimper. People apologised profusely for the time it took to commute between work and home PCs.

For those of us who worked independently, it meant non-working (i.e. unpaid) time. The ones holding down jobs juggled everyday tasks with the SEA-EAT effort. I remember pinging our designer about a display problem. "Give me a minute," she typed, "I just have to tell someone to go away." She spent an hour painstakingly tweaking the template, and after we were done, I asked, "Who was that you shooed away?" She typed a smiley, and added: "My boss."

One member excused himself briefly just before midnight, December 31. A few minutes into 2006, he was back and blogging -- he'd just popped up to raise a toast to the New Year with the folks in his apartment. Another calmly and competently took over tech coordination when others burned out. Another spent huge amounts of time online though she had to make crucial preparations for an upcoming wedding: her own! Another didn't sleep for several days, fuelled only by rice, coffee and adrenaline.

But it wasn't all good vibrations. With the frenetic activity, frayed tempers, misunderstandings, and blow-ups were inevitable. A potentially interesting offshoot, ARC (Alert Retrieval Cache<sup>17</sup>),



TVEAP image archive

designed to auto-post SMSes, sustained collateral damage in one major conflagration. One overstressed person began inundating the group with needless email, a council of war took instant harsh decisions. Opportunists promoting their own agendas had to be curbed. Some of the unpleasantness still lingers.

Overall, it was difficult to know where to draw the line, and I'll wager we erred as often as not. But work continued uninterrupted, quality kept getting better. What kept us going was the knowledge that in some small way, we were helping.

## The Chien(ne)s Sans Frontières effort

Side by side, another effort was taking place. Many of us were also members of Chien(ne)s Sans Frontières, a mediawatch blog. Some of the members in South India and Sri Lanka were blogging, mailing and SMSing from ground zero. Dilip D'Souza in Tamil Nadu: "Don't send clothes, they're lying in piles on the roadside."

Four young Sri Lankans told us of morgues, identifying corpses, burials in graves they helped dig, of aid not getting to where it was needed thanks to corruption and inefficiency. One of them, Morquendi (an online handle), and I chatted online for hours one night, he telling me matter-of-factly about the political games, the risks he and his young friends were taking. He was worried about them. "They're so young," he said. "How old are you, Morq," I typed. "23," he wrote back.

I brushed away tears several times that night, not for the first time in those weeks.

### Hindsight

Did we do any good? Did we succeed?

We didn't have a formal agenda when we started. Some people did donate money. Others sent clothing, food, medicines. Some volunteered in affected areas. We had web expertise, we knew how to look for information, how to make it user-friendly, we had networks. That's what we could give, and we did.

My friend Nilanjana Roy put it into words for me. She said "It was your way of putting a candle in your window, to show that you cared."

Did we change the world? Did we make a significant difference?

From the emails, the sheer number of visitors, from the links to us, from the media coverage, we infer that we were able to provide valuable information at a time when it counted. In our small way, we created a little bit of internet history, pioneered a model for successful online collaboration, a model that we, or others, can refine.

### Not the end

Some of the team stayed in touch, building friendships on the strength of that month of working together. We debated whether we should create a



*Edhi emergency dispatchers operate around the clock. From any phone in Pakistan, dialing 154 connects a caller with the Edhi ambulance service. August 2004. Edhi Foundation is the most trusted name in Pakistan when it comes to relief work within distressed areas in Pakistan and the rest of the world. Edhi foundation is a non Profit organization that has been in the business of providing social services like medical care, emergency services, air ambulances, burial services, mental habitats, old homes, child welfare services, abused women safe houses and training facilities for the disadvantaged. Edhi's founder is Abdul Sattar Edhi who established the first clinic in 1951.*

Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World



formal organisation, document processes... but we'd neglected the rest of our lives for too long, and these thoughts fizzled out.

I had begun to think that SEA-EAT was a one-off, but I was relieved to see that when there were a couple of subsequent earthquake scares in the region, many of the team immediately got back in touch and began updating the blog and wiki.

Then, on 26 July 2005, Bombay (Mumbai) was hit by 944 mm of rain in one day. The weather people called it a freak storm, a "cloudburst." Parts of the city stayed flooded for days. People were stranded in offices or on the streets. Residents of ground floor flats found themselves with their possessions unsalvageable. Many lived through days of water-logging, no electricity, phones or -- the irony -- drinking water.

In the aftermath, a group of SEA-EAT alumni and friends began to put together two blogs: Cloudburst Mumbai concentrating on information about the current situation, flooding, news reports, aid efforts and the like; and Mumbai Help, a resource guide not just for the immediate situation but for future reference as well. (The URLs for these sites, and others mentioned in this section, are at the end of this chapter.) Out of these efforts, an initiative called ThinkMumbai was set up, to look at some of the city's deep-rooted problems, and to provide some aids for future difficult times. That effort went into a long hiatus, but a few of us plan to revive it.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina smashed into Florida.

Several days before that happened, as it became clear that Katrina was likely to hit the coast, some members of the SEA-EAT team had prepared for action. Based on the SEA-EAT experience, the team focussed on a wiki. The site logged a million visitors in two days. Of course that's largely because this disaster was in the US; internet usage there is of a completely different order of magnitude. The team collaborated on a People Finder and a Shelter Finder, and came up with innovations such as using a Florida Skype<sup>18</sup> phone number as a call centre, manned by shifts of volunteers in three continents.

In October 2005 an earthquake near the India-Pakistan border resulted in major losses of life and property. Again, many members of the SEA-EAT and CSF teams, plus others from the MumbaiHelp effort, got together to try and help out. There wasn't much info available; it is a remote, hostile landscape, without much infrastructure. The team

went back to a blog as the centre of the effort, and attempted to create a system where SMSes could be sent direct to a blog, which didn't quite work out.

In December 2005, as that awful year drew to a close, Bala Pitchandi and Angelo Embuldeniya came up with the idea of a Memorial Week that would try and bring the world's attention back to the victims and survivors of the year's disasters. Our campaign got a lot of support across the web.

Around the same time, we realised that starting a new blog or wiki each time something bad happened meant establishing credibility and search engine rankings anew. We decided to bring it all under one umbrella, the World Wide Help (WWH) group. We post alerts and warnings to the WWH blog (and, by now, with our links to NGOs, world bodies and relief agencies, we're able to keep tabs on potential crises pretty efficiently); and if a situation looks like becoming a major disaster, we then look at creating a focused resource.

We used the WWH blog during the floods in Suriname in May 2006, posting a combination of news reports, translation efforts, on-the-ground reporting, and information from relief organisations. The blog continues to be updated whenever needed.

In July 2006, around the time I was writing the original version of this essay, seven bombs went off in Bombay trains during the evening rush hour, killing 181 people, injuring another 890.

The city was in chaos; suburban trains, the major commuting artery, stopped running; thus roads were jammed too. As rumours and panic spread, everybody seemed to be trying to call everyone else at the same time. The phone network -- landlines as well as cellular -- were overwhelmed, so huge numbers of people got no information whatsoever, which only fuelled the confusion.

Family and friends in other parts of the world frantically trying to make sure their loved ones were safe only added to it. Some of us turned to the web for answers, and MumbaiHelp came back to life, with a flurry of emails, first-person reports on road conditions, hospital numbers, and more. And, just in case I had begun to think I was becoming a bit of a guru on this online relief thing, the crowd taught me something new. One post, titled "How can we help you?" got a few hundred comments that night. The comment area became a *de facto* forum, with worried people leaving names and phone numbers of relatives, and others popping up to make calls, send SMSes and confirm that yes, your brother, your friend, your aunt, was indeed safe.

## Outdone big media?

And so we're the best thing that happened to the Web, right?

I've heard talk about how SEA-EAT and subsequent efforts have outdone big media. I don't believe a word of that.

We did get a lot of attention, and that, let's make it clear, was thanks to the media. Did we supplant traditional media? Heavens, no! Our biggest successes in terms of readership were SEA-EAT, which got a million visits in about eight days, and the Katrina wiki, which got that much in a day. For the big media sites, those figures are peanuts. None of them is trembling

in fear of bloggers yet, I'll wager. Citizen journalism -- or at least the segment that we of WWH specialise in, online relief aid -- supplements the efforts of the media, of formal relief agencies, of government bodies.

But here's the thing. There was a week on the cusp of 2004-2005 when a million people didn't find what they wanted anywhere else. When Katrina hit, a million others couldn't find the information they needed elsewhere that day. When the bombs went off in the Mumbai local trains, 40-50,000 people didn't find what they were looking for in the media. We were able to reach out a hand to them, in our small way. We lit our candle, and showed we cared.

### Endnotes:

1. SEA-EAT: <http://tsunamihelp.blogspot.com>
2. <http://www.worldchanging.com/>
3. <http://www.boingboing.net/> BoingBoing is one of the most popular blogs in the world.
4. Rediff.com has a huge readership in India, and among non-resident Indians. For Rediff's dedicated tsunami section, see <http://www.rediff.com/news/tsunami.htm>
5. See <http://www.sitemeter.com>. Sitemeter is a counter that many bloggers and webmasters use to track traffic.
6. For press descriptions of the TsunamiHelp effort, see [http://www.tsunamihelp.info/wiki/index.php/In\\_the\\_media](http://www.tsunamihelp.info/wiki/index.php/In_the_media)
7. Google's Tsunami relief page: [http://www.google.com/tsunami\\_relief.html](http://www.google.com/tsunami_relief.html)
8. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/seaeatvolunteers/>
9. Yahoo!Messenger lets multiple users text-chat simultaneously. We used this like a conference room, staying logged in, but also chatting one-on-one in private windows. <http://messenger.yahoo.com/>
10. Flickr is a photo-hosting site (then comparatively new) that permitted tagging of pictures, group pools and a degree of social networking. [http://www.flickr.com/groups/tsunami\\_help\\_missing/](http://www.flickr.com/groups/tsunami_help_missing/)
11. [http://www.socialtext.net/tsunamihelp/index.cgi?who\\_s\\_doing\\_what](http://www.socialtext.net/tsunamihelp/index.cgi?who_s_doing_what)
12. For the depth and detail of just one aspect of Megha Murthy's redesign of SEA-EAT, see <http://www.meghalomania.com/expand-collapse-script-for-blogger-blogs/>
13. Wikinews earthquake and tsunami coverage: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004\\_Indian\\_Ocean\\_earthquake](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004_Indian_Ocean_earthquake)
14. Comment spam includes machine-generated spam crammed with links to commercial sites. Blogger has since introduced both categorisation of posts and comment moderation.
15. A wiki is a website that can be edited online instantly.
16. For details, see <http://balaspot.blogspot.com/2005/12/how-my-life-changed.html>
17. ARC's current status can be checked at <http://www.socialtext.net/tsunamihelp/index.cgi?arc>
18. Skype is a Voice Over Internet Protocol provider. The service lets you make calls not just from Skype user to Skype user, but also to and from landlines. <http://www.skype.com>



TVETP image archive

## Acknowledgements

An earlier, much longer version of this essay appeared in Sarai Reader 06: *Turbulence*, (Eds: Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Ravi Sundaram, Jeebesh Bagchi, Awadhendra Sharan and Geert Lovink) produced and designed at the Sarai Media Lab, Delhi and published by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, ISBN 81-901429-7-6. More information and free downloads at <http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/06-turbulence>.

Nilanjana S. Roy first pushed me into writing this text. Jai Arjun Singh's incisive questions helped me structure the first draft. I referred to posts by Dina

Mehta and Bala Pitchandi to check on my recollection of the sequence of events. Dina and Bala, Megha Murthy, Neha Vishwanathan, Nilanjana S. Roy and Devangshu Datta critiqued this account for me at various times and gave me their opinions, invaluable in fine-tuning it from the first disjointed scribbles. Shuddhabrata Sengupta gave me the opportunity to first publish it in the *Sarai Reader*. Frederick Noronha and Nalaka Gunawardene charmed me into rewriting it for this book.

And every member of all the collaborations I've been part of helped me understand the process a little better, while we helped each other refine, modify and make more useful, often on the fly, a very raw concept.

## WorldWideHelp Group URLs:

**SEA-EAT / TsunamiHelp** main blog: <http://tsunamihelp.blogspot.com>

Sublogs:

<http://tsunamienquiry.blogspot.com/>

<http://tsunamimissing.blogspot.com/>

<http://tsunamiupdates.blogspot.com/>

<http://tsunamihelpwanted.blogspot.com/>

<http://tsunamihelpoffered.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.tsunamihelp.info> (wiki)

**Cloudburst Mumbai:** <http://cloudburstmumbai.blogspot.com>

**Mumbai Help:** <http://mumbaihelp.blogspot.com> (blog); <http://mumbaihelp.jot.com> (wiki)

**Katrina Help:** <http://katrinahelp.blogspot.com>; <http://katrinahelp.info>

**Rita Help:** <http://ritahelp.blogspot.com>; <http://ritahelp.info>

**Quake Help:** <http://quakehelp.blogspot.com> (blog); <http://smsquake.blogspot.com/>  
(SMS-to-blog failed experiment); <http://quakehelp.asiaquake.org/> (wiki)

**Avian Flu Help (H5N1):** <http://avianfluhelp.blogspot.com/>

**WorldWideHelp:** <http://worldwidehelp.blogspot.com>; <http://www.worldwidehelp.info/>

## Recommended (Further) Reading

**Tsunami Crisis: An Analytical World View.** See Intelliseek's Blogpulse: <http://tsunami.blogpulse.com/>

**Open Source Disaster Recovery: Case Studies of Networked Collaboration.** Study by Calvert Jones and Sarai Mitnick of the School of Information, University of California, Berkeley. In First Monday:  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue11\\_5/jones/index.html](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue11_5/jones/index.html)

**Tsunami Blog among 10 Most Popular Humanitarian Sites.** See Hitwise:

[http://www.hitwise.com/press-center/hitwiseHS2004/tsunami\\_010105.html](http://www.hitwise.com/press-center/hitwiseHS2004/tsunami_010105.html)

**Social Tools: Ripples to Waves of the Future.** See Dina Mehta's blog, Conversations with Dina:

<http://radio.weblogs.com/0121664/2005/05/29.html#a630>

**How My Life Changed.** See Bala Pitchandi's blog, *Bala's Ramblings* 2.1:

<http://balaspot.blogspot.com/2005/12/how-my-life-changed.html>

**For commentary on blogs and the media,** see we, the media, script of a speech by Ashok Malik at the Asian School of Journalism, Chennai. <http://wethemedia.blogspot.com/2005/11/ashok-malik-on-blogs-and-media.html>

**History of Blogic.** Articles by Jai Arjun Singh, Amit Varma and T. R. Vivek in Outlook, Volume XLVI, Issue 1, 9 January 2006, p 60. For online text (subscription required), see: <http://www.outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20060109&fname=H4Bloggers+%28F%29&sid=1>

**The Coming of Age of Citizen Media.** Jane Perrone, in the Guardian news blog.

[http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/news/archives/2005/12/26/the\\_coming\\_of\\_age\\_of\\_citizen\\_media.html](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/news/archives/2005/12/26/the_coming_of_age_of_citizen_media.html)



# Nobody told us to run...



*5th January 2005: View from the rooftop of the house of Karl Max Hantke and his wife Khanti Hantke, of the train that was swept away by the waves near Hikkadua. Karl and Khanti had climbed to the rooftop to safety. Sri Lanka Tsunami.*

**Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World**

Nearly 40,000 died in Sri Lanka when the tsunami hit the Indian Ocean island without public warning. The author traces back the critical hours and minutes to show most of those lives could have been saved, and probes why existing telecom and media channels were not used.

Chanuka Wattagama

On 26 December 2004, Sri Lanka faced its worst-ever natural disaster recorded in recent history. A similar event is believed to have taken place, more than 2,000 years ago, but that could be more a legend. On the other hand, the Boxing Day tsunami was nothing short of harsh reality hitting one's head like an express train. Nearly 40,000 people died in a span of a few hours. More than a million, out of a total Sri Lankan population of about 20 million, were displaced. The aggregate cost to property was estimated to be in the order of one to two billion dollars.

These are all the well known parts of the story. Perhaps a lesser-known fact was that the majority of these 40,000 lives could have been saved. To see how this was possible, one needs only to have a careful look at the time-line of the critical events that occurred on that fateful day.

Let us start from the very beginning.

At 7.00 am local time on Boxing Day, a large earthquake occurs in the Indian Ocean, near Sumatra, Indonesia.

Later, newspapers report that tremors took place within a few minutes in some parts in the island, but the impact was too minor to be taken seriously by a casual observer. Nevertheless, these are recorded at the Pallekele Seismological Station<sup>1</sup>, in Sri Lanka itself, where sophisticated equipment monitors such events round-the-clock. What is missing though is an officer to have a look at the graphs and tell the rest of the world about the potential danger of the event about to happen in South Asia too in a few hours time.

Alas, it is a Sunday following the night of Christmas.<sup>2</sup> It is too much to expect a typical government servant to be on duty at that moment. So, the first opportunity to issue an early warning is forever gone.



TVEAP image archive

## Vital warning

Pallekele Seismological Station, of course, is not the only point where this vital information gets recorded. At 7:07 am, the resulting seismic signals make the Hawaii-based Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC) trigger an internal alarm that alerts watchstanders located in different regions. At 7:10 am, the PTWC issues another message to observatories in the Pacific, with its preliminary earthquake parameters.

At 7:14 am local time, the PTWC issues a bulletin providing information on the earthquake, stating that there is no tsunami threat to the Pacific nations that participate in the Tsunami Warning System in the Pacific (ITSU). India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives are not part of this Pacific-focussed system. At 8:04 am, the PTWC issues bulletin No. 2, revising the earthquake magnitude to 8.5. That bulletin states that there is no tsunami threat to the Pacific, but identifies the possibility of a tsunami near the epicenter.

This means there is a time-gap of 23 minutes before the first waves would eventually strike the east coast of Sri Lanka. If there was to be an island-wide radio broadcast of the warning, time could have well been sufficient for local communities to vacate the risky areas.

However, in the coastal areas of Sri Lanka there is no warning so no one evacuates one's house.

What happens afterwards is the greatest tragedy.

## First wave hits

At 8.27 am, the first tsunami waves hit the island. The first major town to be hit is Batticaloa, the provincial capital of the Eastern Province, at 8.40 am. Trincomalee, the port-city on the north-east coast, and Hambantota, the town on the south-east coast, are hit within a few minutes of each other, at 8.52 am and 8.55 am, respectively. Areas in the Jaffna peninsula are under water by 9.00 am. At 9.15 Galle, the third largest city in the country on the south-western tip of Sri Lanka, is hit. Areas close to Colombo, on the west coast, are hit between 9.20 and 9.30 am.

The undeniable fact is that there had been a nearly 30-minute difference between the time the towns in the east costs and the ones in the west costs were first hit. Statistics tell us that 37 out of every 100 persons in Sri Lanka own telephones, almost 80% of the households have radios, and 71% have televisions.<sup>3</sup> Still there were hardly any messages emanating from the east coast to the west, about the impending disaster. When the fishing communities in the villages

of the west coast see the 10-meter-high waves coming at them, they have no idea that somebody could have pre-warned them.<sup>4</sup>

There are other unimaginable tragedies waiting to happen.

The railway authorities realise that one of their trains is moving down south, towards a risk prone area. They attempt to call the railway stations en route. The train is parked at the Ambalangoda railway station, when the station master's phone rings constantly. Nobody answers it. Both the station master and his deputy are busy supervising the unloading of some goods from the train. By the time they receive the message, the train had already left the station. They do not have any way of issuing a warning, as the engine driver does not have a mobile phone.

The train stops sometime later, in the middle of a village that had already been hit by the first waves. Those who are running for their lives assume the train to be a shield against the waves. They are wrong. The next waves hit the train, carrying it away like a child's toy. The railway tracks get crumpled like a Möbius strip. If it can be called a railway accident, this would have been the worst train accident the world had ever witnessed.<sup>5</sup> It alone costs more than 2,500 lives. Perhaps many of those lives could have saved if only the engine driver has been given a mobile phone.

Is that the end of the story? Sadly, no.

### Tell-tale signs ignored

One key sign of an approaching tsunami, it is better acknowledged now, is the receding of water along the shoreline, exposing areas that are normally always submerged. It has been reported that on 24 December 2004, in some of the coastal areas the water submerged for 1-2 km.<sup>6</sup> This had opened the doors of a seemingly-miraculous new world for spectators, in the area. None of them knew of the danger that was about to come. So, when the waves came later, they were not even on the shore where they might have held a tree if they were lucky. They were out there in the sea bed.

Many among the 40,000 who lost their lives were spectators of this sort. Most of their bodies were never recovered.

Now let me summarize what emerges from the facts above.

1. The monitoring equipment did record the tremors; but by the time someone noticed it, the damage had already been done.



TVETP image archive

2. Warning messages were issued in time, and most probably might have been available on the Net for even more time. Unfortunately, that never reached the ones who needed it most: the communities at risk.
3. Even when we knew we are hit, we didn't think it necessary to communicate that information to the rest.
4. We wanted to pass messages to the critical individuals (like the engine driver of that ill-fated train) who however did not have the necessary equipment to receive such messages
5. We had no idea about the do's and don'ts in the face of a disaster, because nobody had ever educated us on this. So we walked towards the emptied seabed without ever thinking about the impending disaster that was to come our way.

Do you see where the gaps are?

One, and an important one, was the issue of communication. It had nothing to do with the monitoring of the disaster itself. We had enough indications. What we failed to do was to communicate the right message to the right people, within the required time-frame.

Two, the lack of awareness. Even if the message had been passed to the community at the right time, probably they would not have evacuated in time, as they possibly could not have then foreseen the magnitude of the damage to come. This is true for any disaster that happens for the first time.

Unfortunately, this sad scenario is not just limited to Sri Lanka. This is exactly what also happened in India, Indonesia and Thailand. In all these countries, coastal communities faced the tsunami as a complete surprise.

## Better prepared next time?

So what remedies one can suggest so that when the next disaster happens -- which may or may not be a tsunami -- we do not see the same series of events repeated? What exactly is the role that the media can play?

**Firstly, establishing disaster warning channels is absolutely essential and should take priority among the tasks of any national government:**

One cartoon widely distributed over the Net in the tsunami aftermath portrayed two scenarios. On the left panel, there were so many satellites, television stations and dish antennas. That was the technology used to beam the horrific images of the tragedy to the living rooms of the West. On the right was completely blank. That was the technology used to detect the tsunami and communicate the much-needed warnings. Given the commercial nature of the media and communication industries, it might be too much for any developing country to expect a balance between the left and right panels.

However, it might still not be too much for every citizen to expect his or her government to have proper disaster monitoring communication systems set in place. After all, it is a question of life and death, a basic right of any citizen of any country. What can take the priority over that?



**Secondly, detection is critical, but without**

**communication, it serves no purpose:** No need to elaborate on this, since it is now obvious that what matters is the strength of the weakest link. Failure of communication channel somewhere in the middle -- or perhaps even just an half-hour delay -- is equivalent to having no warning systems at all. A warning delayed is a warning denied.<sup>7</sup>

**Thirdly, when it comes to disaster warning, it should not be a choice of one medium or technology over another:** The very reason why there are different modes of communication is because none of them are hundred percent perfect. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. The appropriateness of every channel depends on the environment where they are to be applied. So, the least one expect is a competition of modes and technologies. Depending upon the situation, one should decide what combinations are the best.

## Media channels for early warning

The below table shows some of the media channels that can be used for disaster communication, with their relative strengths and weaknesses.

Channel	Advantages	What are the challenges?
Radio and Television	Widespread	Takes time to get the warnings, not much of use at night
Telephone (fixed and mobile)	Messages delivered quickly	Problems of authenticity. Doesn't reach non-users. Congestion
SMS	Quick, messages can be sent to groups	Congestion, little use for non users, local languages issues
Cellular Broadcasting	No congestion. Can address a group simultaneously	Little use for non-users, language problems
Satellite radio	High reachability	Cannot be used to educate masses, only good for specific points
Internet/E-mail	Interactive. Multiple sources can be checked for the accuracy of the information	Not widespread
Amateur radio and Community radio	Excellent for rural, poor and remote communities	Not widespread. People lose interest if used only in the case of disaster
Sirens	Can be even used at night, good in rural setups	Maintenance of the system, cannot disseminate a detailed message

#### **Fourthly, disaster warning is everyone's**

**business:** Life for most of us would have been easier had the government taken full charge of disaster warnings. Unfortunately, the things do not work that way. These are some of key stakeholders and they have specific roles that they can play:

- **The scientific community:** Develop the early warning systems based on their expertise, support the design of scientific and systematic monitoring and warning services and translate technical information to layman's language.
- **National governments:** Adopt policies and frameworks that facilitate early warning, operate Early Warning Systems, issue warnings for their country in a timely and effective manner.
- **Local governments:** Analyse and store critical knowledge of the hazards to which the communities are exposed. Provide this information to the national governments
- **International bodies:** Provide financial and technical support for national early warning activities and foster the exchange of data and knowledge between individual countries.
- **Regional institutions and organisations:** Provide specialized knowledge and advice in support of national efforts, to develop or sustain operational capabilities experienced by countries that share a common geographical environment.
- **Non-governmental organisations:** Play a critical role in raising awareness among individuals and organizations involved in early warning and in the implementation of early

warning systems, particularly at the community level.

- **The private sector:** Play an essential role in implementing the solutions, using their know-how or donations (in-kind or cash) of goods or services, especially for the communication, dissemination and response elements of early warning.
- **The media:** It has to play an important role in improving the disaster consciousness of the general population, and disseminating early warnings. This can be the critical link between the agency that offer the warning and the recipients.
- **Communities:** These are central to people-oriented early warning systems. Their input to system-design and their ability to respond ultimately determines the extent of risk associated with natural hazards.

**Finally, technology matters but people matter more:** There is a school of thought that suggests that technology is a panacea every problem humankind faces, be that poverty, a lack of proper healthcare, human rights violations or disasters. Let us not fall into this trap.

Technology is important. The sole reason behind the seemingly incredible advancements that have happened in the field of human development is the spurt in the growth of new technology. However without people to handle it properly, the technology per se can achieve little. What we can expect a sophisticated earthquake detecting device to do, if there are no human beings to take note what it indicates? So, while giving technology its due position, let us focus on the people-side of the problems.

#### Endnotes:

- 1 Located near Kandy in the Central region, about 100 km from the capital Colombo.
- 2 Later, when questioned at a press conference, as to why nobody monitored such events round the clock, a key government official rhetorically asked back whether journalists work after hours and holidays, thus justifying the absence of a trained officer.
- 3 Statistics from the Consumer Finances and the Socio-Economic Survey conducted by The Central Bank of Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka Telecommunications Regulatory Commission.
- 4 There are many examples how simple phone warnings saved lives in South Asian countries during the tsunami in 2004. Perhaps the most famous was the incident that happened in the small coastal village of Nallavadu in Pondicherry. A timely telephone call, warning about the impending tsunami, was said to have saved the village's entire 3,600 inhabitants, as well as those of three neighbouring villages. Nallavadu was involved in the very successful M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation's Information Village Research Project.
- 5 According to Wikipedia.org what comes nearest is a train incident happened at Bihar, India in 1981, by a train plunging into Bagmati river killing and estimated number of 800-900, though the official record was 268 deaths.
- 6 Unconfirmed newspaper reports said that in a place near Unawatuna in the south of Sri Lanka, the manager of a tourist hotel had even witnessed a massive Buddha statue, otherwise submerged, about half a kilometer from the shore.
- 7 In Sri Lanka, one mobile company started issuing SMS-based warning messages a few hours after the tragedy had happened. These messages continued for a few days, much to the amusement of the users.





# Children of Tsunami: Documenting Asia's Longest Year

*Children of Tsunami: Rebuilding the Future* was a citizens' response to largely superficial media coverage of the Indian Ocean Tsunami. It tracked on TV, video and web the personal recovery stories of eight affected families in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand for a year after the disaster. In this essay, the originators of the innovative project look back and reflect on their experience.

Nalaka Gunawardene and Manori Wijsekera

For many weeks, Jantakarn Thep-Chuay - nicknamed Beam -- did not understand why her father was not coming home. The eight-year-old girl, in Takuapa in Thailand's southern district of Phang Nga, had last seen him go to work on the morning of 26 December 2004.

"On that Sunday, the day there was a wave, my dad wore his tennis shoes," she recalls as she gets into his pair of sandals. "My dad didn't have to do much work -- he just walked around looking after workers."

Beam's father Sukaroak -- a construction supervisor at a new beach resort in Khao Lak -- was one of thousands of Thais and foreign tourists killed when the Asian Tsunami hit without warning. His body was never found.

For months, Beam would draw pictures of her family. These, and family photos of happier times, helped her to slowly come to terms with what happened.

The first year was long and hard for the family Sukaroak left behind: Beam, her two-year-old brother Boom, and mother Sumontha, 28. The determined young widow struggled to keep home fires burning - and to keep her troublesome in-laws at bay.

As if that were not enough, she also had to engage assorted bureaucracies: even obtaining an official death certificate for her late husband entailed much effort.

Just a few weeks after the disaster, the local authorities approached Sumontha suggesting that she gives away one or both her children for adoption. Apparently a foreigner was interested. She said a firm 'No'.

"Her dad wanted Beam to become an architect. He was hoping for a day when he could build something she draws," says Sumontha. "If I am still alive, I want to raise my own children. I am their mother. For better or worse, I want to raise them myself."

The Tsunami destroyed Beam's school, but she continued to attend a temporary school set up with local and foreign help. Before the year ended, she moved to a brand new 'Tsunami School' that the King of Thailand built to guarantee education for all children affected by the disaster.

Sumontha, Beam and Boom are three ordinary Asians who have shown extraordinary courage, resilience and resourcefulness as they coped with multiple challenges of rebuilding their lives after the Tsunami. Theirs is one of eight families that we followed throughout 2005, under our empathetic communication initiative called *Children of Tsunami: Rebuilding the Future*.

It was a multi-country, multi-media project that tracked how ordinary Asians rebuilt their lives,



*Returning to the scene of a massacre not to long ago...Heshani with sister and friend in southern Sri Lanka*

Video Image, TVEAP image archive

livelihoods and futures after one of the biggest disasters in recent years. We documented on TV, video and web the personal recovery stories of eight affected families in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand for a year after the disaster. Our many media products -- distributed on broadcast, narrowcast and online platforms -- inspired wide ranging public discussion on disaster relief, recovery and rehabilitation. In that process, we were also able to demonstrate that a more engaged, respectful kind of journalism was possible when covering post-disaster situations.

### **Idea born of outrage**

*Children of Tsunami* was conceived hurriedly in the first week of January 2005. It was born out of our collective outrage and frustration.

The aftermath of the Asian Tsunami was covered exhaustively by the national and international media. We at TVE Asia Pacific -- a regionally operating non-profit organisation that uses television and video to communicate development -- felt this coverage focused too much on death and destruction, or on survivors' misery and suffering. Yes, there was plenty of that in all the many locations affected, but there

were also many instances of extraordinary courage, resilience and generosity under duress. These were treated as 'soft' stories, filling air time in between main news bulletins that were mostly about deaths or dollars.

And this saturation coverage lasted only for a few days. Soon, journalists moved on to other stories, and the tsunami as a news story started going down in the news hierarchy.

Yet the story was far from over for those affected. We looked for a way to keep up with the story. We decided to document the gradual recovery process -- and stay on with many evolving stories long after TV news cameras had left the scene.

We realised that the Asian tsunami could be a 'test' for how information and communications technologies (ICTs) can support humanitarian assistance and human development. (The broader definition of ICTs includes television and radio.)

We were further inspired by the words of Sir Arthur C Clarke, inventor of the communications satellite, who said shortly after the disaster: "Media need to move beyond body counts and aid appeals to find lasting, meaningful ways of supporting Asia's recovery. The real stories of survival and heroism are only just beginning. Let network TV move on to the next big story. I am



confident that the cyber activists and committed local journalists will keep us informed.”

It was this challenge that we took up with *Children of Tsunami*.

### A participatory process

We chose to cover the four countries that were hardest hit: India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In each country, we found and commissioned a locally based yet internationally experienced film-maker team who would capture the recovery stories with empathy and authenticity. With their help, we then identified eight typical families -- two in each country -- who were affected in one way or another. After obtaining the families' informed consent, our filming started in February 2005.

We invited a child in each affected family to guide us through the year, as our film crews returned to them month after month (see Box). We felt that working with children -- even though logistically harder -- would enable us to tell this complex story in a way that appeals not only to minds but also hearts. In this sense, our story telling approach was very different from the facts-laden documentaries and other media products about the Tsunami and its aftermath.

Although we stayed focused on the eight children, we also covered their families and communities. The first year saw some major relief and rebuilding efforts carried out by governments, aid workers and NGOs. Trying to personalise the multitude of statistics, aid pledges and recovery plans, we asked how all this was impacting the eight children, their own families and neighbours.

In doing so, we adopted a principle that Mahatma Gandhi had suggested decades ago: find out how a development effort reaches and touches the last man, woman and child.

Our biggest challenge was not marshalling information, but how we related to the eight survivor families.

As journalists, we have been trained not to get 'too attached' to the people or subjects we cover professionally, lest it affects our judgement and dilutes our 'objectivity'. When we brought together the four production teams involved in *Children of Tsunami* for our first (and only) production planning meeting, we all resolved to follow this norm in our year-long coverage of the families.

We also agreed not to reward our participating families in cash or kind, as they were all participating voluntarily with informed consent. And our teams were briefed not to intervene in the aid or recovery efforts by anyone.

### Meet the Children of Tsunami

They have never met each other. Yet they were united first in grief, then in survival. Five girls and three boys, between 8 to 16 years of age, living in eight coastal locations in four countries. Their families were impacted by the Asian Tsunami in different ways. Some lost one or both parents -- or other family members. Some had their homes or schools destroyed. Others found their parents thrown out of a job. During the year, these families faced many hardships and challenges in rebuilding their futures.

These remarkable children were our personal heroes for 2005:

- **Selvam**, 13, Muzhukkuthurai, Tamil Nadu state, India
- **Mala**, 11, Kottaikkadu, Tamil Nadu state, India
- **Putri**, 8, Lampaya, Aceh province, Indonesia
- **Yenni**, 15, Meulaboh, Aceh province, Indonesia
- **Heshani**, 13, Suduwella, southern Sri Lanka
- **Theeban**, 14, Karaitivu, eastern Sri Lanka
- **Bao**, 16, Kuraburi, Phang Nga district, Thailand
- **Beam**, 8, Takuapa, Phang Nga district, Thailand

With their trust and cooperation, we captured their unfolding realities unscripted and unprompted. Individual profiles found at: [www.childrenoftsunami.info](http://www.childrenoftsunami.info)

Selvam



Mala



Theeban



Heshani



Yenni



Putri



Bao



Beam

All Photos: TVEAP image archive



TVEAP image archive



TVEAP image archive

*India - Selvam & Rajiv Gandhi lost their mother*



Both Photos: Jungle Run Productions, TVEAP image archive

*(Above) Waiting in Aceh for global generosity to arrive.  
(Top left) Putri has just received some new donations*



Thananuch Singuanak, TVEAP image archive



Jungle Run Productions, TVEAP image archive

*COT Indonesia - Putri making the best of life in camp*

## Playing good Samaritan

But we soon found out that the ground reality was different. As Asia's longest year (2005) wore on, our production teams found themselves becoming attached to the families they were filming. Sometimes -- acting purely as human beings, not journalists -- they simply had to play good Samaritans:

- On some occasions, our teams found a survivor family close to starvation and bought dry rations or arranged for a cooked meal before any filming commenced.
- At other times, when the children appeared restless or aimless, our film teams gifted them a football, kite or another inexpensive toy that later produced hours of joy and cheer.
- In March 2005, our India film crew found Mala's father seriously ill with a lung infection (triggered by his near-drowning during the Tsunami) and his family unable to seek medical attention. When the crew rushed the sick man to a nearby government-run hospital, doctors refused to admit or treat him -- due to his supposedly low caste! It was only when the crew threatened to film the entire episode, and have it broadcast that same day, that medical attention was finally provided. Discarding all production plans, our crew stayed with Mala's family at the hospital through the night and next day to ensure the doctors gave her father the correct medical attention. The family believes that the production team saved her father's life that day.

As commissioners and publishers of *Children of Tsunami* stories, we had no problems with any of these acts of human kindness. We far preferred journalism with empathy to the cold detachment that journalism schools and textbooks recommended for such situations. (Incidentally, our media-based documentation project did not seek to raise any donations for specific individuals or families. Occasional enquiries for help we received as a result of the media exposure for participating families were duly passed on to local charities best equipped to handle them.)

## Outputs and outreach

Instead, we stayed focused on telling the recovery stories and amplifying the voices of survivors. Our year-long filming produced a range of outputs in a variety of formats intended for different platforms and audiences.

We told the story as we went along. Every month, our four film teams produced a 5-minute video report

on each child and family. We uploaded these to a free, public access website we built and placed at [www.childrenoftsunami.info](http://www.childrenoftsunami.info). This website also carried additional text, still photos and links that enabled visitors to follow the personal stories as they evolved through 2005.

At the end of 2005, distilling the best material from one year's worth of film footage, we produced two long format documentaries, viz:

- *Children of Tsunami: The Journey Continues* (48 mins) captured the highlights and 'lowlights' of our families' first year following the disaster. This was broadcast by TV channels across Asia on the Tsunami's first anniversary in December 2005, and has since been screened at film festivals and international conferences around the world.
- *Children of Tsunami: No More Tears* (25 mins) was a shorter version we co-produced with the Singapore-based regional broadcaster Channel News Asia. This too had repeat broadcasts during the first anniversary and afterwards.

Significantly, all material produced under *Children of Tsunami* was distributed completely free of license fees or royalty to broadcasters, educational institutions and civil society groups. This was consistent with the project's non-commercial character, with our national film crews donating their services (billing only for logistics), and TV stations across Asia assigning prime time broadcast slots entirely for free. Many stations also versioned our English language documentaries into local languages at their cost. The website continues to archive all these outputs for free public access.

Besides public dissemination through different media platforms at regional and global level, *Children of Tsunami* films were also taken back to the participating families each month while the filming was going on. This was part of the engagement we wanted our film teams to maintain. The families saw how their real life story was being told to the world, and also how the other families were faring.

### Highlights and lowlights

*Children of Tsunami* did not set out on a fact-finding mission nor did it engage in hard core investigative journalism. We just wanted to document the recovery process of eight affected families over the first year, helping amplify their voices and stories.

In that process, we derived some very interesting insights and came across powerful personal testimonies. Taken together, our eight case studies

offered an indication of the uneven progress made on the road to tsunami recovery -- one paved with missed opportunities, broken promises, false starts, donor arrogance, government indifference and political bickering. More encouragingly, we also found, at individual levels, inspiring real life stories of survival, resilience, courage and triumph.

Here are a few highlights – and lowlights – in the first year of *Children of Tsunami*:

- **What happened to the money?** Individuals, groups and governments that donated generously expected that support to help the short-term survival needs as well as long-term recovery needs. While part of this money eventually found its way to those in need, a good deal was dissipated, wasted or pilfered along the way. Rigid government bureaucracies, charity inefficiencies, local corruption and favouritism – among other factors -- made a mockery of donor's good intentions. Within the same country, we found discriminatory practices that favoured one affected community over another (see box on page 35).
- **Governments of the people?** Across the four countries, there was wide-spread disillusionment with local and central governments: affected people felt their elected representatives had let them down. Community and religious leaders became more vocal as the year progressed. Some governments



TVETIP image archive

*A rare moment of joy for Mala's sister*



*Thailand - (Top) Having lost both parents, Bao turns bread-winner. (Inset) Dum (left) and Bao lost their parents to the sea, but as sea gypsies they have to come to terms with the sea*

Both Photos: Thananuch Sanguansak, TVEAP image archive

acknowledged by the year's end that much of the aid was still entangled in red tape. Problems were aggravated by draconian post-tsunami regulations – such as Sri Lanka's controversial 'exclusion zone' that banned all new buildings within 100 metres of the shore (which was withdrawn a year later).

- **Logo-delivery mechanisms?** While the public perception of NGOs, aid agencies and charities was better, people were critical of inter-agency rivalries and the humanitarian sector's own rigidity and inefficiency. Adding insult to injury was a 'Tsunami hit parade' witnessed across affected Asia for weeks after the disaster: heads and senior officials of UN agencies, international charities and bilateral donors toured the region – mainly to be photographed by the media. These publicity stunts, and the intense competition to stick agency logos on every single item donated, didn't endear these angels of mercy to affected communities.
- **Gone with the waves:** One of the biggest hurdles survivor families faced was the loss of tools, vessels and structures with which they earned a living. Many were self-employed, or ran small businesses. Practically none came within social safety nets or insurance schemes. Unaccustomed to living on donations or government rations, and yet unable to raise the capital to restart their livelihoods, most

surviving adults were frustrated and bitter. As the year ended, half of our eight families had not bounced back to pre-Tsunami economic activity levels; two were almost destitute.

- **Goodbye, school:** Tens of thousands of Asian children found their education disrupted -- including some of our featured children. When waves destroyed Theeban's school in eastern Sri Lanka, he dropped out and soon became an apprentice at a tractor repairing garage. Mala's school was intact, but her family couldn't afford to send her to school anymore. Putri, Yenni and Beam had their schools damaged or destroyed but their families managed to keep them in temporary schools. Heshani and Selvam too continued their schooling from temporary shelters. (At 16, Bao had already dropped out of school before the disaster.)
- **New roles for survivors:** When families were decimated, survivors found new roles and responsibilities thrust upon them. Elder siblings were suddenly bread-winners. Grandparents had to step in to take care of grandchildren. And religious leaders had to play counsellor to thousands of grieving or traumatised people.
- **Healing wounded minds:** Even though the mismanaged aid effort took care of some physical needs of affected families, there was little external support for their psychological needs. For these, some



turned to religion. Asia's many cultural and religious festivals – when they arrived in their annual cycles – were low key affairs this year, but provided much needed healing for surviving families. Still, few could answer one question asked by many survivors: *why us?*

- **Salvation for sale?** While religions helped many people in their hour of need, other things were happening in the name of religion. The Tsunami's aftermath attracted thousands of different groups to affected areas. Among them were groups who came offering Christianity as a "relief item". Families in distress were promised relief or recovery assistance – if they converted. Two of our eight families came across this phenomenon quite independently – in places as far apart as India and Thailand. One family (in India) accepted; the other (in Thailand) declined.

These and other findings were presented in the two documentaries, supported by visuals and interviews.

Although our sample was very small, it nevertheless unearthed or highlighted many disparities in post-Tsunami recovery. By the time our filming with the eight families ended in December 2005, only three of our eight families had recovered to some degree of normalcy. The others were still struggling to stay alive and stay together. The families of Theeban (Sri Lanka), Mala (India) and Yenni (Indonesia) were the worst off. Among them, Theeban was to wander aimlessly for nearly two and half years after the disaster before coming upon a fate worse than the Tsunami (see box on page 36).

### Development impact

*Children of Tsunami* was the most demanding media project that we personally and TVE Asia Pacific institutionally have embarked upon. This project underlined the pivotal role of communication in post-



Both Photos: Video Image, TVEAP image archive

(Top) Theeban survived the tsunami but not Sri Lanka's conflict (Inset) Theeban finds work in a motorcar repair garage

TVEAP image archive



Video Image, TVEAP image archive



Video Image, TVEAP image archive



(Left) Filming in Tamil Nadu, India. (Centre) Filming Children of Tsunami in southern Sri Lanka. (Right) Filming Children of Tsunami in eastern Sri Lanka

disaster situations, and showed how empathetic media coverage of disaster survivors can be accomplished while still respecting their communication rights and human dignity.<sup>1</sup>

Many players engaged in recovery support spoke or wrote, sometimes passionately, about 'Tsunami victims' (a phrase we carefully avoided). In practice, however, few of them bothered to actually talk with, or listen to, the very people they were trying to help. In many cases, the affected were simply told how they

should pick up their shattered lives and continue.

It is this major communication vacuum that we tried to fill in our small way. Our efforts resonated with a large number of community-based groups and local NGOs, who themselves had been sidelined in the 'Great Tsunami Aid Rush' which brought in bigger players who were new to the local realities.

Beyond its material production and dissemination activities, the *Children of Tsunami* process served unmet, important communication needs in the post-



Video Image, TVEAP image archive

Smiles returned only very slowly to Heshani. It took her months to return to the cruel sea



Selvam remains expressive after family tragedy. He says his mom is now in heaven

tsunami recovery of affected countries, communities and families. The authentic, sincere testimony of the survivor families was often an eye-opener for policy-makers, diplomats and relief workers, many of who were once or twice removed from the actual ground realities.

However, not everyone was convinced of the value of such communication. One senior aid official asked us how many houses could have been built using the (modest) funds we were spending on our filming.

This indicated a fundamental lack of understanding of the many roles of communication before, during and after disasters. It is not just a matter of reporting casualties, displacement and relief needs. It goes beyond the publicity for individual agencies involved in disaster management or relief provision. Communicating disasters includes all these -- plus giving ample opportunity for the directly affected to express their views, even when some of it can be critical of the *status quo*.

**Note:**

*Children of Tsunami* was sustained by pooling support in kind and in cash from a large number of sources. Principal funders were: Novib - Oxfam Netherlands; HelpAge International; Help the Aged, UK; Japan Fund for Global Environment; UNDP Asia Pacific Development Information Programme; and UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office. None of these or other sources exercised any editorial control. We did not accept funding from any governments to ensure our editorial independence, and were also careful not to compete with humanitarian charities for post-tsunami funding intended for the affected people's relief, recovery and rehabilitation.

TVEAP's own guiding principles for its conduct in this respect were articulated in January 2005 - see: <http://www.tveap.org/news/0501tsu01.htm>

### Step-Children of Tsunami?

When the Tsunami triggered massive aid donations, all affected countries pledged to distribute it in a fair, equitable and transparent manner. But as the aid trickled down layers of government and charities, various biases and distortions crept in.

The most striking example of disparity came from India. There, we followed the first year recovery of Mala and her family in Kottaikadu village, Tamil Nadu. Even months after the disaster, they had received absolutely no relief or recovery assistance.

Officially, it was because 'no one was killed' in her village. But the villagers knew the real reason: in the Indian social hierarchy, they occupy the lowest level, known as 'Dalits'. That influenced aid distribution by both government agencies and charities.

We compared Kottaikadu with its adjoining village of Alambara. Both suffered similar damage: people lost their boats and nets, but no one died. Yet the people of Alambara -- who belong to a supposedly higher caste of fishermen -- received food items, boats and fishing nets.

They are feeling sorry for their neighbouring village. "On the day of the tsunami we ran over 15 kilometers," said Kuppuraj, a resident of Alambara. "Kottaikadu villagers, who live just 600 meters away... ran with us -- but nobody has helped them to recover."



(Top) India - People in Selvam's village return to the sea  
(Bottom) Mala with her neighbours - all step-children of tsunami

TVEAP image archive



## The journey ends for Thilainathan Theeban

Thilainathan Theeban, one of two Sri Lankan children that we tracked for one year under the *Children of Tsunami* project, was murdered on the night of 3 March 2007.

According to sketchy news reports, Theeban was shot dead by four unidentified persons who forced their way into the temporary camp for tsunami survivors at Kesar Road, Karaitivu in eastern Sri Lanka. There is no reliable information on who was responsible for this senseless killing. Police investigations drew a blank.

Theeban was an eager, talented school boy of 14 – fond of mathematics, cricket and movies – when the tsunami shattered his dreams. The disaster killed his mother and baby brother, destroyed his house and wrecked the father's fishing business. A middle class family suddenly found themselves destitute, taking refuge in a temporary shelter in Karaitivu.



Video Image, TVC&P image archive

*Theeban was the least fortunate of the eight children of tsunami whose stories were tracked*

That was where we found him and surviving family in January 2005. Theeban dropped out of school and first worked as an apprentice at a tractor repair garage. Manual labour wasn't very easy for this youngster, but he persisted for several months. Later he joined efforts to clear coastal rubble – the tsunami's physical damage. From that he moved on to various odd jobs in masonry and paddy harvesting.

"I am proud to be working at my age... when all the other children are studying," he said in one interview. "I can't get a job at some places because I'm too young... I had to lie about my age being 19, to work at the clearing site."

Not much of the tsunami aid and assistance reached Theeban's family, which drove his father into depression and drinking. The grandmother watched with mounting dismay how the surviving members of her family struggled to bounce back. The family eventually split up: his father remarried and moved out; Theeban's two younger brothers were sent to a youth hostel in Ampara, an hour's bus ride away.

In late 2006, Theeban was abducted by an armed group, to be trained as a child soldier. He later escaped, but it is suspected that his abductors tracked him down to 'teach him a lesson'. At the time of his untimely death, Theeban and grandmother

had been living at the 'temporary' camp for over two years.

The odds were stacked too strongly against Theeban. First, he and his family were at 'ground zero' of the tsunami. Within months of that came a resurgence of political violence in eastern Sri Lanka, making it a 'double whammy' for thousands of civilians caught in the cross-fire.

For all of us involved in *Children of Tsunami*, Theeban's demise is a death in the family. It is also a grim reminder – if any were needed – that man's inhumanity to man is often more devastating than Nature's own fury.

### Endnotes:

- 1 See 'Communication Rights and Communication Wrongs' by Nalaka Gunawardene, published at: <http://scidev.net/Opinions/Index.cfm?fuseaction=readopinions&itemid=447&language=1>

# Beyond the Disaster-News Template



*Sri Lanka: We lost family and property but life must go on - boys playing cricket on tsunami hit beach*

Video Image, TVEAP image archive

The tsunami was more than just another big story for Joanne Teoh Kheng Yau, a journalist and producer with Channel News Asia, Singapore. Her grandmother in her native Malaysia was among the many affected. Even as she produced television coverage on the disaster, she found herself emotionally involved in the unfolding drama. That reached a new level when she took on executive producing the documentary, *Children of Tsunami – No More Tears* for her channel.

Joanne Teoh Kheng Yau

I will remember 3 March 2007 with sadness. That day, four gunmen murdered the teenager we had tracked in eastern Sri Lanka for the documentary, *Children of Tsunami – No More Tears*. Thillainayagam Theeban was gunned down in front of his grandmother in a tin shed in a temporary shelter in Karaitivu. He had been living there after the Tsunami wrecked his home and killed his mother and baby brother.

A child's murder outrages us. As a sense-maker, I ask the old question. Why do bad things happen to innocent people who have already suffered so much? As a journalist, I learn to move on. I get a unique vantage point on some of the world's most shattering events as a television news editor with a regional network. The images are indelible. But

last church, temple or mosque left standing. For an uplifting angle, find a miracle survivor, like an infant "snatched from the jaws of death." Throw in a villager or politician to blame government unprepared-ness.

In making documentaries, I remain astute to the human experience. Reality is to be found by focusing on internal human processes and movements. The narrative approach strikes an emotional chord elusive to other forms of journalism. It breathes life into the five 'W's of the inverted pyramid of traditional journalism, which arranges who, what, where, when and why from the most important to the least important.

*The Children of Tsunami* project required the film-makers to immerse in local detail to create

“*Children of Tsunami* enabled quiet, powerful story-telling that is not explosive enough for the mainstream media. It turned the lens on small people to call attention to big issues that demand humane solutions. It returned story-telling to the first force of knowing the world – the image.”

when a catastrophe hits, no task is more important than to impart the news fast, accurately and fairly.

In the crush of facts, it is easy to overlook stories on the margins of the breathless headlines. Stories on disaster boil down essentially to details about individuals and communities. The real stories happen to real people on the side stream. *Children of Tsunami* enabled quiet, powerful story-telling that is not explosive enough for the mainstream media. It turned the lens on small people to call attention to big issues that demand humane solutions. It returned story-telling to the first force of knowing the world – the image.

Despite efforts to change the depiction of natural disasters, many media reports still portray a patronising view. Death and destruction conjure to injure helpless victims before heroic saviours arrive at catastrophe territory. Cheap shots and clichés assault you in deadline-driven copy. Body counts and quickness of death distinguish the standard disaster-news-template. For human interest, look for the “higher hand” thing, like the

a meaningful larger picture. Out of the accounts drawn from four countries with diverse cultures, faiths and geography emerged themes of grace in grief, courage in catastrophe and faith in the future. The children's testimonies showed remarkable recall for detail. The eye of the camera, unflinching yet intimate, invited them to gather strength from being heard and understood (see box).

Ours perhaps is the most hopeful and the most fearful of eras. Blogs, podcasts, videophones and digital cameras have expanded the space and means available for covering the public interest. Weeks after the Asian Tsunami disaster, the Internet supplanted television as a video platform in disseminating information. Amateur videos shot at ground zero helped the world to experience a disaster in ways not possible just a decade ago. If the Tsunami taught us a lesson in humility, it also tested our humanity. This equal-opportunity catastrophe did not discriminate. It swept away everyone and everything in its path. It orphaned a generation in Asia.

Theeban escaped the killer waves but not his human killers. If his life and the tens of thousands of faceless people who died in the tsunami should count for something, we owe it to our children and ourselves

to tell their stories. *Children of Tsunami – No More Tears* was a baby step on a rough road to ensure that this modern tragedy of almost biblical proportions does not pass without inquiry and memorialisation.

## The art of interview

*Children of Tsunami* demonstrated the power of quiet, empathetic interviews with disaster affected persons. Fleeting news and current affairs journalism rarely bring out the inner feelings of those who are interviewed for a quick soundbyte or two. In contrast, most interviews in *Children of Tsunami* were conducted in an unhurried setting, where the director and crew slowly slipped into the current reality of the families and engaged in a friendly conversation. That is the only way they could elicit candid, moving insights such as these.

### **Beam, aged 8, could not understand why her father will never come home:**

*"I miss kissing my daddy's cheek. Now I kiss my brother instead. In grade 1, Suchart's parents are dead. In grade 2 a boy named Knot is dead. Who is dead in Grade 3? Masha's father is dead. In Grade 4 it is Dear's dad and another kid's dad. There are eight tsunami orphans in my school."*



Thananuch Sanguansak, TVEAP image archive

### **Theeban, aged 14, remembered how the sea stole up to take everything he cherished:**

*"My little brother was with her at the time. We buried my mother and brother in the village. This was the hall where the TV was. This was my mother's nightdress. And this was a part of the ceiling. There were my school trousers and shirts and the baby's cot."*



Video Image, TVEAP image archive

### **Putri, aged 8, recalled the cries of her family members the morning the sea turned against them:**

*"The black water exploded and turned white. I was so scared. People below were crying "help, help." My sister cried. I didn't. My brother didn't cry either, but my mother did. My father didn't cry. But when he remembered my oldest sister might be drowned there, he cried."*



Jungle Run Productions, TVEAP image archive





# Surviving the Tsunami: A Journalist's Story

Frederick Noronha

Indonesian television journalist Dendy Montgomery saw 10-metre tall, black colour waves of the Asian Tsunami kill thousands of people and cause massive property damage in his homeland of Aceh.

Two and a half years after the disaster, he feels waves of forgetfulness are compounding the tragedy.

The western coastal areas of Aceh, on the northern tip of Sumatra island, were among the hardest hit by the tsunami on 26 December 2004. According to estimates, around 160,000 people were killed in Aceh and 500,000 were left homeless.

On that fateful day, Montgomery and his photographer wife Nur Raihan Lubis saw the waters engulf areas near the majestic Grand Mosque landmark, saved others by carrying them away in their old jeep, and narrowly missed death.

"We lost at least 50 relatives (from our joint family)," Montgomery said in an interview conducted in Bangkok.

"(After that) I lost my sense of reporting for one month," Montgomery explains. "Reuters (with whom he has been a TV stringer) wanted to give me a Betacam (camera). But I'm just thinking, can I just take a break for awhile. Everybody and everything appeared the same to me. There were broken pieces... and dead bodies. And I was a tsunami victim myself," he said.

## Below the news radar

For six months after the disaster, the epicentre of the massive Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 remained in the news.

"But after that, I don't know. We didn't have (dramatic pictures) like broken homes. So (editors) probably felt it was not a 'sexy' story anymore," says a bewildered Montgomery, named after the famous American general, who had impressed his grandfather, himself a military man.

When the tsunami's first anniversary came up, reporting took a spurt. Then it slowed down again. It was a similar story with the second anniversary.

"You should follow your heart. Journalists from elsewhere come to (this northern tip of the Sumatra island) to do with their news director wants, not to report what's happening in the field," he says.

Montgomery says he slowly got back to the camera, when he got a chance to do long-term work on the lives of tsunami survivors. That was when he became involved in the Indonesian component of Children of Tsunami – a regional media project that tracked the recovery stories of tsunami affected families in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Montgomery served as cameraman and his wife contributed as researcher for the Indonesia stories, which tracked the recovery struggles of two Tsunami affected girls -- Putri, 8, and Yenni, 15.

"It was like being born again. After months, I began thinking about getting a good picture," he recalls.

## No longer 'sexy'

He says the conflict in Aceh, earlier known for its separatist rebel movement fighting for greater





*Dendy tracked the life of tsunami survivor Putri (right) for one year*

Jungle Run Productions, TVEAP image archive

autonomy from Indonesia, is also not viewed as “sexy anymore” in newsrooms.

“Sometimes journalists ask the military to shoot from their tank, and then report (on TV) as if they are in the heat of a battle,” says he.

“Some ask me, ‘Hey Dendi, where can we find good gun-fighting?’ So I tell them, why do you want to find something like this? Don’t break my heart. I’m Achenese. Why would like gunfighting? Just for your audience? Or your TV station?” he adds.

Aceh has substantial natural resources, including oil and gas -- some estimates put Aceh gas reserves as being the largest in the world. “We’ve got wealth, but no development,” Montgomery puts it.

The Kingdom of Aceh was established initially as a small Islamic kingdom in the 12th century AD. During its golden era, its territory and political influence expanded as far as Satun in southern Thailand, Johor in Malay Peninsula, and Siak in what is today Riau province.

Its capital, Banda Aceh, gets the first part of its name from the Persian, meaning ‘port’ or ‘haven’.

“It’s not even a true war (in Aceh). But we can find a victim everyday,” says Montgomery. “It’s easy to kill people. Once they are dead, you can claim they are from the Free Aceh Movement or from the military, depends which side you’re on.”

This separatist battle began in 1998, but flared up in 2001.

But on a more personal note, Montgomery’s personal loss is that of his gear, gone with the tsunami waves. “If I need to do a production, I need to rent a camera, tripod, mike-boom... and pay approximately \$150 per day for that,” he says.

*Dendy Montgomery*



*Dendy Montgomery in a reflective mood*

Both Photos: Thananuch Sanguansak, TVEAP image archive

# Communicating under duress

Whenever a hazard turns into a disaster of any kind, journalists and relief workers are among the first to arrive on the scene. But they have very different agendas. Journalists have to access and verify real time information, conform to communication ethics and get their story ahead of the competition. In the information age, disaster managers have to balance their own humanitarian priorities with the need to manage information flows and maintain good relations with the media. Five authors offer their perspective on how this might be attempted.







# Capturing Nature's Fury

As disaster survivors sift through what is left of their homes, family photo albums are among the most cherished possessions they seek to recover. Every major disaster produces its own iconic images which determine how the collective memory of the world would remember the incident. Why are snapshots of frozen moments so powerfully evocative to individuals, communities and the world?

Shahidul Alam

It was many years ago that I met that woman in Shondeep. It was after the cyclone in Bangladesh in 1991. Our helicopter had landed in the damaged airstrip of Patenga airport in Chittagong. There had been no fire, so why were the leaves all charred? What had happened on that fateful night of 29 April?

My questions to the 'experts' resulted in the standard response. The NGO workers told me of the bags of wheat they'd given out. The engineers talked of the torque of the wind. The government officers spoke of the funds they had allocated.

Then the woman spoke. In a quiet but controlled voice she recounted, 'The land became the sea and the sea became a wave'.

It took those words, for me the photographer, to see what had happened that night.

## Many experts and players

The Tsunami had come and gone. While I had felt the pain of the Tsunami victims and their survivors, the predominant media coverage of western tourists and western 'experts' had angered me. As an aid worker and later a photographer after the Tsunami in Sri Lanka, I could relate to the resilience of the victims, but the aid efforts had changed.

There were many more 'experts' in the fray and I could see how the media and other major players determined how things panned out. I had arrived after the event. In Trincomalee, the placid water of the ancient tanks gave no sense of the horror on Boxing Day. I then went to Telwatta, on the southern coast, where the train *Samudra Devi* ('Goddess of the Sea') had been devoured by the wave. Where the land had become the sea.

Shanika, the little girl I'd tried to photograph in the remains of her home, was terrified of the sea. She had lost her twin sister, her two other sisters and her mother to the waters. Priantha, her father, had taken his family to the train for safety, and had watched in horror as the sea moved in.

Shanika knew the sea was not to be trusted. She had been with her aunt, and had only heard what had happened. Had she seen the waves? Had she felt the fury? I never found out, but we made friends. The digital camera made it easy to share pictures and we photographed each other and approached the sea together. And she was telling me to be careful. We spoke different languages, but I wanted to know what she felt about the sea. That night after dusk, I went back to the edge of the water, and in that muted light, I tried to see the things Shanika had feared. Where the sea had become a giant wave.



3 December 2005: Ballakot city used to be a popular tourist destination, but has been converted to rubble. "This used to be a city but has now become a graveyard" said Amjad, the driver for CONCERN. Pakistan Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World

## Shattered lives

Yet, exactly a year earlier on 26 December 2003, and almost to the hour, nature had also reminded us of her presence. The historic city of Bam, in Iran, had been all but reduced to rubble. The clay bricks, the domed rooftops, and the fact that people were at home sleeping, all led to the huge loss of life. With no light and no electricity, the few that were living could do little to retrieve the dying.

Iran is no stranger to earthquakes. Another curious cycle of roughly ten years separates the devastating quakes that have rocked this land. I wasn't there, but my photographer friends had decided that we would not be allowed to forget this calamity. Over a period of months, they documented the misery, the valour, the strength and the fighting spirit of those who survived and remained but refused to give in. The witnesses of our time have ensured that we on the sidelines also bear witness. We later exhibited our work together. Trying to pass on nature's message.

8 October 2005. Breaking out from the cyclic order of the previous disasters, the quake in Kashmir took on a different form. News filtered through slowly. As the death figures rose, I remembered how as

children we had gone out singing songs, and collecting blankets, whenever a disaster struck. I wanted to go out to Pakistan, but it was different this time. One needed visas, letters of invitation and official permission. The right time to be there, and capture the unfolding story, came and went. I decided to wait.

But as the media predictably moved on, and the people outside affected areas gradually forgot the disaster, the pain gnawed inside of me. As the winter drew near, I worried about what might be happening. My friends in CONCERN, an NGO I had worked for before, were already out there and I decided to join them. Arriving in Islamabad in the early hours of one morning in December 2006, I soon headed off to Muzaffarabad.

This time the waves were different. Entire mountainsides had flowed like liquid, crushing all in their path. Trucks were still clearing winding pathways, blocked by massive landslides.

I was nervous as I went through the long tunnel that was the gateway to Azad Kashmir. Tents dotted either side of the roads, but even amidst the rubble and despair, life was going on. Children were playing with whatever they could find. A teacher was teaching

her class with a blackboard under the open sky. Moving their tables on to the road, a restaurant was serving customers.

A solitary telephone, on a rickety table, open to the wind and other elements, was the most popular amenity. People desperately sought news of their loved ones.

It was Amjad, the driver, who brought it home as we approached Ballakot. He simply said, "This was a city. Now it's a graveyard."

The winter was already setting in when we met a family in a remote mountain near Neelam. Fatema's husband had been crushed by their falling roof. Her mother in law had been hurled below, survived the fall, but died of a heart attack when she heard of her son's death. They had not come across the army, government officials or NGOs, but as in Muzaffarabad, they were just getting on with their lives. Their top priority was to rebuild their homes before the snow closed in.

The response by ordinary people was overwhelming. Winter came and went. Many survived the bitter chill, but months later, and nearly a year on, much of the talked-about reconstruction had not happened. The pledges seemed to have been forgotten.

## Return to Kashmir

I decided to return. I had worked hurriedly the first time, and felt there were many personal stories that needed to be recorded. Nearly a year after the Kashmir quake, I went back.

On the first occasion, I slept in a tent in the garden of the CONCERN office. This time I stayed indoor. The office couch became my bed. But nearly a year on, tents were still where most people lived. The after tremors still shook the homes, and even those who had moved back to their houses lived in fear. They would move out to tents at night. They didn't trust themselves enough to wake up in time and move out in case there was another quake during the night.

As we went through the ravaged land, we found people who had suffered many times over. Shabbir and Razia had taken shelter in a tent after their house was destroyed. Their temporary home was washed away by a flash flood, one of the many after effects of the earthquake. They lost everything that they salvaged after the quake, and some Rs. 17,000 (US\$ 282 approx.) that remained of the compensation from government. And they now had a new-born baby to look after.



Shahidul Alam/Orbit/World

*Sri Lankan survivors of the tsunami look at a photo album salvaged from the rubble.*





Shahidul Alam/Drift/Majority World

*We spoke different languages, but I wanted to know what she felt about the sea. That night after dusk, I went back to the edge of the water, and in that muted light, I tried to see the things Shanika had feared. Where the sea had become a giant wave.*

We came across tender love stories, as that of Muhammed Saleem Khan, who despite his own injuries, pushed his unconscious wife Rubina on a home-made stretcher for two days to the Abbas Hospital in Muzaffarabad. Muhammed looked after the children and doted on Rubina, but she was sad. The children had become close to the father and she herself, paralysed from the waist down and unable to look after them, felt the children were moving away from her.

Safdar Hussain was buried under stones for four days and thought he would die. Having lost his wife and children to the earthquake, he wept for his mother. Unable to hold the pain, his mind had taken shelter elsewhere.

But Fazila Bibi had a different story to tell. “Before the earthquake we were happy, healthy people,” she said, “the sort of people who gave alms to beggars. Now we have nothing, and we must do with nothing, but we are stronger people.”

Fazila and her family, confined to a tent in Jalalabad Park in Muzaffarabad, waited for things to get better. Waited with quiet strength.

Cluster bombs, warheads, bombs that dig deep before exploding, compete with burning oil wells, toxic spills and nuclear dumping, to shake our fragile earth. Rampant consumer cultures arrogantly shun treaties

to curb our destructive habits. In a globalised world where material and human world resources are fodder for exploitation by giant nations and multinational companies, nature in its fury reminds us that our lives are entwined.

In the ruins of Telawata, where the fateful train disaster had taken place, I came across a family that had gathered in the wreckage of their home. I wanted to ask them their stories, find out what they had seen, but stopped when I saw them pick up the family album. They sat amidst the rubble and laughed as they turned page after page.

### Frozen memories

I had seen it before. As people rummaged through the ruins of their homes, the first thing they searched for was photographs. Years earlier at a disaster closer to home, I had photographed a group of children amidst the floods of 1988. The children insisted on being photographed. As I pressed the shutter, I realised that the boy in the middle was blind. He would never see the photograph he was proudly posing for. Why was it so important for the blind boy to be photographed?

Though my entry into photography had been through a happy accident, my choice of becoming a photographer had been a very conscious one. Having felt the power of the image I recognised its ability to move people. The immediacy of an iconic image, its ability to engage with the viewer, its intimacy, the universality of its language, means it is at once a language of the masses, but also the key that can open doors.

For both the gatekeepers and the public, the image has a visceral quality that is both raw and delicate. It can move people to laughter and to tears and can touch people at many levels. The iconic image lingers, long after the moment has gone. We are the witnesses of our times and the historians of our ages. We are the collective memories of our communities.

For that blind boy in Bangladesh and for the many who face human suffering but may otherwise be forgotten, the photograph prevents them from being reduced to numbers. It brings back humanity in our lives.

# Stop All the Clocks! Beyond Text, Looking at the Pics



*3 December 2005: A man prays in the rooftop of a collapsed building in Ballakot, formerly a popular tourist resort, Pakistan.*

Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majrity World

Much of news imagery seems to be only about here and now. Disaster photography needs to break away from the constraints of time and space. There is work to be done — both before the clock stops, and after it restarts.

Max Martin

A disaster, or a conflict, can spell an abrupt halt to everything we know and live with. The sea turns into a demon, the earth devours villages, neighbours turn into killers. A photographer freezes these dramatic moments and showcases them to the world. These images generate shock, information, compassion, awareness, policy changes, mass action (as in the US during the Vietnam war) and even entertainment, in a perverted sense. It takes a while to get the clock ticking again. If the cameras stay back, as it only rarely happens, then they can record the budding of life once again, moment by precious moment.

In this chapter we explore the challenges of disaster-linked still photography from a media professional's perspective. It argues that disaster photography needs to break away from the constraints of time and space. There is work to be done – both before the clock stops, and after it restarts.

By the very nature of disaster, it is the sheer drama and scale of the event that attract media photographers. They look for shots that sum up 'the drama, spirit and courage in the face of a disasters', as Thomas E Franklin said about his famous still of the flag raising at Ground Zero on 9/11.<sup>1</sup> That was a 'decisive moment' as the legendary French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson would have called.

It is all about being at the right place at the right time, when history happens. This is the essence of good field reporting using any medium – text, sound or visuals. A discerning photographer can combine this classic time and space formula with his or her heart, head and hand to produce lasting memories.

## Unforgettable images

Closer home, the Indian Ocean tsunami produced a set of unforgettable images.

Perhaps the most telling one about the sorrow of this tragedy was a picture taken by the Reuters photographer Arko Datta, showing a woman lying on sandy ground, mourning a dead relative. It became the World Press Photo of the year 2005. One of the jury members called it "graphic, historical and starkly emotional."<sup>2</sup> In fact, this photograph's power lies in its understatement, the respect shown to the subject in keeping the bloated body beyond the frame, showing only the hand (see box for interview).

At the same time we also saw a flood of images, rather less respectful – mountains of bodies, bulldozers burying them en masse, bawling relatives...

The boundary between reporting and disaster pornography often became very thin and contested.

How much human suffering can actually be shown visually in the media depends on where the disaster or humanitarian tragedy occurs.

An unwritten rule of thumb seems to be that the poorer a region is, the more graphic the international media's disaster coverage would be. Few dead bodies were shown in the visual media coverage after the 9/11 attacks in the United States. But the emaciated, naked bodies are staple for reporting on African famines while piles of dead bodies are routinely and explicitly shown in the aftermath of earthquakes or floods in other parts of the developing world.

The presence of cameras at the wrong spot aimed at a wrong angle is bad enough, but worse is their absence when people need it the most: after the last aid van has departed. The cameras vanished from the scene once the drama was over for the tsunami. The media interest waned and the assignment charts got filled with election campaigns, corporate results, celebrity lifestyles, wildlife and assorted beauty pageants.

And we had our fair share of disasters in the Indian subcontinent. When the tsunami-affected people were rebuilding their lives, living in hot, humid temporary shelters in all the affected countries, press cameras were often not there to tell the story to the world. If the international media played its role as the witness, thousands would not have suffered in shelters dubbed as shoeboxes, saunas and ovens across southern Asia. Fires and floods would not have displaced many of these people again and again. In the suburbs of the South Indian city of Chennai, racketeers thriving on an organ trade would not have approached them with disgusting offers.

## Where were the cameras?

Still, people showed their resilience and survived with dignity. They resold boats that did not fit their fishing patterns -- sometimes back to the aid agencies themselves. They also exchanged extra blankets for saris. They insisted that selective, piecemeal, discriminatory charity would not work. Cameras were just not there to capture small acts of courage in the face of a disaster that seemed to have no end.

Across the region, the newfound peace in conflict-stricken northern Sumatra tip of Aceh in Indonesia, and that reached amidst disasters recovery and the broken ceasefire in Sri Lanka, were news events for the world. But the visual representation of these events in the international mainstream media was predominated by guns – up or down in accordance with the story – and politicians and commanders shaking hands and



*An old man carrying his goats on a bamboo raft, Pukuria, Manikgang, Bangladesh. 2007*

Azizur Rahim Pew/DrikNEWS/Majority World

smiling before the flashbulbs. It was not very easy to find pictures of people rebuilding their lives after the tsunami in Aceh two years since the disaster. And the Trincomalee (Sri Lanka) fisherman who had to flee his rebuilt house amid crossfire between the militants and the military did not find a camera to tell his tale.

The renewed conflict in Sri Lanka sent over 16,000 new refugees to India. Their clandestine journey across the choppy Palk Straits in overcrowded small fishing boats, often at night, is perilous and dramatic by any count. At least 18 people died in capsizes and accidents in 2006, many were stranded in the shoals that make the Adam's Bridge. But when did you ever see a striking 'boat people' picture? Committed photojournalism involves getting one's feet wet. It requires resource support, sound editorial decisions and, above all, bold photographers. Even all these may not work if there is no media interest in the plight of a set of marginal people. Media memory is indeed short.

### Ephemeral media

The very life of the media lies in its ephemeral nature. It is all about here-and-now happenings. This concern with ephemera is in fact the bane of the media. We, reporters, tend to switch off our senses to what goes on then and there. Still, persistence of memory, some long-distance telephone calls and a

little bit of imagination might help a text reporter to reconstruct a remote event and connect it to the present. But for a photographer, life revolves around here-and-now happenings. For a follow-up, she or he will have to take a flight and land on the spot and search diligently for the actors of the drama long after the curtains are down. Or the editor may have to commission somebody closer there.

Such time and resources are seldom spent by media houses on development stories. At the same time, the local media that can actually cover processes on ground fail to create enough momentum so that national, regional and international media get to notice what is going on at the ground level. Getting wide coverage of local issues like disaster rebuilding is like the making of an avalanche. It has to roll on to gain size and momentum.

Humanitarian workers argue that it is important to have visual coverage at all phases of disasters. While disaster images generate compassion and policy interest, the follow-up coverage is essential to keep-up the interest and to ensure transparency and accountability.

"Photographs offer a good a reality check," says Dr Unnikrishnan PV, an emergencies and conflicts advisor for ActionAid International. "They can alert the humanitarian and the government system and help initiate action." This globetrotter medic advises photographers to go beyond the roadsides and



(c) 2005 Todd Shapera, Courtesy of Photoshare

*A baby receives medical care at a health clinic set for tsunami survivors at a Catholic school in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, a Tamil region.*

highways, to the remote corners where the real story lies, and witness the resilience of people.

Walking an extra mile and getting closer to people always produce good pictures. As the famous conflict photographer James Nachtwey says about his style, a photographer has to operate in the same intimate space that the subjects inhabit.<sup>3</sup> While dealing with people caught up in disasters and conflict, this closeness matters. It blunts the predatory edge of the camera. The photographer becomes a visitor, rather than a nosy intruder. Once the photographer knows the first name of the person she or he is shooting, it becomes a bit difficult to be offensive with the camera.

### Detached but not cut off

The Dutch photographer Peter van der Houwen, who published a book and held an exhibition titled 'Resilience', on people recovering from the tsunami across Asia, shares Nachtwey's view. "The challenge is getting closer to people," he would often say. He befriended his subjects with Polaroid prints and small talk -- and sometimes serious debates -- before setting up his large-format analogue cameras.

This relaxed style is an anti-thesis to the shoot-and-scoot dictum of the digital era -- a departure from the remote, or rather removed, telephoto-mode operation. A photographer can be detached, but not wholly cut-off, from the people suffering when he or she is covering a disaster, or its aftermath.

If the concern for one's fellow-being is an important factor of photography, then it can get translated into some pre-emptive coverage of would-be

disasters. Those living perilously close to flood-prone rivers, lightning-speed highways and storm-exposed coasts can become subjects of futuristic news. For many of these subjects, the clock is still ticking and the world does not know or care about the risks they are exposed to.

Photography, like text-based reporting, can have a prophetic role built, in the sense that it can predict and depict trends.

The media agenda cannot be set from the field alone. There are issues of power dynamics, economic constraints, editorial taste and political imperatives that influence media choices. Still, a strong storyline and a promise of stunning visuals coming from a photographer's end would be irresistible for any newsroom.

One way to promote better visual representation of disasters and conflict, and also of the people caught up in them, would be to empower photographers. They should be able to make their own storylines, charting out their own assignments. Some of the training sessions of the World Press Photo are aimed at developing better storylines. Such a trend has yet to catch up in the Asian media.

Besides, the mainstream media in South Asia has yet to experiment with the photo possibilities offered by the digital technology and new age design and the use of multimedia. It requires quite a number of operational changes in the tradition-bound newsrooms and dark-rooms. Most of the editors in the region are text-driven, and all over the world too they have a background in text reporting or editing. So changes also need to reach the top.

The way photographs are used can be innovative and quite effective. There is a trend of publishing a series of photographs in a series structured as if in a movie and telling the tale -- sometimes followed up by sound, video and multimedia clips in a web version. Such innovations can have a tremendous influence on humanitarian news coverage that often gets very little attention.

Meanwhile, it may be worthwhile for Asian photographers to find opportunities to see the work of one another and to learn about their neighbouring countries.

### Photographers without borders

Disasters that have recently hit the continent -- like the tsunami, the Kashmir earthquake and some floods in the sub-Himalayan region -- did not respect national boundaries. There is no likelihood that future events, especially the climate-change related disasters, would be restricted to specific countries. There have been



attempts, with varying degrees of success, in dealing with disasters in a cross-border manner. Photography too should think and move beyond political borders.

In this age of the Internet and instant transmission of images, there is a good case for photographers, especially those covering disasters and other emergencies, to work and learn beyond borders and pool their work.

While this chapter was being written, in July 2007, scientists from across the world were meeting in Bangalore, southern India, probing the secrets of the monsoon -- learning how the currents of equatorial Pacific and the winds of northern Atlantic influence this pan-Asian phenomenon. Such a photogenic and life-giving, yet hazard-prone, happening like the monsoon is a good starting point for Asian photographers to break the barriers of time and space.



Mangala Kumarathne

Carrying tsunami relief in Pothuwil, eastern Sri Lanka.

### 'I am merely a messenger'

Arko Datta won the 2004 World Press Photo Award for the image of an Indian woman mourning her relative dead in the tsunami. His image of a man pleading to a mob during the 2002 riot in Gujarat, India, was another defining moment he captured. Datta talked about his photography in an online interview with Max Martin. Excerpts:

#### On frames

*I actually do not plan a frame. I am merely a messenger and do not try to bring in subjectivity or my priorities (in my photographs). I have to be very objective when I am covering any event. I leave the viewers to interpret the pictures according to their perspective. However, of course there are certain parameters I like to follow.*

*I do not like showing corpses or any (image of) morbidity unnecessarily. In natural disasters it is mostly unnecessary; however, in a war, one may need to show the victims as that may be the strongest way of making people aware of the fallout of wars.*

*In a natural disaster, the story is generally about the survivors -- their struggle to cope with the loss of their near and dear ones, their struggle to get back to normalcy. It's the story of their grit and determination to survive and live.*

#### On emotions

*The first viewer of my pictures is myself. When I am touched by a situation, I plan to capture it in my camera and show it to others too. So, definitely, as any other human being, I react to every situation too. However, while on work one has to control and restrain one's emotions, as no productive work can emerge during an emotional state of mind.*

*While covering an event, and covering several events over the years, these emotions keep getting suppressed and bottled up. One needs to know how to tackle this in the long run, or it can deeply effect one's mind. And everyone has his or her own way of tackling it. I do so by talking to my family and very close friends about my experiences.*

#### On interfacing with humanitarian workers

*I feel, on the field, humanitarian workers have their own work to do and the press has its own. The humanitarian workers should not get concerned about the press, as definitely the victims will be their top priority. The press can surely manage on its own. In fact, the press should not come in the way of relief and rescue work.*



(REUTERS, Arko Datta)

An Indian woman mourns the death of a relative killed in the Asian tsunami. The picture was taken in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu, on December 28, 2004






Since our land masters could not cross the floods (next day morning), Panama SFT guys and villagers sent couple of bullock carts. Then we loaded the supplies to the carts to complete the journey to Panama, that was isolated from rest of the world after tsunami. We reached there even before the Indian air force choppers (they refused to land as the pilots fear their choppers would sink without a proper landing pad). While we were there we saw SFT was building one. (Mangala Karumaratne/Calcey Technologies)

(Inset) Flood effected people are moving one to another place using raft. Chillmary, Rangpur, Bangladesh. August 2007. (Munem Wasif/DrillNEWS/Majority World)



# Seeing Disasters Differently: How to Unearth Real Disaster Stories

Nothing is what it seems when it comes to disasters, one of the most challenging subjects for journalists to cover. In today's media-rich world, journalists' are the 'eyes and ears' for the Global Village to witness disasters as they unfold. This is one more reason to get media's disaster coverage just right.

A photograph showing a flooded area. In the foreground, a white cow is wading through the water. Behind it, a person is riding a small boat or cart. In the background, another person is visible, and the water extends to the horizon under a cloudy sky. The overall scene depicts a rural area affected by flooding.

Amjad Bhatti

While doing a report on media perceptions of disasters in 1999, I interviewed senior editors, journalists and columnists and asked how they look at disasters. I wanted to know what role they thought the media could play in reducing disaster-related risk via the domain of reporting. One senior editor of an English-language daily newspaper responded: "What does the media have to do with disasters, except to report on it after it has occurred? For us [the media] disaster is always a front-page story, anyway."

These reflections now hit my memory and remind me a folkloric narrative on floods, and how these were understood in the past in my country, Pakistan, and probably elsewhere too. This stands in sharp contrast to the understanding of the editor we encountered.

*"Kang aye aiy way loko kang aiy aiy"* (this could be literally translated as "the flood has come o folks, the flood has come") is a folkloric narrative in the Punjabi language, which I have been hearing from my childhood. It comes from my village, situated in close proximity to the crucial river Chenab.

In the past, floods were not just bad news. As the above comment suggests, this narrative goes beyond a

mere mourning of flood-induced loss in a risk-prone local geography.

At certain points, it appears to be a cultural satire and social commentary on locally embedded causes, the differential impacts and discrimination witnessed in a disaster like a flood. It's a traditional but critical articulation of seeing disasters differently -- by not treating it narrowly as an ecological event or a stereotypical 'fury of God'. Rather, it's a way of unfolding the causal relationship and social interaction of floods as an ongoing 'process'.

Shamra Mussalli, one of the performers of this narrative, starts by breathlessly following the flood waters. He takes his listeners, through this narrative, to a ride along areas and communities of once-wild Chenab river in Punjab. Punjab straddles the region falling across Pakistan and India and is a place with a long history and rich cultural heritage.

It has been suggested that the Chenab has a similar space in the consciousness of the people of the Punjab as, say, the Rhine holds for the Germans, or the Danube for the Austrians and the Hungarians. It is the iconic river around which quite some amount of Punjabi consciousness revolves.



Tamir Ahmed/OrfikaNEWS/Majority World

Migration never happens during flood, it happens when river erosion starts. But in Sirajganj, a northern district of the country river erosion and flood come together. Most of the northern district is under threat of flood. People have to move their homes with their belongings and take shelter on the highland. Continuous increase in water level causes inundation of river beds and marooning thousands of people. Bangladesh. July 2007.



Tamir Ahmed/OrfikaNEWS/Majority World

Tropical cyclone Akash hit the coastal areas of the country in the Bay of Bengal on May 15 killed 10 people, missing more than 50 and caused huge damage of house and communication system. It raised the water level atleast 5 feet more than its normal height.

People leaving beside the dam of the Mohishshoiri River, besides Sundarban Forest (west zone of Bangladesh) of Khulna division, some around 240 km from the capital Dhaka, didn't know what was waiting for them in the next morning. A part of the dam broke down and inundated the whole area overnight houses, shrimp farms as well as their dreams. They were not even prepared for the situation and with time they could realize they have to move from their home to a safer place not only themselves but also with their cattle. "The sufferings of cattle are more than what we human beings are going through," en us one of the victims said.

They left their village and migrated to a safer village and made temporary homes on the Dam. Now there is no grass for the cattle so they tried to move them to another village. "I sent sixteen of my seventeen cows but I can not move one, it does not want to move from this place."

Ponds with sweet water mixed with saline water could never be drinkable. Scarcity of drinking and useable water forced them to collect water from a distance of about 3-5 kilometers.

The whole village is trying to repair the damage of the dam and become successful. They are petrified by rain but they have no alternative water to drink save the rain water. Koira, Khulna, Bangladesh. 21 May 2007.

But back to Mussalli's work. His poem captures the flood waves gushing into the adjoining rural and urban localities, and finally ends with the flood waters receding back to the riverbed. I find this piece as an irresistible example of an oral 'reportorial' comment or understanding of what the floods meant in the area. The longitudinal lens through which this folklore looks at floods is what, arguably, is missing from the today's corporate-driven media -- particularly when it comes to reports on recurring disasters.

### Disasters as mere events

Media, arguably, tend to be the victim as well as the promoter of hegemonic ideologies, popular prejudice and social stereotypes. Like rest of the events happening everyday in our social milieu, the media largely looks at disaster as an 'event', and at the best treats it as a hard news.

There is a glaring similarity between the government and media in the way both deal with disasters. A quick review of the disaster management policies of South Asian governments would reveal that the policy emphasis of the governments in the region remain *post-hoc*, focusing on emergency management and relief distribution. Wittingly or otherwise, the dominant media pattern follows suit when it comes to disaster reporting.

This has happened particularly in recent mega disasters brought about by the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004 and the Himalayan earthquake in October 2005. There was a rush of camera crews to capture the melodramatic content of the disasters in the first few hours and days; but there was little or no news once the impacts of tides and tremors became 'stale'. Though the survivors were still grappling with the nightmares wrought by those fateful moments of the tsunami and the earthquake, the media was simply not around, eager or forthcoming to follow up the story. Instead, they were all competing with each other to break at the time of the disaster itself.

### Disaster coverage formula?

Swapan Dasgupta, then the deputy editor of *India Today*, argued disaster reporting in India as having traditionally followed a formula: "First there are the gruesome horror stories, followed by accusations that the government willfully connived in the disaster, followed by the stories of how official machinery is insensitive to the sufferings, followed by the alarmist fears of epidemics and, finally, the expose of the wholesale loot of relief material."



Children smile as they cross through floodwaters in Pulparamba, Kerala State, India

(c) 2005 K. K. Santhosh, Courtesy of Photoshare

Needless to say, such a focus does make a good story for practicing journalists; but there are other points which could make 'disaster' a story before it has occurred. The question, however, lies in how we perceive and understand disaster as a concept and as an event.

Recent disaster studies have differentiated between a 'hazard' and a 'disaster'.

These studies maintain that a hazard is a natural event but a disaster is not. *The South Asia Disaster Report 2005* suggests that "a disaster is the dialectical upshot of development failures and socio-economic imbalances manifested in the built- and natural environment." The report criticises the 'dominant perspective' which believes that disaster is an interim intermission that can be efficiently reversed with emergency interventions largely based on rescue and relief.

This is a stereotyped understanding of disaster, which rules the imagination of state managers and is being upheld by media in general. Yet, it has to be questioned.

Nothing short of a paradigm shift is needed if one is to get an alternative perspective on disasters: a shift from emergency management to risk management.

This perspective suggests understanding, investigating and exploring the social dimensions of disaster. It involves focusing on the process of ongoing development planning, state governance and social organization of at-risk areas and communities.

A disaster event and its impact needs to be located through a longitudinal lens as what makes some communities and areas more vulnerable to disasters and how disaster could change or transform the social relationship at the country, community and household level.

Broadly speaking, disasters can be divided into two categories: slow onset and sudden onset disasters.

A cursory look at the media treatment of disasters would suggest that sudden and macro disasters catch media attention more prominently than the slow and micro-scale disasters. One possible reason of this trend strongly visible in the media can be seen in the 'shock value' of sudden and macro disasters. Micro and slow onset disasters largely remain 'missing' or 'invisible' in media analysis and hard-sell stories. Drought, for example, may not be as 'sexy' a story as famine; despite the fact that we all know fully-well that drought leads to famine.

Let's look at another example. The consolidated data of disaster-related deaths in Nepal covering 32 years (1971 - 2003) reveals that epidemic was the cause of 60% of deaths, compared with 16% from landslides, 11% from floods, four percent from earthquake, three percent from thunderstorms and six percent stemming from others causes. Similarly, in the eastern Indian state of Orissa, epidemics were recorded to be one of the greatest causes of deaths.

A comparative analysis of data for 2005 reveals that more people were killed in epidemics (748) than



landslides (287) in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan put together. Yet, these larger killers continue to be some of the most under-reported disasters in the media. A certain tendency of ‘normalcy bias’ has developed towards these disasters.

### **Development induced disaster?**

In recent times a new phenomenon of the development-induced disaster is emerging in the countries of South Asia. A report on development-induced disasters by the Manila-based NGO Forum on ADB (Asian Development Bank), reflects some of this thinking.

While commenting on the US\$ 62 million Khulna-Jessore Drainage Rehabilitation Project (KJDRP) of the ADB in the southwest coastal districts in Bangladesh, Zakir Kibria of Bangla Praxis states: “The project ignored environmental concerns raised in the Summary Initial Environmental Examination (SIEE) and embarked on a structural construction-based design in an ecologically fragile river system. The failed project has now left a legacy of social and environmental disaster exemplified by silted-up dead rivers, permanent inundation of thousands of hectares of land, loss of indigenous variety of fish and crop biodiversity, and has driven fisherfolk out of work.”

In another example, Zulfiqar Halepoto of Forum for Conflict Resolution-Pakistan stated: “The Left Bank Outfall Drain (LBOD) project was intended to drain saline ground of surface water and storm runoff. Due to several technical problems, the drainage effluents, instead of going into the sea, started destroying lands and internationally-recognized wetlands. The project-induced problems include: flooding, sea intrusion, loss of crops and agricultural land, reduction in fish catches and the loss of lives.”

On the Case of Urban Infrastructure Development Projects in Karnataka, India, Gururaja Budhya of Urban Research Centre-Bangalore indicated that the implementation of urban development projects in Karnataka shows that the five major challenges in the Environment Policy identified by the ADB have not been addressed; rather it has created more complications. The poor are not part of decision-making, institutional changes are top-down, the project has contributed to the deterioration of regional environment in the long run, no stakeholder engagement has been conducted, and systems within are not internalized.

These recent trends open new avenues for investigative disaster reporting which are linked

with the overall development policy, planning and implementation in Asian countries. It is pertinent to note that these mega development projects are being pursued by national governments; and loans for these projects are solicited from international financial institutions (IFIs) on extravagant commercial interest rates. Closer investigations have revealed, particularly in the case LBOD (as mentioned above), that these IFI-financed mega projects are causing disasters in terms of flooding, displacement and erosion of livelihood assets of vulnerable communities of the region.

### **Media as partner, not just reporter**

A disaster cycle can be divided into five phases: pre-disaster; immediately post-disaster; short term relief; recovery; and rehabilitation. Media have specific roles to play in all these phases. Informing, educating and influencing public opinion and policy towards disaster risk reduction can be some untapped entry points for the media in relation to disaster reporting.

For instance, in the pre-disaster phase of slow-onset disasters, the media can bring the potential risk into the public attention and highlight imminent damages. In sudden-onset disasters, it can disseminate preparedness information and send warnings to the threatened.

In post-disaster situations stemming from slow-onset disasters, the media can inform decision makers about the concerns and needs of affected people and, inversely, can inform the people about the government’s policies and decisions. It assumes the role of tracking, oversight and monitoring the relief process and can also provide relief information to the people.

In post-disaster situations arising from sudden-onset disasters, the media could identify the cause of the disaster, estimate its seriousness, provide and double-check damage estimates and detail the relief needs.

In the short-term relief phase, the media can monitor the event, report relief operations, locate gaps, obtain accurate information and articulate the voices and interests of victims and survivors.

In the phases of recovery and rehabilitation, the media tends to show a decrease in interest, yet these are the times most crucial for digging out more investigative stories, and unearthing the gaps in the balance sheet of pledges and actual performances. Recovery and rehabilitation audits by the media are one of the under-reported issue, which could bridge the information gap and fill accountability needs of long-term recovery and rehabilitation of disaster-affected areas and communities.



# Communicating to Save Lives



TVEAP image archive

The success or failure of humanitarian action can depend on good communication. This is far more complex than simply building good relations with the media in times of crisis. Communications needs of beneficiaries must be addressed in programme planning and delivery, and humanitarian agencies must place more emphasis on sharing information and resources rather than competing for airtime.

Patrick Fuller



TVEAP image archive



TVEAP image archive

*Interviewing tsunami survivor in Tamil Nadu, India*

2 million Swiss Francs had been launched to assist 50,000 affected people. By 9 am on 29 January donors had committed 4 million Swiss Francs.

Good communications played a key role in mobilizing the funds so quickly. Within 24 hours of the disaster, an assessment team -- which included an information delegate -- had been sent to Kutch from Delhi. Armed only with a satellite phone hooked up to a car battery, the information delegate's main functions were to brief colleagues in Geneva and Delhi and give interviews to the international media. For over a week, the Red Cross featured almost daily on CNN, BBC and other major news outlets. This level of visibility sent a clear signal to the donor community that they were on the ground getting the job done.

Good communication in a disaster zone depends on many factors. Rapid access to the disaster zone, professional human resource capacity and readily available communications technology are among them.

The latest communications technology should be integral to a humanitarian organisations emergency response toolkit. Whether it's an earthquake in the mountains of Afghanistan or flooding in Somalia, a satellite phone is an essential piece of equipment to maintain contact with the outside world where conventional communication isn't possible. Combine a satellite phone with a laptop, digital camera and digital video camera, and a humanitarian agency can become a news provider from anywhere in the world. Web stories and blogs can be posted on agency web sites, and digital photos and raw video footage can easily be made accessible to international news agencies.

On 26 January 2001 a devastating earthquake measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale struck the Indian state of Gujarat. The epicenter was in the remote district of Kutch, close to the Pakistani border. Kutch was cut off from the outside world. Telephone lines were down, mobile phone networks were jammed and the HF radio mast used by local Indian Air Force base had been damaged. It took more than 24 hours before communication could be restored.

This was not an untypical scenario and one that humanitarian organisations and the media regularly confront in the aftermath of major natural disasters.

The South Asia Delegation of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (International Federation, or IFRC ) based in Delhi was at the forefront of the international response to the earthquake. Despite the information vacuum, a well-oiled response mechanism swung into action. By the afternoon of January 26, a preliminary appeal for

### Same disaster, different needs

Organisations such as the International Federation, UNICEF and World Food Programme (WFP) all recognize the importance of having experienced communications staff strategically located in offices around the world who are available to move into disaster zones at short notice. With the advent of the 24 hour news cycle, humanitarian agencies quite often find themselves arriving at the scene of a disaster at the same time as international news teams.

This carries advantages and disadvantages. How many times have you heard the phrase when watching the News ...'the aid effort is slow to get underway'? In any given disaster, it always takes time to establish logistical pipelines and the infrastructure required to deliver relief supplies. But for the media, conveying a mood of drama and controversy makes for a more exciting news report.

Generally, the relationship between the media and humanitarian agencies following a disaster is a reciprocal one. The media need access to the story, sound-bites and good story leads. Humanitarian agencies need visibility and the opportunity to broadcast their concerns to a global audience.

While the relationship is one of mutual benefit, it tends to be short-lived. Media interest in the Gujarat earthquake plummeted after a week when journalists moved on to the next story. In the case of the 2004 Asian Tsunami, media interest was sustained for a few weeks, but some would argue this was largely due to the numbers of foreign tourists who were affected.

A common frustration is that news reporters tend to be very formulaic in their approach to covering disasters. Reporters arriving from abroad rarely probe beneath the surface to provide analysis of the wider issues surrounding disasters, and it is seldom that journalists return to the scene of a disaster to report on how affected communities are coping a few months or a year down the line. This is the nature of news -- the humanitarian community needs to recognize that they have a limited window of opportunity to get their message across using the news media.

### Silent emergencies

The disparity in funding per capita between high profile disasters and some neglected disasters is alarming. Chronic disasters -- such as droughts -- are difficult to cover as news stories precisely because their onset is slow and the visible signs of human suffering that the media favour are often absent.

But the disparity in funding received for different disasters is clearly reflected in the levels of media attention that they receive. The Asian Tsunami raised at least US\$ 1,241 per beneficiary in aid, compared to appeals for disasters such as the 2005 droughts in Malawi and Niger which averaged less than US\$27 per person.<sup>1</sup>

Although the media does have an important role as a catalyst to mobilise public support, they should not be held accountable for some disasters remaining in the shadows. While donor governments have their own decision-making criteria, media coverage of a disaster can certainly influence donor policy on whether or not they should intervene in any given crisis.

Neglect is not necessarily a term that would be associated with the outpouring of goodwill shown by humanitarian agencies in their response to the Asian Tsunami, but it is questionable as to whether

some agencies neglected to communicate sufficiently with affected communities. Most International Non Governmental organizations (INGOs) have signed up to the Red Cross and NGO Code of Conduct (see box on page 62) which provides a clear set of guiding principles designed to regulate consultation between humanitarian agencies and the people they set out to assist. These principles stress the need for consultation, participation and transparency when planning humanitarian interventions. Reviews conducted on the response to the 2004 Asian Tsunami clearly demonstrate that many humanitarian agencies made decisions based on experience and professional judgement when dispatching standard relief materials to the disaster zone. It was only when the chaos subsided that assessments and consultations with affected communities became more detailed and provided more factual data. Under these circumstances information is power and invariably aid agencies hold the key as they make decisions which have a direct impact on the people caught up in the disaster.

### Listening to beneficiaries

In November 2005, the International Federation teamed up with CDA Collaborative Learning Projects and other partners in the humanitarian sector to launch the 'Listening Project'<sup>2</sup>, which aimed to gather the views and opinions of local people in up to 20 developing countries where international aid had been provided after a disaster. The idea was to assess the impact of international assistance and learn from beneficiaries experiences.



(c) 1998 Edison E. Whitney, Courtesy of PhotoShare

*Food supplies are delivered by volunteers from the Bangladesh Center for Communication Programs (BCCP) to rural villages during the 1998 floods in Bangladesh.*

The project began in Aceh, Indonesia, and produced some interesting results. Seven teams of listeners were designated different localities. They didn't work from pre-set questions; rather, the approach was to move around, engaging a wide cross-section of people, young and old, in conversation. It was the beneficiaries who took the lead in raising the issues that most concerned them.

It was apparent that in their response to the Tsunami, NGOs overall had performed poorly when communicating with the people they set out to help. Many people were unhappy that they did not have enough information about aid and aid processes. Some couldn't understand why different aid was given to neighbouring communities. Assumed wisdom led many NGOs to channel information to the community through the village head man which wasn't always the best approach -- it created suspicions of unfairness, and quite often the information failed to trickle down to key groups, particularly women.

The Listening teams found that many people felt there was no mechanism to express their opinions or discuss problems with the NGOs, and felt afraid to raise issues with NGOs. When asked how communication could be improved, there were a

number of suggestions, such as more public meetings or information centers where NGOs could explain issues in greater detail to the community.

The Listening Project highlights how a lack of beneficiary communication can seriously undermine the credibility of humanitarian agencies, which, in turn, led to a negative impact on the welfare of local communities.

Surprisingly few agencies have genuinely addressed the notion of accountability in their aid delivery. Some would argue that upward accountability to donors has taken precedence over downward accountability to beneficiary populations. Despite the heavy branding on most of the relief materials that were distributed in Aceh, most of the recipients knew next to nothing about the agencies that had come to help them.

The response to the Tsunami in Sri Lanka is a good demonstration of conflicting priorities. Reportedly over 300 agencies arrived with considerable funding and little knowledge of working in the country. It was not easy to establish coordination mechanisms at central and district levels between an overwhelmed government bureaucracy and NGOs whose main focus was to hit the ground

## Code of Conduct for NGOs in Disaster Relief

The Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, was developed and agreed upon by eight of the world's largest disaster response agencies in the summer of 1994 and represents a huge leap forward in setting standards for disaster response. It is being used by the International Federation to monitor its own standards of relief delivery and to encourage other agencies to set similar standards.

The Code of Conduct, like most professional codes, is a voluntary one. It is applicable to any NGO, be it national or international, small or large. It lays down 10 points of principle which all NGOs should adhere to in their disaster response work, and goes on to describe the relationships agencies working in disasters should seek with donor governments, host governments and the UN system.

1. The Humanitarian imperative comes first.
2. Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone.
3. Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint.
4. We shall endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy.
5. We shall respect culture and custom.
6. We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities.
7. Ways shall be found to involve programme beneficiaries in the management of relief aid.
8. Relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster as well as meeting basic needs.
9. We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources.
10. In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognise disaster victims as dignified human beings, not hopeless objects.

Source: <http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/conduct/index.asp>





(c) 2005 Saurabh Mittal, Courtesy of Photoshare

running. Because so many agencies wanted to stake their claim to a corner of the country, and become operational as soon as possible, opportunities to share data, assessment findings and knowledge were lost. Collaboration with local government and other agencies became secondary, and there was widespread duplication of efforts. Some villages received multiple distributions of fishing boats, while others received countless assessment teams from different agencies passing through their village asking the same questions....with little or no material benefits.

Providing information to survivors of a disaster can have a significant impact on their well-being by helping to repair psychological damage and restore people's dignity. In post Tsunami Sri Lanka, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) deployed twelve mobile teams whose function was to enable families and individuals staying in welfare centres to make contact with their relatives to let them know they were alive and well. The teams visited over 300 welfare centres armed with satellite and mobile phones, playing a critical role at a time when communication by telephone was almost non-existent.

Mass media plays a crucial role in disaster preparedness and response. Radio was the sole information source for thousands of families living in temporary shelters in Sri Lanka after the Tsunami. Many NGOs and humanitarian agencies tapped into this by collaborating with public and commercial broadcasters to produce public information broadcasts that featured details of forthcoming relief distributions, training opportunities or health education messages.

### **Media for early warning**

Despite the lack of official early warning systems, communications technology played an important role in saving lives before the tsunami struck. There were many reported cases of people-to-people early warning via mobile phone networks. With the proliferation of mobile phone use, text messaging (SMS) is being looked at seriously in some countries for disseminating nationwide early warning alerts. Other modes of communication play a vital role in the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society's Community Based Disaster



Preparedness programme. Historically, the Bay of Bengal is prone to highly destructive seasonal cyclones which in recent decades have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. The Red Crescent has established a no-nonsense approach to reducing risk for communities living close to the sea. Working closely with the Government's meteorological department in Dhaka, Red Crescent disaster preparedness team tracks the movement and intensity of cyclones. If the cyclone looks potentially life-threatening, Red Crescent field offices are alerted by HF radio. The message is then relayed down by VHF radio to disaster preparedness teams at village level where trained volunteers equipped with loud-hailers and bicycles set off through local villages warning villagers to take refuge in the nearest cyclone shelter. The programme has proved to be successful not only because it has saved thousands of lives, but because it is sustained

through the active participation of volunteers from the community.

The success or failure of humanitarian action can depend on good communication. This is far more complex than simply building good relations with the media in times of crisis. Communications needs of beneficiaries must be addressed in programme planning and delivery, and humanitarian agencies must place more emphasis on sharing information and resources rather than competing for airtime. Agencies also need to join forces to raise awareness around neglected disasters that remain in the shadows. To make all this happen communications must be seen as integral to strategic objectives. Humanitarian agencies need to make the necessary investment and should explore new ways to engage their publics using new communications channels and media.

If they don't, they can end up in the shadows.

### Listening as Part of Communication

The task of reconstruction in Sri Lanka has been arduous and complex and there are clear examples where the failure to communicate disempowered affected communities. Permanent housing beneficiaries as well as humanitarian agencies were often unsure of entitlements and rights due to a lack of public information campaigns. This was a situation where consultation and communication between beneficiaries, local government and humanitarian agencies could have been improved. Families who had been living with host families, or in temporary wooden shelters, for over a year should have known where they would settle down permanently.

In Sri Lanka, the Red Cross is one of the main actors in the reconstruction effort, supporting the building of over 20,000 houses. The task will take close to three years to complete and explaining that to tsunami survivors is vital. For the Red Cross, communication has been integral to programme planning. As soon as the local authorities provides a list of beneficiaries for a housing site, a series of consultative meetings begins that involves all families who will be moving to the houses when they are built. They are consulted on the designs and layout of the houses and are taken to neighbouring sites to see similar homes. Families are involved in the planning of each site and are brought together with members of the host community living in the vicinity to ensure that community buildings and infrastructure are planned in a way that reduces possible tensions between old and new residents.

Endnotes:

1 Source: Development Initiatives (UK-based NGO specialising in aid data flows) based on UN FTS data, <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org>

2 <http://www.cdainc.com/lp/>

# Extra Hands in Times of Crisis



Norimasa Tochibayashi, UNV, Japan

The idea of volunteers being philanthropists lacking in skills, or being young, fresh college graduates entering the job market and seeking adventure, is rapidly changing. Several international organisations are engaging highly educated and professional volunteers for specialised tasks during emergencies.

Veronica Balderas Iglesias



Deepthy Tiwari, UNV, India

*As an Urban Planner UNV Volunteer Deepthy assists in the production of draft village and Urban Plans in Northern Sumatra, Indonesia. This requires extensive consultation with the community and project staff, plus the ability to analyze available data.*

“My mom came before the TV warning. She woke me up and said, ‘Waves’. She told me to move to higher ground. My mom is faster than the TV!” eight-year-old Beam said after a tsunami-evacuation drill carried out in Thailand sometime in March 2005. Her mother Sumontha explained that community members did not always hear the warnings the government broadcasts; it was the neighbours who phoned them and made sure they evacuated from the high-risk areas.

Beam was talking to a TVE Asia Pacific film crew who had tracked families affected by the 26 December 2004 tsunami for months, and documented how they were returning to normalcy.<sup>1</sup>

Time and again, local community members are the first to join hands during an emergency situation, and on a voluntary basis they help the most vulnerable. Alas, few of these Samaritans are involved in preparedness activities; nor are most able to adapt available resources to disseminate much-needed information, including alerts on when evacuees can safely return to their homes.

This was the case in Indonesia’s province of Banda Aceh, one of the worst hit areas by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. Aware of the isolated state in which their region was at that point in time due to the dreadful conditions on the ground, hundreds of local volunteers quickly organized emergency relief efforts. They succeeded in many ways, but developing communication methods once again proved challenging.

## Community radio

It was ten days after the disaster that a group of volunteer experts from the KBR68H radio station in Jakarta were finally able to arrive in Aceh, and set up a community radio station. The crew was given a crash course. They worked hard to ensure that much-needed information (from religious messages and encouragement to sharing data on missing persons) finally got to the people. Had local volunteers already received appropriate training, they would have been able to set up the emergency studio in a period of just six hours.

When disaster strikes, volunteers come to the fore. Community members typically rally to support one another. However they need to be prepared, and their efforts need to be coordinated. Trained professionals can provide crucial support by training people in disaster preparedness and response, and by helping to coordinate national and international relief and rebuilding programmes. The United Nations Volunteers programme (UNV) is often one of the first organisations to respond to disasters on-site. UNV mobilizes national and international UNV volunteers to support the immediate relief and recovery activities of major disaster organisations and domestic institutions.

Beyond the response phase, UNV works with governments and other national partners in the creation of community-level disaster preparedness plans to strengthen their capacities and lessen the impact of possible future disasters. UNV supports countries in the development of disaster mitigation programmes that incorporate the principle of volunteerism for development and foster people-centred preparedness initiatives in communities.

The idea of volunteers being philanthropists and lacking in skills, or being young, fresh college graduates entering the job market and seeking adventure, is rapidly changing. The number of international organisations mobilizing highly educated and professional volunteers is on the rise.

Volunteers associated with United Nations Volunteers (UNV), for instance, have five to 10 years of work experience and are an average 37 years old. Their on-site and online contributions are proving extremely productive in fields as diverse as health, education, human rights promotion, community development, vocational training, industry and population.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are other areas where volunteers are contributing necessary knowledge and expertise. They support in disseminating warnings, coordinating relief

efforts and implementing recovery and rehabilitation programmes.

### Volunteers for Prevention

If communities are to brace themselves for weather-related disasters, they need sufficient early warning mechanisms to be able to implement emergency plans of action.

Some initiatives are happening on the ground. As part of the World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) daily routine of weather observation, large numbers of people volunteer their time to the most basic level of meteorological prediction: data collection.

Experienced farmers, fishermen, pilots and sea captains read hydrological and meteorological recorders, measure rainfall and test climatic conditions. They report their findings to national meteorological surveys around the world.

Without these volunteer efforts, meteorologists would have less access to information about conditions in remote areas, impeding their ability to provide accurate forecasts of weather patterns around the globe.

Volunteerism has also served as an effective communication support system in the wake of disasters. In India for instance, a victim of the Gujarat earthquake in January 2001 himself, Information Technology specialist Hemang Karelia declined an offer from a private consulting firm and decided instead to help thousands of victims of the quake, which had devastated his hometown of Bhuj. After signing up as a UNV volunteer a few days after the disaster, he took charge of the computers in the control room and made sure relevant data was collected to help affected people. Easily-readable maps, which helped to track and channel the scarce resources available in those trying times, were also produced.

### Right information

"It gave me great satisfaction to provide the right information at the right time and direct resources in the right direction," Hemang recalls.

Before that, Sanjaya Mohanty in Orissa also used modern tools in communication to take information about government programmes right to the doorstep of poor villagers, whose livelihoods were destroyed first by a cyclone and soon afterwards by floods in October 1999. Furthermore, he established



Metumo Tutikka, UNV, Namibia

*UNV Volunteer Metumo works as Assistant Field Security Coordination Officer in Banda Aceh. She collects data and makes sure all parties are informed of the security risks in the province.*



Normasa Tachibayashi, UNV, Japan

*Shocked by the magnitude of the tsunami devastation and number casualties, he quit his job in January 2005 and decided to join the relief efforts as a Volunteer in Banda Aceh. He was later appointed UNV Volunteer and worked as an HIC Field coordinator supervising the work of the Field Information Officers. He provided key data to the governmental agency BRR and UNIMS. He furthermore customized, stored and managed all the recovery projects in the 'Recovery Aceh and Nias' Database.*

information technology kiosks at a minimal cost to serve as disaster management tools.

"Local communities are now able to access early warning information about impending cyclones and learn about new agricultural practices," Mohanty explains.

After the immediate response, there is always a need to ensure a long-term engagement of different parties in the recovery and reconstruction process of areas hit by natural disasters. UNV volunteers working as Field Reporting Officers help ensure commitments are met. They play a crucial role in the analysis and dissemination of data, and are thus instrumental in assisting communities to gain better access to services.

They also participate in meetings that serve as the main channel for recovery information collection and data sharing, and their reports and findings are uploaded to websites accessible to any interested person.

Kenyan-born Anita Shah flew all the way from her country to assist as a UNV volunteer in the early days of the emergency operation in Sri Lanka in 2004. She made valuable contributions to emergency information management.

“We channeled valuable information on damage and losses, as well as needs, gaps and response efforts. I compiled a bulletin twice a week on the activities being carried out, and was able to provide real time and credible information for planning and decision making,” she recalls.

### Challenges ahead

While volunteer contributions like these have proven extremely valuable at the country level, there is still a need to fully integrate them into strategic partnerships, such as those aiming at communicating disasters at regional levels.

International organisations engaged in mobilizing volunteers should join forces and prepare a database of volunteers with specific professional backgrounds in fields such as journalism, communication technology, disaster management and public health, to respond to the needs of mass media and other communication partners in times of emergency.

The print and broadcast media would probably welcome an extra hand that would assist in their work and help ensure that reliable information is promptly gathered or disseminated. Overloaded news bureaux could greatly benefit from having on-site and online specialized volunteers carrying out field research, extending advice and even giving interviews on disaster management or health recommendations, at least until official sources are ready to do so.

Experienced “volunteer journalists” could also be deployed on-site to act as team leaders for local amateur reporters and photographers, and help speed up the collection of data on casualties and ground conditions. Information centres set up by the specialists would ensure that latest news reached main-stream media for broader dissemination in a timely manner.

When disaster strikes, volunteers are the ones who spearhead activities to support those most affected. The ingenuity solidarity and creativity of ordinary people are harnessed through voluntary action. And since each and every human being has the potential to volunteer, encouraging and supporting their involvement in strategic partnerships will enrich disaster preparedness, mitigation and, ultimately, management.

**Note:** This chapter draws on UNV, UNDP and Radio KBR68H (Jakarta) published materials. The author wishes to acknowledge the prior work and ideas of other volunteers working in disaster response and preparedness.

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#### Endnotes:

1 “Children of Tsunami” was a media project of TVE Asia Pacific (TVEAP), in which local film-maker teams documented the recovery stories of families and communities affected by the Asian Tsunami in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand on video and online. See: [www.childreoftsunami.info](http://www.childreoftsunami.info)



# Seeking common ground

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) give us unprecedented power to reach more people faster on hazards and disasters. Technology alone cannot deliver this potential – it requires a mix of sociological, cultural and institutional responses by governments, corporate sector and civil society. This also calls for building or reinforcing ‘bridges’ between media practitioners and disaster managers who have traditionally been on two sides of a divide. In this section, our contributors offer personal perspectives on harnessing the power of information and communication to disseminate credible warnings, heal broken hearts and help survivors rebuild their lives.





# Engaging the Media: A Rough Guide

Many development professionals want to work with the public media, but very few know how to get it right. Understanding the social, political and cultural dynamics of the media is essential for those who seek to ‘hitch a ride’ on the media bandwagon.

A S Panneerselvan

There are good boys and bad boys out there, in the big world called “Development”. Some full-time “developmentalists” consider the media to be the notorious bad-boys. To them, the media are largely obsessed with profit-making, their cardinal principle is to reduce every reader or viewer or listener to being a mere consumer; they cater to the least common denominator; they are sensational; they distort reality; and the media thrive on hyperbole while they also lack sensitivity.

Developmentalists’ critics whine, they cringe and their dirges reach high decibel levels when they lament about the media’s alleged lack of conviction and total disregard for the well-being of the society. They often take it on themselves to “build capacity for the media” and draw their attention to the specific issue on which their own development agency is working at that point of time.

On the other hand, journalists have developed a pathological distaste to the development narrative that emerges from the portals of various developmental agencies.

Maybe this is understandable. Journalists consider that their reports are ritualistic, cloaked in the political correctness, but often not backed by

enough empirical data. Journalists think that the development agencies are monochromatic in vision and do lack the larger picture in their imagination.

So, this gap grows. There is a popular game prevalent in news-rooms. It involves nick-naming the development agencies in question based on the issue they focus on -- “the HIV- guy”, “the development-index guy”, “the global-warming guy”, “the poverty guy”, “the MDG (millennium development goals) guy”, all labels referring to one or the other development agency working on the specific theme in question. Rarely have these organisations or their staff members shown an interest in themes or issues which are not directly linked with their own priorities of-the-moment.

It is not very surprising therefore that most journalists consider the development agencies as yet another set of self-serving institutions. Institutions that are craving for media coverage, institutions which shamelessly want a plug for the purpose of their own profile-raising, and institutions that are not above board when it comes to that deadliest of sins — the planting of stories.

The divide is nearly complete. The sole saving grace is that both sides have not started wagging war against each other. At least not yet.

So, how did this chasm come about? Are these two arms of the society mutually exclusive? Is there no space for interaction and mutual benefits? Is it, at



TVEAP image archive

all, possible for both to work together for the eventual benefit of their real clientele — the people?

### Understanding media

To answer these questions, one must, first of all, understand media dynamics, and, then, the narrative dynamics of the development discourse.

After all, the media is plural term, not a singular one. This implies that the media are not a monolith.

Some are excellent; many are mediocre; some are downright bad. Some in the media are also indifferent to some issues but may be outstanding in addressing other issues.

If you rotate the media vibgyor-disk fast enough, all you see are shades of grey. But, the development narrative tries to fit it into a bi-polarity of black and white. In a sense, the development narrative predates George W. Bush Jr. and the perspective that you are either with us or against us.



Fundamentally, this cleavage is due to the developmentalists' inability to distinguish between journalism and the media industry.

The media industry, though it claims innumerable privileges, is still an industry with a clear focus on the bottom-line. However, it must be noted that there are any number of journalists who are alive to the crucial issues confronting - humanity. They are constantly on the look-out for a good story that would make some change in people's lives. They want to record, document, initiate a debate, shake the policy-makers out of either their slumber or rank opportunism, research for alternatives, and open up space for dissent.

How am I so sure of this? Well, journalism was my chosen field for some twenty-odd years, till I moved on to the insular world of development, a couple of years ago.

One never looked at journalism purely as a careerist pursuit. I believed, and still do believe, that the media are a site for the democratic mediation of ideas.

It is important for any politically-sensitive person, but one who is not a politician or merely a partisan in narrow party politics, to reach out to the public directly, to bare open his or her ideas and views through the dynamics of media. This is essential to ensure a place for those ideas to germinate into something more concrete in the domain of the public sphere.

Not for a minute had I any delusions about the media being free from various pressures, ideologies and political-orientations. I believe that anyone who wants a space in the public sphere comes in with a worldview, and with a clear motivation for pursuing that worldview. One argues for that worldview and is constantly engaged in the process of refining, redefining and enriching that worldview based on empirical evidence and sharpened by intellectual input.

### Many public spheres

A crucial component of my political belief is that there is not a single public sphere in an Habermasian sense, but multiple public spheres; and a journalist

can play the role of a mediator of these public spheres only when he or she operates in more than one public sphere. This thinking influenced my decision to be a bi-lingual journalist.

The trick in bringing the two sectors -- development and the media -- closer lies not just in creating an institutional framework, but in generating a vibrant human network between development practitioners and journalists who work on developmental issues.

Publications, channels or radio stations may or may not share the concerns of the developmental agencies; but individual journalists do. They use three creative tools to get their stories published or broadcast.

First, journalists always create a contemporary peg to hang their stories onto. They know that stories when presented with no sense of immediacy -- and those having a shelf-life beyond the periodicity of the publication -- seem fit for the story-bank, from which they are rarely if ever retrieved.

This is an essential difference between the perception of developmental agencies and that of the media. Developmental agencies always believe they have generated a body of information that has relevance for at least a decade. And the media looks



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TVEAP image archive

at everything from a perspective of the *here and now*. The media always seeks a contemporary peg in order to help its reader relate to the story by providing a recent grounding. And that's the reason the media remains the best communication platform, while developmental work remains mainly on the shelves of the bookshop.

Second, people working the media are masters of subtle subversion. They know how to mask a story without losing its power or potency in overcoming various forms of censorships to which the mainstream media is often subject.

Censorship comes from the ownership, from the state, from the market and at times there is even self-censorship to tide over a current crisis within the organisation or to cope with the Spirit of the Times. Developmental agencies should therefore leave the narrative grid of the story and form to the journalist, and not to try and impose a politically correct, sanitised version which fails to work, especially with the readers.

Third, journalists also deploy their excursions in erudition to bring forth a point closer to the reader, by

drawing parallels or hinting at similarities.

For this, they will obviously not be prepared to use verbatim the developmental agencies' findings, recommendations, research and writings. Journalists need to counterpose these with other claims, research and writings in order to contextualise them.

One of the usual complaints against journalists coming in from development agencies is that "we gave them so much material but they used so little". There is a need here for the development agencies to reflect why this happens ever so often.

### Engaging media all the way

Development agencies rarely bring journalists into their universe at a stage which can be called 'work-in-progress'. They usually just come to the media with a finished product. There is hardly any joint exploration. When presented with a finished product, there is just one alternative for a reporter — that is, to review the product that is already done.

Imagine a scenario where journalists are brought into the process right from the word go. There would

have been a series of stories, and when the final report of the development agencies is realised, that may well serve as the winding-up story tracking the entire trajectory.

A journalist is expected to report and not just reproduce. Development agencies like their versions to be reproduced to a large extent. This becomes an assault on the journalists' work-pride. He or she would like to do a field report, taking a cue or two from the work of the development agency. But, to merely reproduce a report is seen only as providing a free plug, an unpaid advertisement, and doing a stenographer's job.

Let's look at one story which had a massive impact. In India, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA – the movement to protect livelihoods of tribals coming under threat from a series of major dam projects) has been campaigning on the contentious issue of big dams for nearly two-and-a-half decades. But, not once did Ms. Medha Patkar, the moving spirit of the movement, fail to get the support from the mainstream media. The media has, in fact, been an integral part of this struggle.

This is true on many fronts. Whether in terms of countering the government's claim over proposed dam projects, or in terms of generating details of the area or mass of land that was to be lost due to the raising water levels, or the question

of displacement, or on the lack of rehabilitation. On all these issues, the NBA managed to keep the media informed from the word go. In the process, it managed to generate much debate, raise voices of concern over many institutions, including the apex judicial body, the Supreme Court of India.

Never once, did the NBA come to the media with a final text and ask them merely to reproduce it. Journalists, on the other hand, were informed of the NBA's activities, they were given details of the villages that are getting submerged, and they were taken into confidence even about the nature of protests that were being planned.

NBA shared with journalists its own doubts, vulnerabilities, and anxieties and often voiced their fear that all their efforts may be futile. In many a sense, it was a partnership between the NBA and the journalists.

Though the NBA's struggle may have ultimately not yielded the desired results in its entirety – the contentious dams were built, finally -- what resulted from this fruitful partnership was many a useful by-product. This included the debate on the desirability of big dams in India, the actual human cost of development, the need for proper rehabilitation and re-settlement, and wider issues concerning development-induced-displacement.



Medha Patkar



TVEAP image archive

## Not just a publicity tool

UN agencies, donor agencies and international development organisations should keep in mind that media is not merely a conveyor of messages handed to them by press officers.

The prose of the development agencies often has no people in it... it's just numbers. They retain their sense of critical distance; and journalists feel slighted by the press releases that land on their tables mostly without any scope whatsoever for verification, counter-checking and illustrative examples.

A good journalist always strives to give a human face to his or her reports. There are names, faces,

families, friends, and depictions of the local society in their stories. By focusing on one individual, the media makes the suffering of that individual a metaphor of larger malady. It helps the readers to understand the pain, hope and frustrations of the victims.

In that sense, journalism helps people to retain their dignity and not get reduced to becoming mere statistics. If developmental agencies understand this dynamics about the working of journalists, then there is nothing that prevents a most beneficial partnership from flourishing sometime in the future. But that goal is some understanding away, still.

# Building Bridges: Managers and the Media



*Living with vulnerability in Jaring Halus, Indonesia*

TVEAP image archive

Information, education and communications are, then, essential primary tools that could play a vital role to reduce vulnerabilities, increase awareness and promote changes directly or by influencing better decision-making.

Sanny Jegillos, Rajesh Sharma and Pablo Torrealba



*(Left) Consulting communities on their hazard perception in Sri Lanka. (Right) Participatory hazard mapping in Sri Lanka*

TVAP image archive

What is a disaster? How is it that some houses can be destroyed by storm winds while others resist the most frightening earthquake? Why do some people need years to recover from a bout of localised heavy rain, while others are back in business just a few months after a major tsunami?

For risk professionals, disasters occur when a potentially dangerous natural phenomenon impacts vulnerable people (or their houses, organizations or cultures) who then cannot cope with these natural forces and their destructive effects.

What are their causes? As noted above, there are causes behind nature's potential to become a threat – some of which we can hardly influence! For instance, we have no ways to avoid the normal movements of the earth's crust, which we call earthquakes, or the differences in humidity and pressure, which turn into typhoons. But society's bigger weaknesses come from its vulnerabilities

For instance: a lack of awareness about the potential threats. A misunderstanding of how development effects could end up causing increasing risks. The unavailability of sufficient resources to build better homes. Inadequate or non-existent land-use planning. There could also be the problems of information systems not reaching the exposed people to alert them on upcoming events. It might be due to weak preparation or the lack of training and resources to help those affected.

Information, education, and communications are, then, essentials primary tools that could play a vital role to reduce vulnerabilities, increase awareness and promote changes directly or by influencing better decision-making.

### Information as a basic tool

Most vulnerable communities have long learnt to deal with disastrous events. There are many examples of indigenous people -- who are probably among the most socially-vulnerable groups nowadays -- or ancient inhabitants of a region, understanding nature's messages of an event-to-come based on their historical knowledge of nature's behaviour.

This, for instance, was the case of some of the Andaman's populations, on the islands off the Indian east coast, during the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. People in some of these areas rushed inland after noticing the water receding from the beaches on 26 December that year. We technologists would call this information an "early warning message", one that needs to be understood and acted upon.

Access to historical information about past events is often one of the best mechanisms to prevent death for many. That is why most of the participatory approaches to assess risks at the village level include in their initial steps a discussion and collection of past events. This is the case with the approaches used by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Red Cross/Red Crescent, Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC), CARE, Oxfam and many others that work on supporting local communities.

Such an approach allows one to know in which conditions those events have occurred in the past, where they normally happen, and who has been historically affected and how.

Unlike information needed by a state government or other national entities, "small" events are also compiled at that stage. For a vulnerable community, having one or two families affected can translate



into a disaster; and surely it is one for those whose livelihoods have been severely destroyed or jeopardized. The UNDP has been promoting DesInventar ([www.desinventar.org](http://www.desinventar.org)), a Free/Libre and Open Source Software tool to collect, analyse and present such historical data. It is being used in all five tsunami affected countries, as well as in Latin America and other Asian countries, to be able to go into the details of past events.

## Development induced disasters

Deeper risk analysis requires one to look for additional information. There's a reason for that: how can we avoid an event from turning into a disaster if we don't understand its roots, its causes and the parameters that creates it? Apart from the natural phenomenon, the developments around which and evolution of which are well known to researchers and scientific institutions across the globe, digging into the social causes such as territorial (un)planning, productive activities that lead to the changing of the environmental balances, building methods, organizational structures, internal power struggles and disparities, and the impact of external actors, are some of the key factors needed to be incorporated into a good risk assessment.

Tools like hazard-mapping, actors-mapping, seasonal calendars, economical activities, an analysis of social service providers (such as transport, education, power, water and sanitation) and social typologies, are then useful to allow communities to better understand, express and explain their knowledge of risks. All this is also essential to document the reality of risks.

Unfortunately, all this information is not always available at the community level, because it is unknown by people there or unavailable to them.

Take the case of migration, involving people in search of a better future, who opt to move to some newly-created community or neighbourhoods, around an important urban centre. They often don't have this past information to be able to build on their knowledge of potential threats.

They wouldn't know, for instance, how a river would evolve during the rainy season, or they often don't even have access to proper construction materials, basic health care, education or permanent jobs. In many cases, they themselves risk being affected by monsoon floods, and deliberately choose

to find a way to survive in their permanent social disaster (whether this is brought about by poverty, illness, illiteracy, discrimination or something else). Being the most vulnerable to natural events is very often an indicator of a deeper social vulnerability, inequity and discrimination.

To reduce risk, it is also essential to document and understand good practices, not only as ready-to-use technical solutions to imitate, but most importantly, as social processes to replicate in different conditions, searching for internal and external factors that will trigger success.

Looking for, understanding, sharing, and adapting good practices, building its own new ones from others' experience is certainly one of the best ways to ensure proper ownership and sustainability of new techniques, organizations and partnerships.

## Educate and reduce vulnerabilities

But information by itself is not knowledge. Just being aware of a danger can cause more anxiety than bring security, mainly if we know that nothing is being done to reduce the threat. It is therefore imperative to simultaneously teach, educate and train vulnerable people and societies on ways to find solutions, or techniques allowing them to reduce vulnerabilities.

Because the human part of the risks are produced by development choices, a lot of the decisions affecting local conditions are not taken locally. Take the example of market policies that can be a strong incentive for patterns in agricultural production which effectively lead to wider deforestation. Or, energy policies that could modify a river's flow.

It is hence imperative to raise awareness, and promote risk education among decision-makers, highlighting the way a "development" decision could either reduce (if its implementation is done accordingly) or increase risks. Most of the time, it is the latter which happens when risk knowledge remains completely absent from the development decision-making chain.

When Hurricane Mitch struck in Central America, there were many cases of well-constructed bridges being affected, even though they were strong enough to resist the water flow from mighty rivers. They were meant to weather large floods upstream, but their design was not done in a way to take into account the highest historical rainfall! Such bridges became the main cause for vulnerable communities upstream.

At the local level, many solutions are already known. Education and training will range from creating new (or restoring the old) agriculture or forestry techniques to reduce potential landslides on high-slope terrains, building methods to prevent floods from damaging houses, early warning schemes, first aid, rescue methods and evacuation planning to avoid the loss of lives. These solutions need to be adapted to the local context, implying the translation of documents. It would also help to produce audio documents, incorporate cultural standards, and reach the most vulnerable sections.

At the national, state or district level, with decision-makers, awareness can be increased by education and training on risk creation, by producing assessment techniques to identify the most-obvious risks using existing data, just as it is being done for environmental purposes, allowing the emergence of prevention or mitigation solutions.

Informing the general public on these matters is also a way to produce pressure for better decision-making. In 2004 in Panama, CEPREDENAC<sup>2</sup> and the UNDP supported the Ministry of Finance while modifying the normal government project-financing approval process, so as to train their project reviewers on disaster risks, enabling them to add five questions about risks, to be answered by any proposal: Is the project zone prone to natural events? With which frequency? When finished, will the project produce new risks to other projects? If infrastructure project, is it compliant with the seismic-resistant constructions codes? Does the project consider mitigation measures to reduce its vulnerabilities?

## Responsibilities, duties and rights

As we have seen above, the responsibility on producing vulnerabilities and increasing risk does

not lie solely with the communities. Many decisions affecting local land use or social mobility are driven by local authorities, economical conditions and private investments, national policies and regulations. In some cases, these decisions are even taken in another country (particularly in the case of trans-boundary rivers' management scenarios that produce floods in the lowest part of the watershed). Knowledge should then be used to communicate on an informed basis, so as to promote "horizontal" dialogue and open discussion between parties to look for solutions after determining responsibilities. Development strategies should always be the product of a wide discussion, taking economic, environmental and social interest into account. (Incidentally those are the "ingredients" of sustainable development, as defined during the 1990s.) There should also be a special place for discussing risks, as they also have economic, environmental and social implications which show up during disasters.

Information and communication are among the main purposes of the media. Risks can be reduced even before tragedy strikes by using informed cases studies, success stories or examples of good- and bad-practices. In these efforts, one could highlight existing risks to enhance the dialogue between communities and decision-makers.

It's not enough just to report on the number of the dead, and point at responsibilities after an event. This is specially the case if one's focus is building education around prevention matters, and for empowering communities with useful information.

Based on concrete examples, the media can and should play a significant role in letting large audiences be aware of the risks. It can also play a useful task by getting people to start to think of potential threats before they occur, so that human development activities might include vulnerability-reduction actions too.

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### Endnotes:

- 1 Except known human interaction causing changes in nature's balances, such as global warming and increased frequency of extreme events, or deforestation and its effects on a higher number of flash floods and landslides.
- 2 Spanish acronym for the Coordination Centre for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America

# Who is Afraid of Citizen Journalists?



*Tent housing is provided for survivors of the 26 December 2004 tsunami at the Kuraburi Refugee camp in Thailand.*

(c) 2005 Rachel Serrano, Courtesy of Photoshare

With today's modern ICTs, anyone can become a citizen journalist if they are committed to the free flow of information and opinions. What happens when some disaster survivors as well as relief workers turn citizen journalists, offering an insider perspective that mainstream media professionals find hard to match? A media watcher and citizen journalist offers his perspective.

Sanjana Hattotuwa



(c) 2005 Rachel Serano. Courtesy of PhotoShare

*The Khao Lak shopping center was destroyed by the tsunami that hit the shores of Thailand on 26 December 2004.*

Disasters, whether natural or man-made, used to be phenomena that we read about, saw on the television or heard on the radio *after* they happened. Even the advent of cable TV and 24 hour news channels did not change this.

Unexpected or unplanned, no one could accurately predict where or when they would occur. Once they did, our first images and sounds usually used to be of ambulances rushing into hospital with the injured and the dead; bloody, ashen or mud-stained emergency workers and survivors emerging from the chaos; an aerial shot over the disaster area; an image zoomed in to focus on a single detail (a broken toy, a frozen clock or a single shoe); an animation depicting the lead-up to the disaster and how it played out; sound-bites from traumatized victims and various spokespersons; or a news anchor struggling to be heard above the din of relief work. Headlines the next day would scream out the numbers dead alongside an image of the tragedy -- shot by a professional photographer and purchased for hundreds of dollars.

Large-scale disasters are growing. One the one hand, global warming and unprecedented environmental change are resulting in disasters more frequent and calamitous than before. Natural disasters such as earthquakes (Kashmir, 2005), floods (Bangladesh, India and Nepal, 2007), landslides

and mudslides (Bam, 2003; Chittagong, 2007), volcanic eruptions (Merapi, 2006), tsunamis (South and Southeast Asia, 2005) and forest fires (across Europe, 2007) continue to severely affect the lives and livelihoods of millions. On the other, the iconic images of the London bombings (7 July 2006), the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001, Madrid train bombs (2004) and the Bali bombings (2002 and 2005) coupled with hundreds of gruesome local incidents -- including suicide bombings in countries such as Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Iraq -- are a stark reminder that man made disasters, often the result of terrorism, are a permanent feature of domestic life in many countries.

### **Making sense**

But how do we make sense of such disasters -- their causes, their impact on those involved as victims and perpetrators? How do we maintain compassion in a world with competing human tragedies? Does the increasing availability and affordability of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) -- covering PCs, radio, mobile phones, blogs, SMS and the Internet -- result in the coverage and awareness of disasters qualitatively better than before? Or does reportage across a hundred thousand websites and

blogs by those who are untrained in professional journalism diminish the importance of and, by extension, the response towards a disaster?

There are no easy answers to these questions.

Whether we like it or not, new technologies are changing the manner in which we gather, store, disseminate, consume and comment on news. The overall experience after the tsunami in Sri Lanka and the subsequent design of ICTs for humanitarian aid suggests that ordinary citizens can play a pivotal role in facilitating the flow of information in relief and conflict management mechanisms.

What has changed? Let's take the scenario in the first paragraph. Today, professional photographers still take celebrated images, but now have to compete with citizens with digital cameras in their mobile phones who are often the first to arrive, or already present at the scene. We could call this victim journalism.

The first images of the London bombings (7 July 2006) were not from broadcast quality video cameras of TV networks or the high end cameras of photojournalists. They were grainy, jittery images and video taken from mobile phones by citizens, many of whom were victims of the bombings. For hours after the bombings, this visceral footage was shown repeatedly on the BBC as well as other news networks globally.

## SMS to the rescue

The web is littered with examples on how SMS (Short Message Service, often called text messages) helped in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami in Indonesia and Sri Lanka.<sup>1</sup> For example:

- *I'm standing on the Galle road in Aluthgama and looking at 5 ton trawlers tossed onto the road. Scary shit.*
- *Found 5 of my friends, 2 dead. Of the 5, 4 are back in Colombo. The last one is stranded because of a broken bridge. Broken his leg. But he's alive. Made...*
- *...contact. He got swept away but swam ashore. Said he's been burying people all day. Just dragging them off the beach and digging holes with his hands. Go..*

An enduring lesson in this regard was that since SMS is more resilient to mass scale destruction of telecoms infrastructure<sup>2</sup>, it can be the foundation for early warning systems<sup>3</sup> and as a key alerting tool for communities at risk.<sup>4</sup> For example, the Dutch government is testing a mobile phone danger alert system that sends text messages to people who could be affected by natural disasters or terrorist attacks. The

system, called Cell Broadcast, uses GSM technology to identify cell phone users in a particular area.

Here are four other examples of citizens using SMS:

- Some governments are finding it hard to control the flow of information on inept and inadequate responses to disasters.<sup>5</sup> SMS became an important tool in 2003 in China when it was used to spread information on the SARS epidemic. And although the spread of false information hampered relief efforts and sometimes created mass panic, SMS was a vehicle through which citizens exchanged information that the Chinese government wanted to suppress.
- In the aftermath of the devastating earthquake on the Indonesian island of Java in May 2006, which killed over 5,000 and left 1.6 million homeless, mobile phones quickly became mobile news services for journalists covering the recovery efforts. International media support group Internews worked with more than 180 Indonesian journalists to establish a quick, low-cost text messaging service that enabled local radio stations to report on humanitarian relief.<sup>6</sup>
- In Sri Lanka, mobile phone totting citizens are requested to send in news and situation reports to JasmineNewsWires (JNW), a service set up to broadcast news updates through SMS. These messages are parsed into a news feed on the web, making it easy to access information in real time on everything from traffic conditions, street violence at political rallies and field reports from the embattled regions in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

*"My name is Mohammed Sokor, writing to you from Dagahaley refugee camp in Dadaab. Dear Sir, there is an alarming issue here. People are given too*



(c) JWB/P image archive





<http://radio.voicesofpeace.lk>

few kilograms of food. You must help.” The Economist (26 July 2007) carried an article<sup>7</sup> that began with this quote as an example of how the relationship between victims and aid agencies has changed on account of the mobile phone. It shows how mobile phones could be used to strengthen the quality and responsiveness of aid work because of the accountability and transparency of aid operations it fosters amongst beneficiaries, governments, civil society and donors.

### Citizens bearing witness

In Sri Lanka, citizen journalism initiatives such as Groundviews<sup>8</sup> and Vikalpa<sup>9</sup> elicit content from ordinary citizens with little or no training in journalism. The contributors attempt to humanise violent conflict, support peace and reconciliation and expose the growing divide between that which the Government and other warring parties promise and actually do. In fact, citizen journalists are increasingly playing a major role in meaningfully reporting deaths, the humanitarian fallout and hidden social costs of violent conflict, often glossed over or sensationalised by traditional media.

If we expand our definition of disasters to encompass failed or failing states, or regions with a clear democratic deficit, initiatives that record human rights abuses in the form of photos, videos and short stories produced by ordinary citizens through mobile devices and PCs are hugely important. The Human Rights Video Hub<sup>10</sup>, run by WITNESS and Global Voices, is a powerful example. Another is how Nepali citizens used blogs to restore democracy from the disastrous rule of the Monarchy that led to hundreds of deaths and gross human rights abuses.<sup>11</sup>

Such initiatives - simple yet effective - can help strengthen accountability, expose corruption, help in the restoration of democracy and support governance mechanisms responsive to the needs of citizens.

Mainstream news organizations are taking note - today, citizens across the world are actively encouraged to submit their “palm-grown” content through dedicated portals on Reuters, AP, BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera and many other major networks.<sup>12</sup> Much of the real time footage coming from disasters on these networks are actually those captured by citizens and mobile devices. The growth of high speed internet access in many countries around the world has also resulted in this growth - it is now possible to stream video in real time from many places in the world. This opens up the potential for new perspectives and insights into disasters - instead of one TV crew, we now have a thousand, all of them recording, bearing witness and publishing.

New media through ICTs have also given rise to new ways of visualising disasters - activists now use tools such



[www.vikalpa.org](http://www.vikalpa.org)



[www.groundviews.org](http://www.groundviews.org)

as Google Earth to highlight the enormity of human tragedy in places such as Darfur.<sup>13</sup>

### Many challenges

But is it all good and positive? Put another way, merely because we now have access to a hundred times more content on a disaster than before does not mean that we get any closer to understanding it or responding to it.

Information overload is a real problem, as is the subjectivity of citizens, who only capture what they feel is important and often ignore aspects to a disaster beyond their own comfort zone and prejudices. There is still no widely accepted standard for citizen journalists, though organizations such as the Centre for Citizen Media are actively working towards such standards.<sup>14</sup>

There are other challenges associated with citizen journalism, especially in a context of violent conflict. This author receives vicious hate mail, suffers public insults, is branded a 'terrorist' and even receives the occasional death threat – all because of the content he promotes on the citizen journalism websites he edits.

Not all citizens, even when they can do so and have access to digital devices, record disasters or human rights abuses - especially when their own security could be compromised for having done so. Governments can also clamp down hard on citizen journalism. The French Constitutional Council approved a law in early 2007 that criminalizes the filming or broadcasting of acts of violence by people other than professional journalists. The law could lead to the imprisonment of eyewitnesses who film acts of police violence, or operators of Web sites publishing the images.<sup>15</sup> Sri Lanka unofficially banned a pro-Tamil nationalist website<sup>16</sup> in 2007 and regularly cuts off mobile phone and Internet services in the North and East of the country.<sup>17</sup>

Scared by the potential for embarrassment, political debacles and popular uprisings, countries such as Egypt, Iran, Cuba, North Korea and China vigorously censor and monitor content on blogs and exchanges through SMS, prompting Julien Pain, head of the Internet freedom desk at Reporters Without Borders (RSF) to note.<sup>18</sup> "... all authoritarian regimes are now working to censor the Web, even countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The Ethiopian regime of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has blocked openly critical Web sites and blogs since May 2006, and President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe is considering a law allowing security forces to intercept online messages



Video Image, TVETP image archive



Tamir Ahmed/DrikNEWS/Majority World

*without reference to the courts. One of the first moves by Thailand's military rulers after their September (2006) coup was to censor news Web sites, even foreign ones, that criticized the takeover."*

It is a significant challenge for citizen journalists to cover disasters and conflict in such contexts. What is essential here is to identify the social and organisational contexts in which the technology is implemented. It is true that the evidence of the use of ICTs in disaster management and early warning is growing.<sup>19</sup> It is also true that mobile devices are increasingly powerful because they are pervasive, personal and capable of authoring content.<sup>20</sup> However, like any other tool, they can lie unused, used for purposes they were not intended for, misused or only used for personal gain. There is no guarantee that images and photos from disasters produced by victims in the thick of it will galvanise attention and support.

ICTs can also merely serve to strengthen hierarchies and bureaucracy that impede accountability and responsive aid delivery. In Sri Lanka, the significant deterioration of democracy in 2006-2007 has resulted in a country where anxiety and fear overwhelm a sense of civic duty to bear witness to so much of what is wrong. No amount of mobile phones and PCs is going to magically erase this deep rooted fear of harm for speaking one's mind out. And too often, the victims of disasters and the beneficiaries of aid still continue to languish in camps and suffer the effects of ill-planned relief mechanisms.

I posed at the beginning of this essay a difficult question on how we can maintain compassion in a world with competing human tragedies. The stories of trauma, suffering, loss of humanity, and gross human rights abuses are not easy to digest or comprehend. Yet, sometimes without a single word of commentary, they can show us hope and compassion. They are a vital record and bear witness to events and processes that shape our world and worldview. They archive voices that die or are killed. They show us images and tell us stories we need to listen and respond to.

## Building resilience

Disasters are about resilience - how we pick ourselves up after a human tragedy and slowly return

to normalcy. ICTs help us understand how we can help communities spring back to life after a disaster. They humanise a tragedy, the scale of which may be too large to otherwise comprehend. Citizen journalists, flawed as they may be as individuals, are nevertheless tremendously powerful as a group. They have the potential to capture, over the long term, a multiplicity of rich and insightful perspectives on disasters not often covered by the traditional media.

My response to conflict and disasters in violent and failing states is to suggest the strong potential of citizen journalism to promote a better understanding of disasters, their causes and impact. We cannot wait for the rest of the world to wake up to the potential of citizen journalism to better respond to disasters. My experience in fostering new media frameworks and citizen journalism is that significant challenges can be overcome through the resilience and commitment of citizens to democracy. Often, all they want is to be heard. All we need to do is to awaken in them the imagination to use mobile devices and PCs to bear witness to what they feel is wrong.

We cannot prevent or predict all disasters. However, we can plan for, react to and learn from disasters when they do occur. Citizen journalism, ICT and new media are already helping in many ways in this endeavour.

### Endnotes:

- 1 [http://www.boingboing.net/2004/12/27/smses\\_from\\_sri\\_lanka.html](http://www.boingboing.net/2004/12/27/smses_from_sri_lanka.html) and [http://www.boingboing.net/2005/01/01/nyt\\_sms\\_as\\_warning\\_s.html](http://www.boingboing.net/2005/01/01/nyt_sms_as_warning_s.html)
- 2 <http://www.limeasia.net/2007/08/another-instance-of-voice-failing-and-sms-triumphing-during-disasters/>
- 3 <http://www.limeasia.net/2005/01/sms-as-part-of-early-warning-system> (and also the interesting comments that follow the original post)
- 4 <http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/2005/01/006698.htm>
- 5 <http://www.cnn.com/2005/TECH/11/09/dutch.disaster.warning/index.html>
- 6 [http://www.internews.org/prs/2006/20061019\\_indo.shtml](http://www.internews.org/prs/2006/20061019_indo.shtml)
- 7 [http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=9546242](http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9546242)
- 8 <http://www.groundviews.lk>
- 9 <http://www.vikalpa.org>
- 10 <http://globalvoicesonline.org/-/human-rights-video/>
- 11 <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=21285>
- 12 <http://ict4peace.wordpress.com/2006/12/07/new-media-in-cycles-of-violence-using-technology-for-new-voices/>
- 13 <http://ict4peace.wordpress.com/2007/04/12/darfur-through-google-earth-the-reality-of-conflict-through-crisis-in-darfur/> is one example, of a growing number, of the use of multimedia rich mapping tools such as Google Earth to help visualise the otherwise difficult to comprehend enormity of humanitarian crises such as Darfur.
- 14 <http://www.citmedia.org/principles>
- 15 <http://www.macworld.com/news/2007/03/06/franceban/index.php?src=mwrss>
- 16 [http://freemediasrilanka.org/index.php?action=con\\_news\\_full&id=625&section=news](http://freemediasrilanka.org/index.php?action=con_news_full&id=625&section=news)
- 17 [http://freemediasrilanka.org/index.php?action=con\\_news\\_full&id=443&section=news](http://freemediasrilanka.org/index.php?action=con_news_full&id=443&section=news)
- 18 [http://news.com.com/2010-1028\\_3-6155582.html?part=rss&tag=2547-1\\_3-0-20&subj=news](http://news.com.com/2010-1028_3-6155582.html?part=rss&tag=2547-1_3-0-20&subj=news)
- 19 <http://ict4peace.pbwiki.com/>
- 20 <http://www.worldchanging.com/archives/006458.html>

# Bridging the Long 'Last Mile'



TVEAP image archive

Building high cost, high tech early warning systems is necessary, but not sufficient. The bigger challenge is how to disseminate credible and timely warnings to all communities at risk. A combination of broadcast media, community-based preparedness and strategic use of ICTs could help cover that 'last mile'.

Nalaka Gunawardene



In the months following the tsunami of December 2004, some believed that it had caught the Indian Ocean rim countries entirely by surprise. This misconception, repeated by governments and aid donors alike, was included even in some independent analyses.

While the countries of South and Southeast Asia were largely unprepared to act on the tsunami, the disaster did not entirely arrive as a surprise. As the killer waves originating from the ocean near Indonesia's Sumatra Island radiated across the Indian Ocean at the speed of a jetliner, the alert about the impending tsunami moved through the Internet at the speed of light. Scientists at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre (PTWC) in Hawaii, who had detected the extraordinary seismic activity, issued a local tsunami warning one hour and five minutes after the undersea quake.<sup>1</sup>

That was a bit too late for Indonesia -- which, being closest to the quake's epicentre, was hit soon after the seismic event -- but it could have made a difference for countries further away, such as India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. As is now well established, an authentic warning was delivered to each country, but there were few listeners at the receiving end -- and even fewer to act on it.

For example, the warning went unheeded by the centres of power in Sri Lanka: no one reacted with the swiftness such information warranted. Institutional, technological and societal failures combined to prevent the timely sharing of this international warning within the island of Sri Lanka. There was also a communications failure in sharing an alert across the country. The tsunami progressively pounded the tear drop-shaped island for nearly four hours, starting on the eastern coast at around 8.30 am local time, and then spreading northwards and southwards. If only the rest of the island had been alerted soon after the east was first hit, coastal evacuation could still have significantly reduced deaths elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

But alas, that too did not happen. As a result, over 35,000 people died, most of them needlessly.<sup>3</sup>



*HazInfo Project meeting at Sarvodaya*

## Where were all the ICTs?

It was astonishing that a disaster of this magnitude could arrive without any public warning in many places across Asia despite the rapid proliferation of information and communications technologies (ICTs). With thunderous impact, the tsunami drove home the point that the timely and efficient delivery of disaster warnings involves much more than mere technologies.

As Sir Arthur C Clarke, author and long-time resident of Sri Lanka, later remarked: "The Asian tsunami's death toll could have been drastically reduced if the warning -- already known to scientists -- was disseminated quickly and effectively to millions of coastal dwellers on the Indian Ocean rim. It is appalling that our sophisticated global communications systems simply failed us that fateful day."

Clarke, best known for inventing the communications satellite, added: "We need to address the long-term issues of better disaster preparedness, functional early warning systems and realistic arrangements to cope with tsunamis and a multitude of other hazards. It is imperative that we improve our monitoring and early warning systems, but we must also put in place a fail-proof plan to sound the alarm as and when necessary."<sup>4</sup>

In response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, the United Nations and aid donor countries embarked on building a high-tech tsunami early warning system in the Indian Ocean. By June 2006, UNESCO -- whose Inter-governmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) coordinated the effort -- reported that the system was 'up and running'. Some 25 new seismographic stations would detect underwater earthquake tremors, it said, while three deep-seabed sensors were in place to detect tsunami waves through tiny changes in water pressure. More equipment, including satellite sensors and additional seabed sensors, are to be added to the system by 2008. A network of 26 national information centres will enable Indian Ocean countries to receive and distribute warnings of potential tsunamis.<sup>5</sup>

However, all these elaborate arrangements address only part of the challenge. As I wrote in December 2005: "Developing effective early warning systems for multiple hazards is an urgent priority for the Indian Ocean rim countries. But setting up a state-of-the-art, high tech and high cost system is not a solution by itself. Because the most advanced early warning system in the world can only do half the job: alert governments and other centres of power (e.g. military) of an impending disaster. The far bigger challenge is to disseminate that warning to large numbers of people spread across vast areas in the shortest possible time."<sup>6</sup>



The crucial question remains: how can we travel that all important 'last mile'?

### Uncertainties and difficulties

Issuing and disseminating public warnings about rapid onset disasters like tsunamis is fraught with uncertainties and practical difficulties. This has been underscored by recent experiences in the Indian Ocean rim countries. Two examples:

- On 17 July 2006, a magnitude 7.7 undersea earthquake occurred off the resort town of Pangandaran on Java island in Indonesia. The tremor was detected by various groups of seismologists overseas, and within 17 minutes, the PTWC issued a tsunami warning. That warning reached the Indonesian capital in two minutes by email -- but officials there lacked a proper system to get the warning across to areas at risk in their vast, archipelagic nation. Two-metre high waves hit the southern Java coastline 37 minutes after the quake. A timely public warning and evacuation could have saved many of the nearly 600 people who died.<sup>7</sup>
- On 12 September 2007, a magnitude 8.4 earthquake shook western Sumatra with the epicentre located undersea off the city of Bengkulu. Following seismic reports, repeated tsunami warnings were issued in Indonesia, as well as in Sri Lanka, but the quake did not produce a tsunami. While coastal evacuations took place in Sri Lanka, there was considerable confusion and panic which indicated that systems and procedures were not yet in place to respond rapidly and appropriately to such a warning.<sup>8</sup>

To warn communities about rapid onset disasters, improvements are required on at least three parallel fronts:

- the science of rapid detection and analysis needs to be fine-tuned;
- proper institutional arrangements have to be in place to decide on and issue credible, swift warnings; and
- there should be effective ways of communicating these warnings to everyone at risk.

One 'ready-made' option for rapidly disseminating disaster warnings in Asia is to use the broadcast media, i.e. radio and television. Since the early 1990s, Asia's airwaves have become crowded with a cacophony of FM radio and television channels that today reach out to most households day and night. Using the airwaves -- a public property -- these channels inform, titillate and occasionally educate their audiences. Most channels would willingly carry authentic, official warnings and other public interest messages in times of crisis, including when a hazard turns into a disaster.

Indeed, partnerships with the broadcast media can make a big difference in going the last mile. Yet there are inherent limitations in using radio and TV channels, which are engaged in peddling content and messages mostly in a single direction (from producers or journalists to their audiences). Ordinary radio and TV receivers also cannot receive warnings when they are switched off.

As the world grapples with the increasing frequency and intensity of disasters, the search continues for other ways in which life-saving warnings can be delivered quickly, reliably and effectively.

Can the potential of ICTs be tapped to augment the broadcast media and official methods (e.g. police or military communications) in this process? What is the right mix of technology, preparedness and community mobilisation that would help create more disaster resilience at the grassroots?

### Technology, training, action!

These questions were at the heart of a path-breaking initiative implemented in Sri Lanka during 2006-2007. 'Evaluating Last Mile Hazard Information Dissemination Project' (HazInfo project for short) was an action research project by LIRNEasia to find out how communication technology and training can be used to safeguard grassroots communities from disasters. It involved Sarvodaya, Sri Lanka's largest development organisation, and several other partners that included telecom operators, civil society organisations, IT companies and the media (see box for full list). The research was supported by International Development Research Center (IDRC) of Canada.



TVETP image archive

Dr Rohan Samarajiva, Executive Director, LIRNEasia

## HazInfo project partners

LIRNEasia ([www.lirneasia.net](http://www.lirneasia.net)) brought together the following institutions and experts:

Sarvodaya, [www.sarvodaya.org](http://www.sarvodaya.org)

TVE Asia Pacific, [www.tveap.org](http://www.tveap.org)

WorldSpace Corporation, [www.worldspace.com](http://www.worldspace.com)

Dialog Telekom, [www.dialog.lk](http://www.dialog.lk)

Microimage, [www.microimage.com](http://www.microimage.com)

Solana Networks, [www.solananetworks.com](http://www.solananetworks.com)

Lanka Software Foundation, [www.opensource.lk](http://www.opensource.lk)

Vanguard Foundation

Innovative Technologies

Dr Peter Anderson, Simon Fraser University

Dr Gordon Gow, University of Alberta

The project studied which ICTs and community mobilisation methods could work effectively in disseminating information on hazards faced by selected coastal communities. The exercise was not confined to tsunamis alone; other rapid onset disasters such as cyclones and floods were also covered.

The project grew out of a participatory concept paper that LIRNEasia developed in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami.<sup>9</sup> It noted that a national early warning system was a 'pure public good', and the responsibility of its supply would normally fall on the government. However, the paper acknowledged that, due to lack of capacity, "it is unlikely that the last mile of such a system will be provided by the local government or private firms operating in the marketplace".



*Dr Vinya Ariyaratne, Executive Director, Sarvodaya*

The HazInfo project addressed that vacuum. It was designed around a governance structure where a non-profit, non-governmental organisation (Sarvodaya) would provide the necessary oversight, training and the sourcing of critical information, i.e. disaster warnings. The project was rooted in the model of village self-governance that has been evolved for half a century by Sarvodaya, whose work encompasses 15,000 villages in all parts of the island.

"We played multiple roles in the project," recalls Dr Vinya Ariyaratne, Executive Director of Sarvodaya. "At a community level we were involved in selecting a suitable sector of villagers for this research project. The project was carried out in villages which have been involved with Sarvodaya work for a long time. And then we implemented the project and served as the interface to the community."

The project involved several steps:

- At its headquarters in Moratuwa, just south of the capital Colombo, Sarvodaya set up a Hazard Information Hub (HIH) to maintain round-the-clock links with the government's designated disaster warning agencies as well as international sources monitoring various hazards in the Indian Ocean region.
- Twenty-six youth leaders from Sarvodaya's voluntary Peace Brigade (Shanti Sena) received training in community-based disaster preparedness. They took this knowledge and training to 32 chosen coastal villages (all impacted by the Indian Ocean tsunami) and mobilised local communities from muslim, Sinhala and Tamil backgrounds.
- In each village, a first responder was identified by the community to receive a warning from Sarvodaya's HIH and activate the local method of sounding the alarm. This voluntary responsibility was assigned to local level Sarvodaya leaders.
- Based on a participatory hazard mapping process, each community prepared a plan on how to respond to such an alert or warning. This included identifying vulnerabilities, demarcating evacuation routes and designating safe locations for community members to assemble after evacuation.
- Communities also decided on the most effective ways for locally communicating a disaster warning they would receive: choices ranged from runners and loud-speakers to temple bells.
- To assess how all these factors blend together, hazard warning simulations (which included evacuation drills) were conducted in each participating village.

TVEAP image archive

## Relay and amplification

The result of these interventions was not a traditional warning system that is usually used by governments but a community-based model used for alert and notification, emphasizes Dr Rohan Samarajiva, Executive Director of LIRNEasia.

He adds: “This is not in any way, shape or form a public warning system that lots of people talk about. When you talk about a community-based warning system, we are not talking about reaching every member of the community. We are talking about a representative of the community, a designated ‘first responder’.”

The research component of the project involved evaluating factors that contribute to effective last mile hazard information dissemination. These included the reliability and effectiveness of various ICTs; how training and the level of organisational development in a village influence community responses; and how women participated in these exercises.

To transmit information from the hub to the grassroots, five ICT tools in eight combinations were tested out in the participating villages. The tools were:

- Fixed telephones (using wireless CDMA technology)
- Java enabled mobile phones customised to carry text alerts in English, Sinhala and Tamil
- Very Small Aperture Satellite Terminals (VSATs)
- Addressable Radios for Emergency Alerts (AREA), developed by the WorldSpace Corporation (which this project was the first to field test)
- A remote alarm device (RAD) developed by Dialog Telekom and University of Moratuwa.

It was akin to running a relay – from the Hub to the first responders, and from them to the communities at risk. Speed and accuracy were of essence at each step of the transmission.

The HazInfo project was among the first in the world to apply the Common Alerting Protocol (CAP), an international standard method to exchange emergency alerts and public warnings among different alerting technologies.<sup>10</sup> CAP helps standardise the collection and relaying of hazard warnings and reports locally, nationally and regionally for input into a variety of dissemination systems.

LIRNEasia analysed how each ICT tool or combination was integrated into communities to deliver timely warnings to those designated as first responders. The factors needed for efficient functioning of the hazard information hub were also studied.<sup>11</sup>

The front-runner was AREA combined with fixed or mobile phones. Under normal circumstances, AREA

## Community members speak . . .

Testimonies for the HazInfo project’s need and relevance have come from many community members in the villages that were involved. A sample:

“If only we knew how to protect ourselves and our belongings in December 2004, we wouldn’t have lost lives and property.”

- **Sinnathambi Thangarani**, Karativu

“This has helped us to get rid of fear and hesitation in our minds. Now we know what we should do when a disaster strikes.”

- **J A Malani**, Hambantota

“Earlier we had no way of knowing about a disaster in advance. But now Sarvodaya has given us this facility which will inform us about a disaster two hours ahead. That will help us very much to save ourselves and our belongings.”

- **Annandaraja Niroshan**, Karativu

Excerpts of interviews from TVEAP film, *The Long Last Mile*. See: <http://www.tveap.org/news/0710lon.html>

works as a radio, receiving digital radio transmissions from WorldSpace satellites in geosynchronous orbit. But they can be switched on remotely from a central location, whether or not the user has turned it on at that moment, converting them instantly into a hazard alert system. Each radio has an in-built Global Positioning System (GPS) and a unique code. This enables hazard warnings to be issued to only those units known to be within a vulnerable area -- or just to those units with specific assigned codes.<sup>12</sup>

Mobile and fixed phones, on their own, were also found to be reliable, although having two communication technologies ensured at least one would work at critical moments. AREA and RAD units also worked well as a combination.

For tsunami-affected communities anxious to safeguard themselves from future disasters, communication technologies epitomised reliability and dependability, says Dr Samarajiva. “If you don’t have the technology, if you don’t have the assurance and the trust that is built up over time that the messages will be reliable, they will come rain or shine, they will come in the middle of the night when I’m sleeping, they will come in the middle of the day when my husband is not here. It’s basically a trust relationship that has to be anchored by the technology.”

The project findings highlight the importance of the sociology of communication. As Sarvodaya's Dr Ariyaratne says: "We learned there are so many social elements. One is the way the community behaves in a situation when a hazard alert is given. And also the collective behaviour of the community and the knowledge that they had before the event is so vital...We were able to identify in very specific terms what technological, social and legal as well as other elements are required to make a community warning system work."

### Lessons from the Last Mile

As these findings are documented and discussed by researchers, the key generic lessons may be summed up as follows:

- **Trusted technology:** Use ICTs that are reliable in performance, accessible at the local levels and trusted by the people.
- **Complementary redundancy:** Always have at least two different ICTs delivering information, to minimise transmission failures.
- **Credible information:** Tap only the most authentic sources of information at national and international level, reducing room for misinformation and rumour.
- **Right mix:** Achieve the appropriate combination of technology, training and institutional arrangements at the grassroots.
- **Be prepared:** Raise localised awareness and provide experiential training so community know what to do when crisis occurs.

### Living with hazards

The HazInfo project's basic premise was not to issue any warnings, but to amplify and relay them once they have been issued by designated governmental authorities. The project collaborated with the government's civilian and military personnel trained on disaster preparedness, warning issuance and emergency response.

The generic lessons (see box) are helping Sarvodaya to integrate disaster preparedness into its village development programmes. Says Dr Ariyaratne: "Our main objective is to make the 15,000 Sarvodaya villages disaster resilient. Ultimately it is the community which is responsible for making the decision and doing the most effective work. And that was proven during the tsunami disaster...the community response was the best response."

The Last Mile HazInfo Project can be a pathfinder for Asian countries that united in grief when the tsunami struck. They can now unite again in ensuring public safety through the right use of communications technology, community preparedness and training.

The author thanks Dr Rohan Samarajiva, Nuwan Waidyanatha and Natasha Udu-gama of LIRNEasia and Dr Vinya Ariyaratne of Sarvodaya for their inputs and references.

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- 3 <http://www.limeasia.net/projects/completed-projects/national-early-warning-system/>
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# Gender and Disasters: Tracing the Link



*"I can't move, I'm tired and sick. I'm an old woman, please give me some relief", Kajban, a 80 years woman yells. Flood hits second time in his house. Chilmari, Kurigram, Bangladesh. September 2007.*

**Tanvir Ahmed/DrikNEWS/Majority World**

What's gender got to do with disasters if Nature is indiscriminate in unleashing her fury on men and women? South Asia's experience goes against this perception. Disasters impact the human constructed society where gender relations are a key determinant in who is affected and how the rest of the world perceives and responds to calamities.

Ammu Joseph



At an international conference on the media's role in the post-tsunami scenario, in April 2005, a journalist who questioned the scant coverage of women's concerns in the aftermath of the December 2004 disaster was told off by a male resource person. She was accused of being "too gender sensitive" and advised by a fellow female participant to shed her "women's ghetto mentality." "This sort of thinking isn't going to get you anywhere," the latter cautioned her. "People died, not just women. Why should the media concentrate on the women?"<sup>1</sup>

Anticipating just such a reaction to my presentation on some of the missing links in media coverage of the tsunami at a workshop on 8 January 2005, I flagged the doubt myself: "It may seem irrelevant to raise the question of gender awareness in the context of media coverage of a natural disaster such as this one, which obviously affected those who happened to be in

the path of the massive waves -- men, women and children. Can there possibly be a gender angle to the tsunami story? Is it at all reasonable to call for a gender perspective while covering the post-tsunami situation?"<sup>2</sup>

It was not long before it became abundantly clear that gender was indeed a critical factor in the tragedy, as well as in the relief, recovery and rehabilitation process that followed.<sup>3</sup>

For example, there is substantial evidence that more women than men died when the killer waves engulfed the shores. Most of the reasons cited for the apparently higher female death toll have everything to do with gender as manifested in many of the affected countries. For instance, women's restrictive clothes, their customary inability to swim or climb trees, and their conventional roles as mothers and care-givers.



Qibai Ahmed/Orinews/Majority World

*Drought is a common phenomenon in Bangladesh. Most of the areas of northern part of the country facing severe water crises in irrigation even fresh water. Rajshahi, Bangladesh. April 2007.*

There were also early reports of molestation and rape at some relief camps, of trafficking in women and girls, and of adolescent girls being made to marry older men who had lost their wives in the calamity.

## Special needs

At another level, the special needs and concerns of women and girls – such as inner wear and sanitary napkins, accessible toilets with adequate water, reproductive and maternal health care, female health workers, safety and privacy -- were often forgotten in relief efforts.

Many women also found themselves left out in the distribution of relief money and material, thanks to traditional notions about heads of families or breadwinners. Single women – including female heads of households -- were particularly vulnerable, especially if they did not have adult sons.

In the rehabilitation and reconstruction phase, too, women were disadvantaged, especially with regard to the restoration of means of livelihood. With the plight of fishermen, and their losses in terms of assets like boats and nets, occupying centre-stage, little attention was paid to other economic activities in coastal areas, including those involving women.

In addition, the “property-owner centric” approach that generally characterised rehabilitation packages came under criticism for ignoring the needs of people from the fishing and farming communities who do not own boats, nets, land or shops but do contribute their labour and skills to the coastal economy. Under the circumstances women -- who traditionally form a major section of the informal or unorganised sector of labour and who rarely own property – were rendered doubly invisible, with their economic activities, losses, and needs by and large unaccounted for.

The consequent neglect of women’s livelihood needs was obviously catastrophic for a large number of families, especially among the poor, because women are often their sole earners or sources of support. And, in any case, women’s earnings tend to go directly towards meeting the basic needs of their families, while a significant portion of many men’s earnings is frequently spent on personal habits such as drinking, smoking, and gambling. There have, in fact, been reports of relief money being wasted in this way and then serving as triggers for domestic violence.

To make matters worse, women and local women’s collectives – including self-help or savings and credit groups – were often ignored

by the government, other agencies, as well as gram panchayats (rural institutions of local self-governance), in the process of post-tsunami planning and decision-making. This was clearly a widespread problem across the affected region, highlighted at several meetings in July 2005.

## Women excluded

For example, a statement issued by participants in an Asian women’s consultation on post-tsunami challenges in Banda Aceh (Indonesia) began by asserting, “Seven months after the December 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, affected women continue to be marginalised, discriminated against and excluded from the process of rebuilding on all levels: the family, the community and the nation.”<sup>4</sup>

A South Asian conference on gender concerns in post-tsunami reconstruction in Batticaloa (Sri Lanka) also highlighted the lack of representation of and decision-making powers for women in rebuilding activities, apart from land rights and livelihood issues.<sup>5</sup> And a meeting called by the Tamil Nadu Dalit Women’s Movement in Tharangambadi focussed attention on the continuing plight of Dalit women survivors in different parts of the worst-affected State in India.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, tsunami-affected women were not merely victims. In fact, many played active roles in rescue, relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction. What is more, as “first responders,” they often took on the challenging task of restoring a semblance of normalcy to life after the disaster: cooking, cleaning, taking care of the sick and the injured, the young and the old, sending children to school, salvaging belongings, helping to repair homes, and trying to make ends meet and regain livelihoods under extremely difficult circumstances.

Many women survivors also grew in strength and confidence in the wake of their experience of devastation and tragedy. They approached both government officials and non-governmental organisations for assistance in rebuilding their lives and livelihoods. Recognising the multiple benefits of collective action, they formed, joined or reactivated self-help groups, some learning from the experiences of earthquake-affected rural women from Gujarat and Maharashtra (India) who had turned disaster into opportunity by working together to re-establish themselves and their communities.<sup>7</sup> In the process they managed to overcome prior restraints on their mobility, become more assertive and ambitious

in claiming their rights, and compel families and communities to recognise their personhood and capabilities.

### Unequal in death

So, yes, people died -- not just women. People suffered, succumbed, survived, recovered, rebuilt -- not just women. Nobody would be stupid enough to suggest that the media focus exclusively on women. But it is surely not unfair to propose that the media -- in their vital role as the Fourth Estate, the watchdog of society, defenders of the public interest -- must attempt to reflect the experiences, concerns and opinions of diverse sections of the population, including the female half of the human race? Yet, despite the well-documented gender differences in the impact of disasters, and despite the fact that women and children constitute the majority of victims seen in the media's representation of disasters -- natural and otherwise -- media coverage of recurring disasters across the world continues to be, by and large, gender-blind.

As Oxfam's March 2005 Briefing Note on "The Tsunami's Impact on Women" put it, "There is no scarcity of reflections and commentary on the impact of the disaster that shook the coasts of several Asian countries on 26 December 2004. The media have ... looked into almost every conceivable angle: the impact on tourism, the impact on the environment, revealed underwater villages, even the impact on animals. One area that has ... received less attention is the gender impact of the tsunami, and its impact on women in particular."<sup>8</sup>



*In the Sindh region of Pakistan, children carry water back to their Thar Desert home from a well built by Muslim Aid. In this region, some people walk for over an hour in order to collect fresh drinkable water. In an effort to reduce this much travel for water, Muslim Aid has built over 100 wells here and continue to build more.*

(c) 2006 Jacob Simkin, Courtesy of Photoshare

Months later, media coverage of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans and neighbouring areas in the United States of America, was little better.

As Joni Seager -- the scholar and activist in feminist geography, women's studies, and environmental studies -- pointed out, while the mainstream media "started asking tough, targeted questions about why this disaster fell so hard on one side of the race line" at least a few days after the event they were not so quick to notice and highlight the fact that the disaster "fell hard on one side of the gender line, too."<sup>9</sup> According to her, "The 'not-noticing' of the gendered dimensions of this disaster by the American media and by the panoply of experts who interpreted the disaster to the public through the media is alarming and warrants attention in itself."

Gender blindness also characterised much of the reporting on the massive earthquake that struck parts of Pakistan and India, particularly Kashmir, in October 2005. Yet there are many indications that gender played a crucial role in the disproportionate number of female casualties, as well as in women's access to aid and healthcare, and that it will continue to determine the lives of many survivors.

### Men run the 'alms bazaar'

For example, an early Reuters report quoted Pakistani officials who acknowledged that the majority of the victims were women and children but that much of the aid, including relief material, was being intercepted by and distributed through the men of the affected communities.<sup>10</sup>

According to Aditi Kapoor, "Most aid workers arriving in the affected areas are usually greeted first by groups of men. Women from the affected communities usually stand some distance away."<sup>11</sup> As one woman told her, "It is easier for men to voice their concerns. But whom can we go to for (our) issues?"

United Nations estimates suggest that there were 40,000 pregnant women among the four million people affected by the deadly quake.<sup>12</sup> Health officials warned that the tremors could have triggered miscarriage and premature labour, which would entail more risk than normal in view of the destruction of many of the clinics and hospitals that constituted the limited healthcare facilities available in the worst affected areas at the best of times.

Even on the Indian side of Kashmir, which was relatively less devastated, over 300 cases of miscarriage were registered in the weeks after the





Women from ICDDR,B's Kamalapur Surveillance Site form a long line to receive food at the Dhaka City Corporation Transportation yard, their shelter after Bangladesh's worst flood in 15 years. ICDDR,B canteen staff cooked 15 large pots of highly nutritious kitcheri (dhal, rice, oil, onion, spices) with superb organization by the field workers. Over 2500 individuals were fed on 31 July 2004. (c) 2004 David Sack/ICDDR,B, Courtesy of Photoshare

disaster, emergency obstetric care was inaccessible, and trauma counselling negligible, according to Prakriti Gupta.<sup>13</sup>

One of the most widely reported post-earthquake “gender” stories, versions of which appeared in some mainstream international news outlets, was the Melody Cinema story. It was about the conversion of an abandoned movie theatre in Islamabad into a women’s hospital catering to the needs of the large number of women who sustained spinal injuries in the disaster. A doctor attending to the severely injured in the makeshift medical centre said that 90 per cent of the patients he had seen were girls and women. Most were paraplegics.<sup>14</sup> The fact that most of the patients with spinal injuries were women is attributed primarily to gender-related roles and restrictions.

The future of these women, too, will in all likelihood be determined by gender. Unable to walk

and, in many cases, to control their bladders or bowels, they may require constant care for the rest of their lives. Under the circumstances, the married ones lived in fear of being abandoned by their husbands and the single ones knew their chances of marriage were virtually non-existent. The attending doctor was obviously concerned about what would happen to his patients after they left the hospital. “This society is cruel,” he said. “They will be out on the streets unless they can get a skill and become independent. A young woman who does not walk, who has no control over her bladder, has no real chance in this society.”<sup>15</sup>

Paraplegics were not the only ones facing a bleak future.

There were reports of women survivors – especially widows without adult sons -- losing property to male relatives after moving out of their broken homes in shattered mountain villages in the







immediate aftermath of the disaster.<sup>16</sup> Most of them had no papers to prove their ownership and, it was reported, according to customary law, a dead man's property reverts to his brothers rather than his wife. Although daughters do have a right to a share in the property, this is apparently often denied to them. As a result, a large number of quake-affected women and girls could be left with no home to call their own.

Still, several women have also been able to turn the disaster into an opportunity to restructure their lives for the better. With so many families having lost homes, assets and means of livelihood in the rubble, these women faced less opposition to their efforts to find work outside the confines of their houses. Some set up petty shops, others found employment in non-governmental organisations. And, encouraged by humanitarian organisations, some of them set up women's committees to assess their communities' rehabilitation and reconstruction needs.<sup>17</sup>

To sum up, one unfortunate constant across the many disasters that took place in several parts of the world through 2005 was the huge toll they took on women. After a trip to tsunami-ravaged Sri Lanka in November 2005, Ritu Sharma, a leading voice on international women's issues, noted, "I am (now) more cognisant than ever of how natural disasters impact women severely and in specific ways that are often not recognised, especially during reconstruction phases after the crises have faded from the news."<sup>18</sup>

that determine how people are affected by such disasters is that of gender."<sup>19</sup>

The media need to recognise more fully that even "hard news" coverage, including the reporting of disasters, can actually benefit from gender consciousness. By focussing attention on the inevitable social consequences of "natural" calamities, the media can alert both communities and the authorities to the impact of the event on different sections of the affected population, including various categories of women, and highlight the importance of taking their experiences, opinions, needs and



Jungle Run Productions, TVEAP image archive

Clearing tsunami rubble in Aceh, Indonesia

## Disasters are discriminatory

Clearly, then, gender is an angle that needs to be explored in media coverage of disasters and their aftermath. As the Oxfam Briefing Note put it, "Disasters, however 'natural,' are profoundly discriminatory. Wherever they hit, pre-existing structures and social conditions determine that some members of the community will be less affected while others will pay a higher price. Among the differences

resources into account in the relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction process.

The bonus is that the special stories resulting from gender awareness not only serve a valuable purpose in the aftermath of such events, but they are also likely to stand out as more memorable than many others in the customary media blitz that generally follows.

So looking at the world through a gender lens has nothing to do with being "too gender sensitive" or being burdened with a "women's ghetto mentality." Disasters have everything to do with gender, as

*(Opposite Page)*

November 2005: A girl at a refugee camp in Muzaffarabad, Pakistan.

Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World

do other high profile, high prestige areas of media coverage such as war, social conflict, politics and economics. The stories are out there. If few of them make it to the mainstream media it is because gender awareness is still missing in many newsrooms.

There is, today, no dearth of sources and resources that can be tapped to figure out whether or not an event or process has any special implications for women, including different categories of women, as well as other vulnerable sections of society whose

voices are not commonly heard in the media.<sup>20</sup> It's just a question of looking for them – and even that is not difficult, especially in the present era of the Internet.

The bottom line is that unless gender is acknowledged as one of several factors that affect people's experience of almost everything, and accepted as one of the "angles" to be explored while covering anything, the media will continue to tell only part of the story – whatever that story may be.

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This chapter is based on a paper presented by the writer during the session on "Reporting the world through a gender lens" at the 4th Asia Media Summit, Kuala Lumpur, 30 May 2007, which was adapted from "The Gender Factor" by Ammu Joseph in *21st Century Journalism in India*, Nalini Rajan (ed.), Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2007

# Healing Broken Hearts, Calming Anguished Minds



*10 January 2005: Devotees pray at the Shrine of Our Lady of Matara Church, where many people were washed away while they were at congregation. Sri Lanka.*

**Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World**

Communication is one of four necessary steps towards recovery. Survivors need to maintain communication with family, friends and counsellors in order to share their experiences. They need to tell their stories about the disaster, and listen to others as they tell theirs.

Chin Saik Yoon

Survivors recover from disasters in the isolation of what is left of their communities. Their rebuilding begins far away from the gaze of the mass media. Often within alien environments created by relief shelters. And usually forgotten by media audiences who had once taken a keen interest in the survivors' plight.

During the months and years of anguish that follow a disaster, survivors have to cope with anger, grief, homelessness, isolation, shame, physical and emotional pain, and despair. They often do this alone. In most instances, they are disconnected from social and communication networks that are at best temporarily disrupted or at worst permanently impaired.

The revival of these networks is given low priority by most relief agencies – there is always the greater urgency to tackle the tangible – even though most

in order to share their experiences. They need to tell their stories about the disaster, and listen to others as they tell theirs. This helps survivors to collectively release their stress.

Participatory communication processes work best here. This is where survivors assume the role of both the “initiator” as well as the “receiver” of communication. No expert or government official should be there to decide what is to be discussed by the survivors. They need only facilitate the process. The participatory processes ensure that communication occurs at the pace that communities are comfortable with and address issues only when survivors are ready to deal with them.

Communication is also vital in rebuilding efforts when communities are mobilised to plan, execute, and evaluate reconstruction programmes. An important part of these programmes will need

Video Image, TVEAP image archive



Video Image, TVEAP image archive



Jungle Run Productions, TVEAP image archive



*(Left) Sri Lankan Theeban survived the tsunami but not its cruel aftermath. (Centre) Sri Lankan teenager Heshani took months to come to terms with the sea (Right) Indonesian Putri was just 8 when tsunami shattered her life.*

survivors grieve more deeply for their intangible losses. Relief agencies must come round to see that their mission to heal these broken hearts and calm their anguished minds is just as urgent.

### Reconnecting and rebuilding

Communication is one of four necessary steps towards recovery.<sup>1</sup> Survivors need to maintain communication with family, friends, and counsellors

to focus on reviving core social elements that make up communities. These elements are as vital as, if not more important than, the infrastructure; in the absence of socially connected survivors, physical and hardware components alone will not lead to the rebirth of viable communities. What is worst, if such infrastructure is rebuilt without the active participation of the people in their planning, it may contribute to the disintegration rather than re-integration of communities.



In participatory communication processes, technical production values – which can sometimes be all important to the mass media – are considered unimportant. What matters most of all is the people's active participation in deciding what needs to be communicated, by whom, to whom, using which channels, and for what purpose. Participatory media relies heavily on inter-personal communication (talking *and* listening), cultural rituals, ceremonies, religious rites, performances and theatre, and group activities.

## The immediate aftermath

### Notices of the missing

One of the most vivid examples of participatory media in the immediate aftermath of recent disasters is the spontaneous posting of missing-people notices by family members, colleagues and friends. We saw this outside the hospitals in the areas struck by the Asian Tsunami and around the site of The World Trade Center in New York City during the days after September 11, 2001.

The notices invariably carry a photograph of the missing person, his or her name, a short description including what clothes they were last seen wearing, and the contact telephone number or address of the people looking for the missing person. The notices are often photocopied and posted at vantage points where they stand the best chances of being seen and read. These include the site of the disaster, major intersections, outside hospitals and police stations, and public venues such as bus and train stations, food stores, and cafes.

Jonathan Perugia, a Jakarta-based photographer, found such notices plastered everywhere in Banda Aceh when he arrived soon after the tsunami. He has photographed these notices and mounted them online as a gallery at the Christian Aid website.



TVEAP image archive

### Looking for the missing in Aceh

Jonathan Perugia, a Jakarta-based photographer, digitised and mounted on a website notices about people missing after the tsunami. This is what he said about the notices he photographed at the website:

Normally the dead and the missing are faceless. I found it poignant to see these pictures of missing people posted all over town....

These photocopies of family portraits, of special or even mundane moments in ordinary lives, become a unique memorial which emphasises the tsunami in a more personal way than pictures of dead bodies and destruction ever can....

When you approach the display, you get a sense of anonymity. Then you step forward, and see people's eyes and expressions. When I first started taking the pictures, I imagined them displayed like this, in a way that gives a sense of the sheer number of victims... then you step closer and get a sense of who they were. It's a similar feeling to that I had when I saw the photos of Khmer Rouge victims in Phnom Penh: a simultaneous sense of the anonymity of death, and the personalities of the dead....



Perugia's efforts at photographing and then mounting the images at a website are a good example of what communicators can do to facilitate this participatory process. Since internet access will probably be unavailable in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, copies of such webpages may be distributed on compact discs (CDs) and made available to disaster relief centres where they may help in either the happy process of reuniting dispersed family members or the sad task of identifying the dead.

Agencies at the scene of the disaster should support this spontaneous and participatory form of communication by making available wall space for the posting of the notices. The notices should be allowed to stay on display until recovery efforts are well-established and effective documentation processes for reporting the missing have been established for and accepted by the people. The notices may then be removed and disposed of in a manner that is respectful of the dead who may be featured among the collection of notices. The notices may either be stored for photography, or scanning, at a later date to create a database similar to that built by Perugia, or disposed of in a culturally acceptable manner, such as burning them at a temple compound set aside for funereal rituals.

Websites and databases for reporting the missing should include text that is searchable. It should ideally include the names of the missing, descriptions of their appearance, including their ages, height and weight, and what they were wearing at the time of the disaster, and where they may have been at that time. Such information will help make the webpages a searchable database which disaster-relief agencies can use efficiently.

I saw another striking use of the internet during the flooding and destruction of many parts of New Orleans when hurricane Katrina struck the city. I started to monitor the website <http://www.nola.com> closely<sup>2</sup>, starting when the storm was a couple of hours away from coming ashore, and then tracked its consequences when it roared across the city. The newspaper that published the website was well prepared for the storm and the editors had decided to relocate its newsroom to a safe location, abandon printing its paper editions, but continue publishing the newspaper on the Web.

The newspaper's website had been designed early on with the facility for readers to post online their comments about stories from around the New Orleans metropolitan area. But, as the storm struck and internet access and public utilities was lost across the

city, this interactive facility became one of less than a handful of communication channels for relatives and friends of those living in the city to post their messages online for disaster relief agencies to respond to. As the levees of the city were breached, some of the most heart-wrenching messages which were posted online at this website were from people living outside New Orleans but who had elderly relatives living alone in the affected areas. Desperate pleas were made online for relief agencies to go to the homes of these helpless elderly victims to rescue them from their homes which were been drowned in quickly rising flood waters. These pleas were largely not responded to as search-and-rescue operations for the disaster had unravelled by then.

Relief agencies planning for future disasters should plan on plugging into such spontaneous channels of communication from relatives and friends of victims. A practical way of doing this may be to link such interactive messaging facilities to a larger disaster-relief website where volunteers appearing on scene (as part of the "convergence" described below) may respond to the messages by posting their intentions to act on particular requests for assistance so that others need not duplicate rescue efforts.

### The convergence

The mass gathering of people at the site of a disaster, and the despatch of relief supplies (particularly food, clothing and medicine) is a phenomenon that was first recognised about five decades ago by researchers. It is both welcomed and feared by agencies responsible for disaster management.

People are driven by a variety of intentions to converge on a disaster scene. Two researchers<sup>3</sup> interviewed people met at "ground-zero" soon after the attacks on The World Trade Center on September 11 to find out why they were there. The researchers found that an important group of people within the convergence were anxious relatives, friends and colleagues of people working or living at the site of the disaster, they were there to confirm the well being of their loved ones. The second group of people comprised volunteers with good intentions to provide assistance to the injured and others affected by the disaster. As time passed a third group of people came to the site, they were "the curious" who just wanted to have a first-hand look at the scene of the disaster. They were quickly joined by the fourth group – "the supporters" – who were touched by the noble efforts of

the rescue workers and were there to acknowledge their work and to cheer them on.

In the case of the World Trade Center disaster scene in New York, the convergence proved to be a headache for the authorities who were trying to both secure the site as well as better organise search-and-rescue efforts; all the while apprehensive of follow-up attacks. Security personnel were, for example, deeply concerned that

Asian tsunami, convergence may be viewed largely as positive. In many isolated and less developed areas, it was the people, NGOs and other civic groups volunteering their help and contributing their own food, clothing, medicine and rescue equipment that were the first on the scene of disasters. In many cases they were the main responders. Many survivors would have suffered greater trauma if not for convergence.



*(Left) Asmat Njaripur (47 years old) cries, showing a photograph of her only daughter that got killed in recent earthquake. She also lost her husband in the same earthquake. Her daughter Sohar Ikdamia was 16 years old and used to attend grade 8. The massive earthquake of Bam in December 2003 destroyed thousands of houses and killed over 30,000 people. Iran*

*Shehzad Noorani/Drift/Majority World*

*(Right) Sisters Bibi and Taiba played together all the time. Taiba was killed in the earthquake. Sri Lanka.*

*Shahdul Alam/Drift/Majority World*

the food and beverages being handed out to rescue personnel by people converging on the site may not have been safe for consumption and could provide the means for a second attack on the site. The rescue workers themselves were distracted by people setting up barbeque pits to cook food for them and unintentionally adding an inappropriately festive touch to their grim mission.

The concerns about convergence stemmed mainly from disasters occurring in urban areas of developed countries where the politics and dynamics of the disasters gave rise to adequate reasons for apprehension. In the case of the developing countries, and especially in the immediate aftermath of the

Many disaster agencies now accept that convergence needs to be included in disaster mitigation planning. The apprehensions that the agencies may have for the phenomenon may be addressed by putting in place communication and information programmes where efforts and movements of the people and groups forming the convergence may be coordinated. This may comprise a decentralised system where well-established first responders, such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent, community organisations and religious congregations are networked, so that they, in turn, can help to coordinate other groups of people who spontaneously offer their assistance when a disaster strikes.



Jungle Run Productions, TVETAP image archive

*Indonesian teenager Yenni in the weeks after the tsunami*

The internet is an excellent channel for networking civic groups. If the disaster has not cut off Web access, the coordinators can make use of a website to announce the help that is required and make use of simple interactive facilities to invite individuals and groups interested in responding to the disaster to describe what they are mobilizing to contribute towards search-and-rescue and recovery efforts. The quickest channel may be via an email address announced over radio and television.

A quick and effective way of establishing an interactive online service is by signing on to any of the free blogging websites and creating a blogsite. The blog that is established for this purpose may be setup to allow posting of “comments” which in effect enables all visitors to communicate with each other via a central website.

The main advantage of using one of the large blogging service providers is that they tend to be operated by well-equipped internet companies that run servers on fast telecommunication links that will be able to handle sudden spikes in visitors to a particular blogsite. The demands of thousands of people trying to access the same website at the same time can quickly crash the computer systems of smaller service providers.

In disasters where internet-access and electricity supply are disrupted, coordinators should make use of the broadcast media to suggest that volunteers head towards designated staging areas.

Radio is potentially the most effective medium. Many volunteers would probably carry one with them or have a car radio installed on the vehicles they are travelling in, as they head towards the scene of the disaster. The staging area should be equipped with large boards or wall spaces on which are pinned charts

showing the priority needs of victims and survivors, and maps of where they are located. Volunteers should be encouraged to sign up on the charts against the areas they are heading for to render their help. This will announce to other volunteers which areas have yet to be responded to and where they should focus on.

Coordinators should also hold regular meetings of representatives from various groups of volunteers. These meetings should be as brief as possible as volunteers will be eager to get to the scene of disaster quickly and to avoid what they will consider cumbersome bureaucracy. The meetings will allow coordinators to provide volunteers with pertinent information about the different sites and to allow the volunteers to announce their intentions and contributions. The aim is not perfect coordination, but to prevent counter-productive chaos caused by different groups of people setting off on their own aimlessly.

The other important aim of routing volunteers through staging areas is to ensure that communication processes are established between them and the coordinators. Volunteers should be encouraged to report back from the scene of the disaster, especially if they are the first responders, so that a clearer picture of the scene of the disaster may be mapped. This will, in turn, help the authorities mobilise sufficient resources to meet the needs of the injured and survivors.

## Reviving communities

The necessity for facilitating participatory communication processes increases after search-and-rescue efforts have been completed. At this point emergency services withdraw and planning begins for the long-term recovery of affected communities. The plans that are to be implemented will enjoy a higher probability of success if they are prepared in a participatory manner, involving members of the community that they serve.

The first and most daunting challenge that faces facilitators of such a planning process is that community ties may have been seriously fractured. Social groups and organisations that facilitators may have chosen to work with in normal conditions may no longer exist. The facilitators’ first task is to revive fractured social networks, help form new groups, and motivate the people to work together in communal efforts to rebuild. Participation does not always come naturally to groups of people. This is especially the case in communities that have previously been organised in a top-down manner with a few elites dictating a community’s agenda.

It is useful to help these groups learn about participatory methods by first addressing simple and routine issues such as arrangements for providing temporary food, shelter, water, security, and medical services. In this way they learn to work together and build trust in the groups and the processes.

Facilitators may also propose the formation of a special group which will focus on the search for missing members of the community. Women from the communities should be actively involved in managing groups responsible for a community's logistics. Experience has shown that women often make better managers than men in organising communal logistics. The involvement of the women will also ensure that the interests of children are better represented in decision-making. It will also ensure that security issues for women are not overlooked; this is particularly important as numerous reports were received of women being abused in the aftermath of the Asian tsunami.

Facilitators should be aware that although the principles of participation are sound and worthy of pursuit they can be fraught with difficulties. The first of these is conflict that may arise among members and between sub-groups. Such conflict is often due to competing interests and allegiances.

Facilitators should be ready and trained to help the groups resolve them. Successful resolution and management of such conflicts will help the community build trust in the process. Community members themselves need time to learn to resolve their disagreements and learn how to build consensus; facilitators will therefore find it useful to begin with the simpler issues described above, that tend to cause less intense disagreements and are easier to resolve. It is only after the groups have grown more confident of working together as a community that facilitators help to introduce the more complex and potentially more contentious process of planning for the long-term rebuilding of the community.

Experienced facilitators will be able to introduce survivor groups to a number of participatory communication methods that may be applied towards building consensus on a communal plan for the future. You can obtain tips at the website <http://www.southbound.com.my/vipp> which is published by the community of practice of the VIPP (Visualization in Participatory Programmes) process. VIPP has been successfully applied by the UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) in different participatory activities and especially those involving women and children who are illiterate.

## Keeping survivors informed

Survivors have an urgent need for information to regain some sense of control and normalcy in their lives. Getting information to them is difficult, as most channels of mass communication will have been disrupted within a disaster site.

A quick method of restoring some news flow at relief shelters and other affected sites is by organising small editorial groups to begin the publication of wall-newspapers. Young literate men and women are probably the best people to mobilise for this task. Wall-newspapers are simple notices pasted on a wall at a location where people congregate or pass daily. This may be the wall of a tent where food is distributed or a location at an intersection. It is important that the wall is sheltered from rain and wind.

The newspaper may be organised into departments that reflect the priority needs of the survivors. These may be: food and water, medical



(c) 2006 Rachel Serrano. Courtesy of Photoshare

*Photos of victims of the December 26, 2004 tsunami cover the missing person wall at Phuket Airport in Thailand.*

services, missing people, search and rescue, accommodation, clothing and supplies, funeral and religious events, government disaster relief announcements, women and children services, temporary schools, and eventually entertainment programmes.

All government and relief agencies working at the site should make it a point to post a copy of all their public announcements at the wall-newspapers. The role of the editorial group is to post news, comments and appeals from members of the communities. They will also translate notices posted by relief agencies into the local language.

Any member of the community should also be allowed to post their items on to the wall. Only inflammatory commentary need to be edited out of the newspaper.

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, postings by the editorial group will very likely be written on paper and just pasted on the wall with rice paste. As time progresses and the community settles down to a calmer routine, relief agencies may wish to strengthen the production of wall-newspapers with a basic desktop-publishing system and supplies. This should include a digital camera so that images may be added to the postings.

This digital system should also enable the newspapers to be posted to a website so that relatives and friends, and relief agencies located at a distance from the site can keep in touch with the community. Desktop-publishing arrangements will also allow local editions of wall newspapers to be shared among neighbouring communities. Such sharing is particularly important for notices about missing people.

The editorial groups should be aware that many members of the community may not be able to read the postings on the wall. Members of poorer communities and women, who may be facing greater distress than other survivors, may not be able to obtain important information off the walls due to their higher illiteracy rates. The editorial groups should arrange for periodic public readings of the most important recent postings so that the illiterate members of the community can receive this information. The “readers” should also help the illiterate members present at these sessions to write and post their comments on to the wall.

### Cultural competencies of external communicators

A global disaster relief network has evolved in the past decades, managed by highly competent groups that are able to mobilise at short notices and promptly ship their material and rescuers to even remote locations. This has developed disaster response into complex efforts involving people from a diverse mix of cultures and training.

At the same time, these international groups have grown more sensitive to the importance of their cultural competencies when working in disaster scenes located at a distance from their base. This competency is not only important for the international groups but also for groups and individuals responding to events within their own countries. Development

communicators have long appreciated how cultural diversity within countries, and between city-dwellers and villagers in the rural hinterland, affects effective and meaningful communication especially in critical issues relating to life and death.

### Respecting the people's culture

The following characteristics of a community make up its culture:

- Traditions, customs, rituals
- Language
- Age
- Gender
- Religious beliefs
- Political beliefs
- Family values
- Goals in life
- Socioeconomic status
- Education level
- Geographic location
- Family and household makeup

Communicators working away from home at a “foreign” site of a disaster need to be keenly aware that communities differ greatly in how they think of life and death. They grief and mourn in their own ways the lost of loved ones, and the destruction of their homesteads and traditional burial grounds.

A large group of relief workers from “the outside” working within a community can easily overwhelm a community, especially when they have been left weakened and fractured by a disaster. Communicators should therefore always seek advice from local leaders and knowledgeable individuals when planning and executing their programmes. This is particularly important in the case of participatory processes where the over-arching intention is to facilitate the articulation of local intentions and restoration of identity.

One of the most controversial episodes to occur after the Asian tsunami was the conversion of significant numbers of communities in some affected areas to the religion of the group of volunteers which had been active in relief work among them. The conversion troubled members of the communities, and many people in neighbouring villages who were struggling to rebuild and to regroup. It also caused concern among other relief groups who felt that an unfortunate case of “cultural destruction” had been committed by a group of their peers.

Cultural destructiveness is characterized by organizations or individuals who view cultural differences as a problem and undertake activities that purposely attempt to destroy a culture to achieve what they consider to be a more desirable replacement.<sup>4</sup>



## Remembering disasters

Remembering a disaster and the people lost to it enables survivors to move on. It also helps to prevent the recurrence of a similar disaster, or minimising its impact if it cannot be prevented from happening again.

One of the most striking cases of this saving lives occurred among the sea nomads living in the Andaman Sea – that body of water to the southeast of the Bay of Bengal, south of Myanmar, west of Thailand and east of the Andaman Islands.

They call themselves the Moken. Although they lived on the small islands that bore the brunt of the Asian tsunami most of them were reported to have survived. They had all sensed danger when they saw the sea retreating before the tsunami hit and had rushed to higher ground. Their sense of ill boding was triggered by a Moken legend about “The Seven Waves” that had been passed down from generation to generation.

It had long been recited around campfires and accurately described what had happened when the Asian tsunami hit. In the legend, the Moken called the tsunami the “Laboon” or “the wave that eats people”. They believed it was caused by the angry spirits of their ancestors. The source of the legend is unclear but it was very likely based on the remembrance of a tsunami that had affected the ancestors of the Moken people centuries ago, and was so traumatic that it was not only etched into the oral history of the community but also its sea-faring culture.

A different, but just as inspiring, example of an urbanized community remembering a disaster may be found in San Francisco. The Interfaith AIDS Memorial Chapel is “a space for remembrance and celebration” of the lives of the thousands who have died. Set on one of its wall are brass symbols representing the religions of the world. The chapel has two focal points. One is provided by a triptych created by internationally renowned artist Keith Haring who finished it two weeks before he himself died from AIDS. On the opposite side of the chapel, hanging from the ceiling, is a panel from the AIDS Memorial Quilt which is changed on a regular basis. Each panel is sewn together from smaller pieces of quilt hand-made by family members, lovers and friends of people who had died from AIDS. Sewing the quilt has helped many people recover from losing their loved ones. It also serves to remind everyone who passes by the chapel and enters the cathedral the continuing threats posed by AIDS.



(c) Chin Salk Yoon, 2006

*The Keith-Haring triptych flanked by two pillars bearing symbols of the main religions of the world. The circle on the right pillar is for religions not represented by the other symbols.*



(c) Chin Salk Yoon, 2006



(c) Chin Salk Yoon, 2006

*(Top) A panel from the AIDS Quilt (itself a product of a participatory communication initiative) hanging in the chapel. The panel is changed regularly. A panel comprises eight smaller quilts each commemorating a person who died from AIDS. (Bottom) Close-up of a panel from the AIDS Quilt; the flannel shirt and T-shirt incorporated into the designs of the two quilts at the centre of the panel were once worn by the two men who are remembered here.*

## Remembering the AIDS pandemic

The Interfaith AIDS Memorial Chapel is located in an intimate space set next to the main doors of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco. The location was selected so that people who are uncomfortable about attending church may avoid walking through the cathedral to get to the chapel.

Symbols recognising various faiths adorn two pillars flanking the famous altar-piece by Keith Haring. Visitors tend to spend the most time standing under a panel of the AIDS Memorial Quilt (<http://www.aidsquilt.org>) reading obituaries of the people being remembered.

Each panel comprises eight smaller three-by-six-foot pieces of quilt hand-sewn by the loved ones of people who had died from AIDS. Each of these pieces is poignant with its often bitter-sweet remembrances. They frequently include an item of clothing of the person being remembered.

The quilt project is itself a good example of a participatory communication initiative that has succeeded in not only remembering those who died from AIDS but also in increasing awareness among people about HIV and AIDS.

It began in June 1987, when a small group of strangers gathered in front of a shop in San Francisco to document the lives of their loved ones who had died; fearful that they will be forgotten. They wanted to create a memorial for those who had died of AIDS, and at the same time to help people understand the devastating impact of the disease.

That meeting of devoted friends and lovers eventually led to the launching of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt across the United States. The Quilt today is a powerful visual reminder of the AIDS pandemic. More than 44,000 individual three-by-six-foot memorial panels have been sewn by friends, lovers and family members of those who have died.

## Conclusion

Survivors of disasters who are withdrawn and disconnected from people around them are suffering in silence the profound consequences of their trauma. Participatory communication processes help survivors reconnect with others and recover. Survivors determine how this communication will take place. Relief agencies should help in facilitating the communication that heals. They should also make available resources to upscale the process to involve all whom the survivors wish to reach out to.

Women should be encouraged to play an active role. They make good facilitators, are able to connect with others and mend broken social ties. Women are also the primary care-givers to children and will look after their interests and advocate for their needs in group decision-making.

Relief agencies tend to focus on mending what they can see are broken after a disaster. The trauma suffered by survivors are seldom seen and therefore not responded to. Yet without healing the minds and spirit of survivors, agencies will find that fixing broken infrastructure alone will not revive communities.

### Endnotes:

- 1 Diane Myers (1999) in her unpublished manuscript "Protect, Direct, Connect, Select" that is widely cited by disaster relief agencies identified three other steps: Protect: Where survivors find a safe haven that provides shelter; food and liquids; sanitation; privacy; and chances to sit quietly, relax, and sleep at least briefly. Direct: Where survivors begin setting and working on immediate personal and family priorities to enable them to preserve or regain a sense of hope, purpose, and self-esteem. Select: Where survivors identify disaster-relief agencies, such as the Red Cross/Crescent, or the local and state health departments, for help in health, housing, and basic emergency assistance.
- 2 The website was published by The Times-Picayune (<http://blog.nola.com/times-picayune>). It stayed online right through the hurricane and the floods that followed providing blow-by-blow accounts as public services unravelled and civil order broke down.
- 3 Read the following paper for a detailed report on their research findings: Kendra, J.M. & Wachtendorf, T. 2002, Rebel Food... Renegade Supplies: Convergence after the World Trade Center Attack. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Chicago, IL, 17 August 2002.
- 4 For more information read: Cross, T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K. & Isaacs, M. 1989, Towards a culturally competent system of care: A Monograph on Effective Services for Minority Children Who Are Severely Emotionally Disturbed: Volume I, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Child Development Center.

# 'Critical mass' for Community Disaster Resilience



*Fire fighters recover a dead body from the rubble as least 76 people died and 61 were injured after landslides caused by heavy rains in the port city of Chittagong, police and witnesses said. Chittagong, Bangladesh. June 11 2007.*

**Rajesh Charabarti/DrikNEWS/Majority World**

Disaster Risk Communication builds upon the generic principles of strategic communication. However, building community resilience must go a step beyond. It must lead to action. Should it then be called Action Communication? Turning ideas into action? What challenges does it face?

Buddhi Weerasinghe

I remember growing up in a Sri Lankan village, half a century ago. Ours was a closely-knit community. Most families had lived there for generations. My family was exceptional: they had arrived recently, but were assimilated fairly easily.

The formal leadership came from the village headman, who was respected by everyone. The headmanship had been in his family for several generations. The chief monk of the village temple was another cohesive factor. When a family had an illness or some other problem, the chief monk was sure to visit. Informal leadership arose depending on the occasion. An alms-giving always brought out an 'expert group' for the event's arrangement. A devil dance had another 'expert group'. The post harvest offering to the deities -- in the form of a traditional *Devol Maduwa* dance -- brought the whole village together for two days. It felt like a large family gathering.

With these factors in place and in harmony, it was not difficult to achieve the critical mass needed to move an idea into action in our village community.

Things have changed considerably in the past 50 years. I imagine communities like the one from my childhood still exist. But more often than not, the factors supportive of community action have been in decline. This is more noticeable in the urban and semi-urban communities. There may be many reasons as to why this has happened, which needs separate discussion. The fact is: bringing a community together has now become a daunting task. In many Sri Lankan communities, where participatory hazard mapping was carried out in recent years, a majority of participants were women. Most men had other compelling priorities, or were simply not motivated to join. Often there was an expectation of an immediate, material benefit for participation. It was as if the building of disaster resilience in their communities was not reward enough.

Yet, when a disaster strikes, the first responders are almost always from the neighbourhood. This was most visible after the Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 2004.

### **Together, we are safe...**

Building disaster resilience calls for a community's participation for an anticipated future event. That is where the critical mass becomes crucial. When that is missing, it becomes necessary to intervene from outside the community. The availability of funds from beyond the community is also an important factor.

With it comes the challenge of communicating to the community. It is difficult for outsiders to move in and quickly establish trust and credibility with a community. It is much more effective to align with an existing leadership. Alternatively, staying and working in the community for a period of time can build relationships and trust.

In the aftermath of the tsunami, the Sri Lankan government's Disaster Management Center (DMC) introduced a mechanism where members of the armed forces were deployed as District Disaster Management Coordination Units. These were attached to the District Secretariats (the civil administration at district level) in nine out of 25 administrative districts. Walking amongst the people without firearms and initially trying to create awareness in the communities and schools about hazards and disasters, these officers soon gained visibility. Sri Lanka has a tradition of the armed forces and the Police being deployed to provide disaster relief. This had built up goodwill over the years. This visibility and recognition were important to the success of evacuation drills and other work they conducted to create disaster resilience in coastal communities.

This is also the experience in other parts of the Asian region. For example, the Asian Urban Disaster Mitigation Programme (AUDMP) of the Bangkok-based Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) carried out several community based flood mitigation projects in Bangladesh during the late 1990s. Key to the success in these predominantly Muslim communities was the involvement of Muslim religious leaders in communicating messages. In one project, where a school was made flood proof, it was the school principal who provided leadership.

In flood proofing the school, which was on high ground, a drain was constructed to carry the rain water away. The surrounding area of the school, whose flooding prevented access to the school, was mud-packed to raise the ground above flood level.

AUDMP has conducted risk mitigation projects in other countries. In Katmandu, Nepal, a project looked at enhancing school safety from earthquakes. There, the work was carried out by an NGO called NSET-Nepal. The first step was creating awareness about the risk faced and the safety measures that could be adopted. The school buildings were strengthened using reinforcement, minimizing their collapse during an earthquake. Parents, teachers and students volunteered labour in this process, known as retrofitting. Some parents were masons

who had specialized skills. The cement, metal and steel were donated by local vendors. In some cases, the children walked from house to house singing and dancing to collect money. Technical know-how was provided by NSET-Nepal and their partner, Geo Hazard International. The project's focus on the safety of school children established credibility in the community.

**Lesson one: risk communication must be followed by specific action which will consolidate a community's trust. Of course, the ground reality and social dynamics can vary from community to community.**

Back in Sri Lanka, DMC is working with several landslide prone communities within Ratnapura district. The residents were owners of small-scale tea holdings. Their income was good. Due to the apparent vulnerability, they had been advised to relocate but were not given acceptable alternatives. They wanted to stay on and risk death in the event of a landslide rather than relocate and lose their income.

The people were skeptic at the beginning which was apparently based on past experience. Various outsiders had visited the community with good intentions, discussed their vulnerability and promised solutions. But none had come back. The people felt cheated, and it took much effort to convince them to join in participatory work and find possible solutions.

Clearly, the people had chosen to live with the risk. The only option was to mitigate the risk through proper drainage of the land and establishing vigilance for early warning. This is not an easy task. In these mountainous areas, rain and mist combine to reduce visibility drastically. The slope formations will also prevent a single alarm signal from reaching out to all members of the communities at risk. All this makes it essential to cascade any warning signal.

### Escape routes for evacuation

Beyond relaying warnings, it was necessary to identify escape routes. People's regular paths get flooded after a few hours of heavy rain. Some households may well be surrounded by floodwaters when a landslide warning arrives. Structural interventions have been proposed to ensure safe passage.

The National Building Research Organization (NBRO) is the state organization dealing with landslide hazards in Sri Lanka. It has many years of experience in mapping landslide vulnerability and carrying out public awareness campaigns. People

Photo courtesy Sarvodaya



*Dialog disaster warning system being demonstrated in Sri Lanka*

TVEAP image archive



TVEAP image archive





living in hazard prone areas have been made aware of the tell-tale signs of impending landslides.

This work is beginning to show results. During a series of landslides that occurred in late 2006, several communities warned by these tell-tale signs evacuated their homes just in time, saving many lives.

**Lesson two: successful community action can catalyse other communities to adopt similar preventive measures and safe behaviour before disasters strike.**

When a community intervention is facilitated by an outside entity which brings in the funding, there is always the danger of losing momentum when outsiders withdraw. Sustainability comes with ownership of the intervention by the community. In early 2000, the Sri Lanka Urban Multi-hazard Disaster Mitigation Project (SLUMDMP), a project under AUDMP in Sri Lanka, undertook a drought mitigation initiative in Aarachchikattuwa, in the north-western part of the island. An irrigation reservoir ('tank'), called Medawewa, which stored water for farming, had breached in 1975 and gone into disrepair.

SLUMDMP agreed to provide funds to rebuild the breached dam and the sluice gate, but the people donated their labour to clear the tank bed that had been overgrown by thicket. The local government provided the heavy machinery to dredge the tank bed. Leadership came from the Chairman of the local Farmers' Association.

## Sense of ownership

As it turned out, not everyone was convinced. Past efforts to repair the damaged tank had flopped for 25 years, demoralizing some people. Volunteers were initially jeered by some members of the community. The Chairman of the Farmers' Association was persuasive enough to keep the volunteers going. When the rehabilitation was completed, the community united in its celebration.

Later I visited this community with the manager of SLUMDMP. The area was experiencing heavy rains. We wanted to monitor the sturdiness of the repaired dam and sluice gate. Water in the tank was close to spilling level. We found several villagers at the sluice gate. They had come to open the sluice gate to let out part of the water to ensure that the tank would not breach again due to water pressure. They found that the sluice gate was blocked and dived into the water to remove several logs. This monitoring had become routine during rains. This was convincing evidence for a strong sense of ownership of the project by the community.

Not every project is so successful. There is no single recipe for success in building disaster resilient communities. It is best to approach a community with an open mind. In most cases, the community has most of the answers. That comes from traditional wisdom of villagers, although much of it is now disappearing or is being ignored by engineers and other experts from outside.

## Participatory Hazard Mapping

The big challenge is to sustain disaster preparedness interventions over time. This is helped by the creation of informal leadership within the community through participatory action.

Sri Lanka's Disaster Management Centre (DMC) typically begins its community engagements with awareness creation. It then moves on to participatory hazard mapping. Here community members are divided into a few groups and asked to map their neighbourhood – they have to capture roads, footpaths, rivers, hillocks, houses, schools, temples and other key landmarks. Then people mark the areas that have been affected historically with different disasters such as tsunami, floods or cyclones. This helps identify relatively safer areas as well as safety routes in case a new disaster demands quick evacuation.

This exercise allows informal leaderships to emerge. Encouraging this leadership and recognizing their inputs can motivate them and enable sustainability of interventions. The process of hazard mapping also imparts a sense of ownership. In cases where evacuation is the only way to escape a disaster, this exercise is followed with a mock drill. In the event of a tsunami, early warning and evacuation is the only solution available to the community.

Community resilience is like a fruit that ripens. The air and the sunshine contribute to that gradual process. The leaves that synthesise the food, the branches that hold leaves to light, the roots that absorb the water from the soil, the stem that conducts it to the leaves all have a part to play. Community resilience also requires different inputs from different stakeholders. It does not work in isolation. The sense of self-help is the most important catalyst. In my opinion, building community resilience needs communication backed by action. Perhaps the old Chinese proverb captures the essence of this thinking – *"I hear I forget. I see I remember. I do I understand"*.

# Digging Under The Rubble



*3 December 2005: Precarious constructions are so commonplace that a casual walk underneath causes no concern. Ballakot, Pakistan.*

**Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World**

To be more effective, the media needs to look within at where it has compromised on the basic skills that are part of every journalist's tool kit. These are needed at all times, in all kinds of reporting. But when reporting on extraordinary situations, they became absolutely essential to do a competent job of communicating a disaster truthfully and in all its dimensions.

Kalpana Sharma

On 26 January 2001, when an earthquake that measured 6.9 on the Richter Scale hit the western state of Gujarat and flattened large parts of Kutch, the desert district bordering Pakistan, it took national media over 24 hours to reach the district capital city of Bhuj. The earthquake had knocked down cellular phone towers and telephone lines. There was no electricity. And therefore few knew the extent of the devastation. Even the offices of the District Collector, the chief administrative officer, had been destroyed.

One of the first commercial flights from Mumbai that flew in essential aid to the region also carried with it a handful of journalists. I was one of those who managed to fight my way onto that flight.

What we saw in the 24 hours after we landed are scenes none of us will forget. Disasters have a way of writing themselves into your memory, etching unlikely details that spring up when you pause to think about them. In the rush of reportage, these details are often overlooked. In those 24 hours, all one could do was absorb and record. Reporting was impossible until we got back to Mumbai on the return flight the next day. Our stories could convey only first impressions.

The bigger challenge came a week later when electricity was restored, phone lines were working and the national and international media had established

themselves in the flattened town of Bhuj. How much detail do you report? How many photographs of crumpled buildings can you send? How many people who have lost family can you speak to before you get a good enough idea of what had happened? How many stories do you narrate of people who had lost entire families, people who were maimed and badly injured, people who could not trace their families? Do you rely on what officials tell you or do you personally go and double check each fact despite immense logistical problems?

None of this is unfamiliar to journalists covering anything beyond the routine beats in cities. There are constant challenges of getting facts, verifying them, making sure you have enough information, that you talk to an adequate number of people, that you get all sides of the story, that you get human interest, etc. And that you meet your deadline.

You come across villages where not a twig moves. Moonscapes. No sound. Only the stench of bodies that lie buried under the mounds of rubble. There are others where people have survived. Like one settlement where each house seems to be sliced in half, leaving it exposed, like a row of cardboard houses on display. You watch the inhabitants patiently attempting to rescue what they can from the ruins. And as you stand by and watch, you talk to some of them. I asked a young woman what she

remembered of January 26 even as she sifted through a trunk with some of her clothes. She said nothing at first. Then she looked curiously at me and asked, "What is your caste?" I could not believe the question. Yet, that is what she asked me. Why, I asked, did she need to know? Just wondered, she said, as she went back to sorting out her clothes.

### Social history relevant

I remember this incident because it revealed to me another aspect of any reporting, even of disasters. That the social history of a region comes into play regardless of the immediate story. So people might have lost everything, but in this part of Gujarat, as elsewhere in the state, your caste counts. And it doesn't get erased just because nature has ignored caste and dealt everyone a

similar blow.

Religion also counts, as we soon realised. So even if Muslims and Hindus had lived peacefully together for generations, disaster created cleavages as sectarian



Omidous Alam/DRINKNEWS/Majority World

*Gaibandha district is connected with three rivers Ghagot, Brahmaputra and Teesta. Every day the water level of these rivers is increasing and has crossed the terrible level reached during the '88 flood. 20 villages have been inundated with flood water affecting 2 lac people. They take shelter in the highland. Getting water for drinking and cooking becomes almost impossible. They have to depend on dry food. In some remote areas people do not get any help, like boat for transfer to a safe shelter, from any one. Gaibandha, Bangladesh. 1 August 2007.*



Tanvir Ahmed/DirikNEWS/Majority World

*Flood affected people wait for relief in a flood shelter center. Hundreds of flood affected people suffer from lack of food and drinking water. Basaba, Dhaka, Bangladesh. 13 August 2007.*

groups set about providing relief to only their own kind. And political parties that had built their base on caste and religious divides went about building new townships with clearly demarcated areas for different communities and castes. The story then was not a simple “developmental” kind, with disaster, relief and rehabilitation. It was interlaced with caste, community and politics.

This is precisely why reporting on disasters – natural or human induced – is so demanding. It has all the excitement and immediacy of covering an event. You are guaranteed page one! But it also has layer upon layer of complexity, of histories that have to be dug out from under the rubble, of policies that have to be unearthed that make the current and future tasks more difficult, of understanding the interconnectedness and fissures that predate a disaster but impact what follows it.

If you take into account such layering, reporting on disasters can be much more nuanced. Otherwise, once the emergency ends, it turns into another routine story, of daily briefings by the “authorities” on relief and rehabilitation, on the work of international aid organisations and NGOs, on the final death count, of the state of the injured, etc. Survey media coverage of any natural disaster, and you will find this change of tone setting in within a couple of weeks. Not only do the stories disappear from the front page, as they are bound to do given the compulsions of the news business, but often they vanish altogether.

The reason for this, I would suggest, is as much the way the media functions as the absence of imagination of reporters assigned to cover the disaster. And one reason for this, I think, is because journalists have stopped being “generalists”. Gone are the days when, as part of formal education, we were taught “General

Knowledge” or GK. We were supposed to be curious and interested in everything if we wanted to be counted as a good journalist. Life, nature, science, politics, economics, social structures – all this was supposed to be a part of our essential kit along with writing skills.

The problem with an absence of GK, as I call it, or plain old homework about the region you are assigned to cover, is that journalists fail to see stories that are staring them in the face. The excuse is lack of time. But in the age of the Internet, where information is there for the asking, surely such an excuse does not count.

### What lies beneath

Much of disaster reporting sounds and reads the same because the reporters only see what is in front of them, not what lies behind the mounds of rubble, figuratively speaking. What was this region before it became this disaster area? How were social relations between different groups? What was its history? What were its relations with the state government? Was it neglected or was it favoured? How important was it to the politics of the state?

These questions are examples of the many other, but essential, dimensions of reporting on disasters that are often not part of discussions that look at how media communicates disasters. Just as gender is overlooked, so is much else. These are oversights in general reporting, exacerbated when it comes to disaster reporting.

Another example that comes to mind is the inundation of large parts of the Indian commercial capital, Mumbai on 26 July 2005 when a cloud burst brought 944 mm of rain on the city within 12 hours. Even the most efficient drainage system would not have sufficed to drain out this downpour. Mumbai has

a dismal storm water system that can barely cope with routine monsoon rains. So the city almost drowned: over 400 people died; life came to a standstill for 48 hours; there were no trains, buses, no electricity and water; the airport was closed; and the roads were jammed with cars that had stalled.

During these 48 hours, the broadcast media, the multiple 24-hour news channels, went into over-drive. Unable to reach many areas, they chose to telecast old footage without explaining to viewers that these had not been updated. Apart from misinformation, this spread panic. It also undercut the credibility of the media.

It did not help that the government was unprepared and did not have a proper disaster management system in place. But it was also evident that much of the media was not prepared for disaster coverage and was floundering. It is ordinary people, citizen journalists, who came to the rescue by phoning in information and visuals.

### A little known river

The disaster exposed inadequacies in both the media and government. It seemed the rain forced both to take note of a river called the Mithi! In fact, this river, which has now been reduced to little more than a dirty narrow drain, has always existed, slicing Mumbai into two halves. But few reporters knew of its existence, or its importance for the city. The fact that it provided natural drainage. Or that the city's development had ignored this and reclaimed immeasurably important mangroves to build swank office buildings. That the airport had changed the course of the river to meet its requirements for an extension to a runway. And that no one, including the media, had noticed or commented when all this happened, many years before 2005.

So when the rain came down on 26 July 2005, the poor Mithi struggled to push out the water. It had to face the high tide from the Arabian Sea, into which it drained out. So instead of taking water out, it became the conduit for huge quantities of seawater coming in, even as its banks overflowed from the rain. The result: complete and sudden flooding in areas all along the river, including the airport.

The Mithi story is another important illustration about the need for journalists to be generalists, to have GK. Any reporter worth his or her salt covering a city like Mumbai should have been aware of the importance of the Mithi to the city. Within a few hours, they could have pinned down the reason for the flooding. Instead it took days, for both authorities and the media, to understand what had happened.

From my own experience of reporting on disasters I can cite many such examples to underline again the importance of training journalists to understand linkages – between the environment and disasters, between developmental policies and disasters, between socio-economic conditions (which would necessarily include the position of women and other marginalised communities) and disasters, and between local politics and disasters.

### Following up stories

Apart from reporting in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, what about follow up? This is an eternal question that most media practitioners face. For how long do you pursue a disaster story? For weeks, months, and on every anniversary? There is clearly no formula. It depends on the media.

But once media scrutiny disappears, attention to the area also lapses. While the routine work of reconstruction continues, the people falling between the cracks go virtually unnoticed. Until a civil society organisation brings this to the notice of the media. The history of post-disaster work in India has many examples that show that those historically marginalised often slip further back into deprivation after a natural calamity. Constant media scrutiny and follow up can help expose the gaps between professed intentions and actual performance of governments and aid givers and in the long-term aid those most needing help.

To conclude, there is no question that in an age when the media seems not just to be omnipresent but almost omniscient, its role in communicating disasters and playing an important role as a way of two-way communication between affected communities and the government is central. The term media now encompasses not just the mainstream – print, broadcast and radio, etc. – but also new media, blogs, ham radio and increasingly the tribe of citizen journalists who have become such a key source of information and images during and after a disaster.

To be more effective, the media needs to look within at where it has compromised on the basic skills that ought to be part of every journalist's tool kit. These are needed at all times, in all kinds of reporting. But when reporting on extraordinary situations, like the 2004 Asian Tsunami, or the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, these skills became absolutely essential to do a competent job of communicating truthfully and in all its dimensions, the extent of a disaster.

Disasters should make media stop and reassess its capabilities, and work to refurbish them -- before it is hit by another disaster.



# Appendices

## **Appendix 1**

Report of the Brainstorming on 'Communicating Disasters: Building on the Tsunami Experience and Responding to Future Challenges': Bangkok, 21 – 22 December 2006

## **Appendix 2**

List of participants of Bangkok Brainstorming, December 2006

## **Appendix 3**

Suggested guidelines for more effective engagement of mass media and new media before, during and after disasters

## **Appendix 4**

Contributing authors

## **Appendix 5**

Reuters AlertNet for Journalists

## **Appendix 6**

UN/ISDR Media Network on Disaster Risk Reduction

## **Appendix 7**

ReliefWeb Project

# Appendix 1

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## **Official Report of Regional Brainstorming Meet on Communicating Disasters: Building on the Tsunami Experience and Responding to Future Challenges**

**Bangkok, Thailand: 21 – 22 December 2006**

Organised by TVE Asia Pacific and  
United Nations Development Programme - Regional Centre in Bangkok

Report compiled by: Frederick Noronha and Nalaka Gunawardene

Photographs by: Thananuch Sanguansak and Janaka Sri Jayalath for TVEAP

### **Executive Summary**

*“Where there is no camera, there is no humanitarian intervention,”* said Bernard Kouchner, co-founder of Medecins Sans Frontieres – and many of today’s disaster managers and relief agencies would agree. Yet, the relationship between media practitioners and those managing disasters can often be stressful, difficult and fraught with misunderstandings. Communicating about disasters sometimes ends up as communications disasters.

How can these mishaps be minimised, so that the power of established and new forms of mass media can play a more meaningful role in managing both hazards and disasters?

This was the broad question addressed during a regional brainstorming meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, held on the eve of the Indian Ocean Tsunami’s second anniversary, i.e. 21 – 22 December 2006. Organised by TVE Asia Pacific and UNDP, the meeting brought together over 30 leading media professionals, disaster managers and communication specialists from South and Southeast Asia.

Early on, it became apparent that both the media practitioners and disaster/development professionals had very different attitudes and approaches to managing information before, during and after disasters. Some of the differences arose from a failure to appreciate the different needs and priorities of these two groups. But this division became less sharp as the two groups agreed on the essential functions of information and communication, and the need to serve the public interest over individual, corporate or agency interests.

The meeting recognised that the media must evolve its own ethics, guidelines and strategies for covering hazards and disasters, and these cannot be imposed from outside. At the same time, all participants agreed on the value of greater understanding and cooperation between media practitioners, development professionals and disaster managers.

### **Meeting goals and objectives**

On the eve of the disaster’s second anniversary, TVE Asia Pacific and UNDP organised a regional brainstorming that brought together over 30 leading media professionals, disaster researchers and managers and development communication specialists from across South and Southeast Asia. The meeting’s goal was to

discern the key communication lessons of the Tsunami (and other disasters), both in terms of the mass media and new media.

Its objectives were:

- To explore the role of media professionals and their use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) before, during and after a disaster;
- To share lessons learned among media professionals and key players in disaster risk reduction based on the experience of the Tsunami disaster; and
- To come up with a few suggestive guidelines for engaging the mass media and new media for more effective communication before, during and after disasters.

### Meeting content

The agenda of this two-day meeting was designed to encourage maximum interaction among all the participants. It avoided formal presentations or speeches, and instead included series of panel discussions, debates, interactive sessions, group work and film-screenings. A large part of the workshop content was generated by the participants themselves.

### Meeting participation

A total of 33 participants took part in this meeting. Among them were:

- media communicators interested in better covering disasters;
- disaster managers, interested in better links with the media; and
- development professionals keen on improving links between the two.

There was representation from both South Asia and Southeast Asia. There was also a good mix of journalists, broadcasters, media managers, researchers and development professionals.

The overall meeting facilitators were:

- Chin Saik Yoon, Communications specialist and Publisher, Southbound Press, Penang, Malaysia
- Nalaka Gunawardene, Director and CEO, TVE Asia Pacific

### Meeting proceedings

#### Day One: 21 December 2006

#### Introductory remarks

**Marcia V J Kran**, Deputy Regional Manager and Head of Policy and Programme, UNDP Regional Centre in Bangkok, stressed the importance of information management, learning and training, and early warning systems. She suggested creating historical disaster databases to understand disaster trends, and to better understand early warning stakeholders.

She added: "UNDP recognises and supports the very critical role played by the media. In terms of access to information, raising awareness, shaping democratic governance structures, and promoting safer communities."

**Nalaka Gunawardene**, Director and CEO of TVE Asia Pacific, said that it "took a mega-disaster like the Indian Ocean Tsunami to open our eyes... To make us realise how vulnerable we were (and perhaps still are)." He felt the media and other information and communications technologies (ICTs) had not done a good job in alerting the Asian public about the oncoming Tsunami.

He went on to say that after the Tsunami had struck, the media's role was paramount. This was living proof of what Bernard Kouchner, the co-founder of Medecins sans Frontieres, had said: "Where there is no camera, there is no humanitarian intervention." If not for the wide coverage in the media, the world would not have pledged US\$13 billion for relief and recovery efforts.



TVEAP image archive



Thanudh Sangumak, TVEAP image archive



He urged the meeting to remain focused on the following:

- Public communication of disasters using mass media and new media
- Look at all phases of a disaster: before, during and after
- Consider many different types of disasters
- Study the nexus between media-based communications and disasters with a view to finding ways to improve this relationship on all fronts.

**Chin Saik Yoon**, publisher and communications specialist, saw disasters as the more visible ‘peaks’ in processes that unfold over time affecting lives of large numbers of people. Media, as mirrors of society and analysts of social trends, should be interested in these processes as much as they cover the ‘peaks’. During the self-introductory session, each participant was asked to share a “quick personal insight related to any disaster”. These helped illustrate the diversity of nationalities, experiences and perspectives in the room.

Examples:

- **Chin Saik Yoon, Southbound Press:** Shortly after the Tsunami, I wrote about the experience of the Nallavadu village, Pondicherry, on the eastern coast of India, whose people were alerted about the oncoming Tsunami via phone from Singapore. This call, given by one villager who was working in Singapore, saved everyone’s lives. But later I found out that he had become the most hated person in his community! Because while lives were saved, the village suffered significant property losses. But the news had spread far and wide that this village had been “saved” by that call, which prevented relief or recovery support from reaching the people. Everyone thought this village was doing just fine.
- **Lynette Lee Corporal, Inter Press Service-Asia Pacific:** Philippines is known as the country of typhoons, super-typhoons, mudslides and landslides, so I am not a stranger to disasters. I’ve covered serious disasters, and have also done volunteer work after disasters, having glimpses of how it is to be on the “other side” of the situation. The perspective as a volunteer is very different, something which most media practitioners lack.
- **Chanuka Wategama, UNDP-APDIP:** Before the Tsunami there were only a handful of blogs written by persons based in Sri Lanka, and these too didn’t have much following. Within days of the disaster, many new blogs emerged. These not only tracked and reported what was happening on the ground, but continued to cover other matters of public interest afterwards. Now there are at least 100 - 200 regular bloggers, many expressing themselves on a daily basis.
- **Shahidul Alam, Drik Picture Library:** As a media person, I need to find a balance. What’s very important is sending out the messages, the real stories of what’s happening during a disaster. On the other hand, countries like mine are internationally ‘branded’ for disasters. There’s strong stereotyping. We find it very difficult to get out of that mould. We seem to attract international attention and coverage all the time for disaster, famine, suffering or death.
- **Amjad Bhatti, Duryog Nivaran - South Asian Network for Disaster Risk Reduction:** A farmer who had experience of 30 years of flood once told me: “We used to pray to have floods.” He explained that floods used to bring fertile deposits to their lands. These are nuances that are often overlooked by ‘experts’.

## Session 1:

### Distilling media experiences and learnings of the Asian Tsunami

#### Panel 1: Covering the Indian Ocean Tsunami: the hard news edge

Moderated by Chin Saik Yoon, members of this panel were journalists and news editors who recalled how they covered one of the biggest news stories in recent years – the Indian Ocean Tsunami.

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##### **Milind Khandekar, Deputy Managing Editor, Star News, India:**

- For a media practitioner, the biggest challenge in a disaster is logically managing information about the unfolding event. You have to get the pictures. This was the challenge when covering the Tsunami. We have heard and seen so many disasters in India, yet never heard of Tsunami. Honestly, we were not ready for it.
- In India, the first reports of the Tsunami came in from the eastern metropolis of Chennai around 9 am. These talked about flooding at Marina Beach. Water was said to be coming into the city. There were no reports yet from other parts of the state of Tamil Nadu. Our first reaction was: is it a flood? It took us time to understand this was a Tsunami. Even while the story was still unfolding, we found out that it was hitting our neighbours worse: Sri Lanka, Thailand -- and things were getting worse by the hour.
- In a disaster, everyone is a victim in one way or another; no one is spared. We as media are not there to merely and dispassionately report. We invariably become a vital link the scene of the disaster has with the rest of the country and world. During the Gujarat Earthquake, I allowed dozens of affected people to use my microphone -- live on air -- to speak out and tell their family and friends elsewhere that they had survived.



TVEAP image archive

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##### **Asoka Dias, Station Director, Sirasa TV/Mararaja TV, Sri Lanka**

- When the Tsunami story was breaking, one big challenge was to find a word or a phrase to explain the Tsunami in our local languages (Sinhala and Tamil). Historically Sri Lanka has had some tsunamis, but none in living memory. We struggled to describe what was happening.
- The tsunami hit many provincial correspondents based in coastal areas. According to one assessment, two correspondents went missing and 23 were injured. Additionally, nearly 1,000 members of 121 journalists' families were displaced, with housing and equipment damages totaling US \$300,000. Among the damages listed are 48 houses, 80 still cameras and nine television cameras. This, and telecommunications disruption in the affected areas, placed practical difficulties in obtaining coverage in the initial days.<sup>1</sup>
- Sri Lankan government requested the media not to carry photos of dead bodies. Later, we realised affected people were using pictures in the media to identify their missing loved ones. This prompted some individuals to record the TV reportage of the tsunami and sell them on CDs for approx US\$ 1.50 per copy.



Thananuch Sangquansak, TVEAP image archive

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##### **Ahmed Shakeeb, Television Maldives**

- You can barely imagine impact of that magnitude for Maldivian people living on the sea. The Tsunami struck Maldives at 9.20 am in the morning. It became more shocking because of the nature of our livelihood. As the Tsunami hit, the whole communication system failed. The telephone and radio systems failed. The only thing that still worked were the TV signals.
- Because of the Maldives' small land mass and population, the world did not realize how badly it was affected. Some 13 islands had to be totally evacuated. Out of these, four islands were later abandoned. Nearly two years later, a couple of thousands people are living in temporary shelters.
- Almost 95% of the Maldives is the sea. The sea is everything for us Maldivians: playground for our children, and source of livelihood for many of us. In a split of a second, their friend (the sea) became an enemy. After the Tsunami, everyone is afraid of the sea. Not just the sight of it, but even the thought of it. But we have to overcome this: we cannot live in the Maldives fearing the sea – it is never more than a few metres away!



Thananuch Sangquansak, TVEAP image archive



### Indian News Channels: United by Tsunami

The first hours and days after the Tsunami saw the highly competitive Indian news media organizations sharing each other's information, visual and contacts in the true spirit of cooperation. Panos South Asia Executive Director (and former News Director of India's Sun TV network) A S Panneerselvan told the meeting:

"Generally, the Indian news market is highly competitive with 18 TV news channels. They're not willing to share visuals or co-operate. But something extraordinary happened soon after the Tsunami news broke. For the first time, none of the channels was insisting on exclusivity. They were simply downloading each other's images, without even bothering about the rights or other issues.

"This was indeed rare. We know how many contracts have to be signed even for broadcasting 10 seconds of a cricket match. The kind of cross-flow of information after the Tsunami was amazing. All channel rivalries were momentarily forgotten.

"The only problem was with the international relief agencies, who are extremely hierarchy conscious. They were not easily available to the news media, and often they spoke only to influential Western news agencies such as Reuters and BBC."

### Panel 2: Covering the Asian Tsunami: beyond news headlines

Moderated by Manori Wijesekera, Regional Programme Manager of TVE Asia Pacific, this panel discussed the Tsunami's coverage in formats other than news and current affairs, and how such coverage extended beyond the hard news values. TVE Asia Pacific's Children of Tsunami was one key experience discussed during a panel. Three of the four panelists had been associated with this multi-country, multi-media initiative, which tracked -- on television, video and web -- how affected people were rebuilding their lives, livelihoods and homes after the disaster. From February to November 2005, TVEAP-commissioned local film-makers made monthly visits to two chosen families in each country. Based on location filming and field investigations, they produced television, video and web stories for a global audience.

The main focus was on eight surviving children, who served as 'story guides' -- but the stories also covered their extended families, neighbours and communities. Using their specific experiences, Children of Tsunami showed how tsunami recovery was progressing -- or, in some places, stagnating -- across affected Asia.

TVEAP's Regional Programme Manager Manori Wijesekera described it as 'an open-ended experiment that took us beyond the comfort zone of conventional television journalism'. She added: "Positioned between hard-edge news and current affairs TV journalism and the development community, TVEAP was well equipped to engage in this exercise. As a regionally operating media organisation, we were extremely keen to tell the story of tsunami recovery using the audio-visual medium. But instead of producing documentaries laden with information and statistics, we opted to personalise the stories.



TVEAP image archive

### **Pipope Panitchpakdi, Director - Documentary, Nation Broadcasting Corporation, Thailand**

- As journalists, we've been trained to do quick, sharp and precise stories that will have the most impact with our viewers. In doing so, we lose many nuances in a story like the Tsunami.
- Most editors are disinterested in "slow moving" stories. Once the news value faded away, it was a challenge to keep the Tsunami stories on the air. When TVEAP approached me with this idea, I welcomed it as that would allow me to track two affected Thai families for a year. Nation TV agreed to let me work half time during that period, but with full pay.
- Much of the Tsunami coverage in the Thai media (as well as international media reports filed from Thailand) centred around how foreign tourists were killed or injured. No one had looked at how the disaster affected the Moken ('sea gypsies') -- nomadic, indigenous people living in coastal areas and some islands. One of the two Thai families tracked for Children of Tsunami was a Moken one.
- Children of Tsunami enabled me to raise other issues that were not adequately covered in the mainstream Thai media. For example, how some Western relief offers came with attempts in Christian proselitization, or the difficulties faced by Tsunami widows -- under Thai law, their husbands were not considered dead till bodies were found.



Thananuch Sangunsak, TVEAP image archive

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### **Joanne Teoh Kheng Yau, Executive Producer, Channel News Asia**

- In the days following the tsunami, Channel News Asia received satellite news feeds showing the extent of devastation, as well as what experts, charity workers and politicians were doing to provide relief. But we felt the need to move beyond headlines. We wanted to examine the various facets of the tsunami's impact – social, cultural, political and even scientific aspects," she recalled.
- Shortly after the disaster, I visited my native town of Penang, Malaysia, where my grandmother was among the affected. The randomness of this event caught many journalists by surprise. Many of us were groping for words to describe the impact.
- It was in the second half of 2005 that I became involved in Children of Tsunami, when TVEAP negotiated a co-production arrangement with Channel News Asia. I was designated as executive producer for CNA's documentary based on the material filmed by the four country teams: Children of Tsunami: No More Tears.
- I have seen many types of TV and video productions related to disasters, but never come across a sustained effort like Children of Tsunami. It covered the struggles of some very ordinary people with extraordinary courage in the tsunami's aftermath. It captured many nuances and subtext. These details tell us more than the screaming news-headlines. My challenge was to distil so much that was gathered over the year into 26 minutes.
- Even now, many media organisations still work according to a 'disaster template', which needs to evolve.



Thananuch Sangunsak, TVEAP image archive

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### **Dendy Montgomery, Freelance TV professional, Aceh**

- Aceh was the worst hit by the Tsunami. The good news is that children in Aceh are no longer afraid of the sea. They go to the beach every Sunday.
- There has been progress, but not for everyone. President Clinton was in Aceh recently, but when I asked affected people, some said: 'We don't care who comes visiting. When do we receive our permanent houses?'
- The Tsunami disaster in Aceh is not sexy (as a news-story) anymore. For several months after the disaster, all eyes were on Aceh. When the first year's commemoration came up, reporting took a spurt. Then it slowed down again. You should follow your heart. Journalists from elsewhere come to Aceh to do what their news directors want, and not really to report on what's happening on the ground.



TVEAP image archive



### Frederick Noronha, Freelance journalist & new media activist, India

- There seems to be a 'hierarchy of reporting' in disaster related media coverage. For example, some disasters are covered much more widely than others. The international news media takes an interest in some countries only when a major disaster strikes. Even within countries, some areas receive media attention only when a disaster strikes.
- We need to critique the media for not telling the stories that break over a long period. The tsunami story is not yet over. It may no longer be 'sexy', but there is much unfinished business in the post-tsunami recovery process.
- The under-reporting and non-reporting of many human interest and human development stories is a scandal. There are many silent emergencies that never attract sufficient media coverage or public attention. Today we have the tools and technologies to spread information quickly and inexpensively. We need to find alternative communications strategies.

## Session 2: Beyond the Tsunami: zooming out to the wider issues



### Debate 1: Communicating Disasters or Communications Disasters?

The first activity under this session was a debate on 'Communicating Disasters or Communications Disasters?'. Moderated by Nalaka Gunawardene, it involved four participants representing diverse backgrounds such as print and broadcast media, development agencies and research/advocacy groups.

In starting off the debate, **Nalaka Gunawardene** raised several questions:

- Is information itself an essential 'relief item' during and after disasters, as recognised in the *World Disaster Report 2005*?
- Where does the media's role begin and end in disasters: should the media merely report and analyse – or get involved in rescue, relief, recovery and rehabilitation as well?
- How do we balance the public's right to know with the right to privacy of disaster affected persons
- How do new media alter the traditional media coverage of disasters? Can citizen journalists help improve communication of disasters?

The following are highlights of initial and later remarks made by each participant of the debate.



**Lynette Lee Corporal, Project Editor, Inter Press Service - Asia Pacific**, raised the issue of the mass media "losing interest" in disasters after a while.

- The Tsunami (like other disasters) came in "different waves" -- the need for information, the need for analysis and commentary, the spurt in citizen journalism.
- Citizen journalism has changed the way journalism is practised today. Unlike the detached 'objectivity' of the professional journalist, we have some honest, real accounts of what happened at the ground from

citizen journalists (mainly bloggers). That in some ways has enhanced the reporting of professional journalists. The two groups have become complementary.

- The reporter needs to know what is happening... and not just go 'blind' to the scene of a disaster or any other event. Understanding and reflection are important attributes of a good communicator.

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**Amjad Bhatti, Regional Coordinator, Duryog Nivaran - South Asian Network for Disaster Risk Reduction**, called for defining 'disasters' and going beyond the "obsession with macro disasters".

- Since the Indian Ocean Tsunami, there has been a trend of "Tsunamisation of disasters" which had led to a desensitisation of responses in other disasters large and small.
- Disasters that set in slowly are being overlooked. For example, if 500 people die in a single train disaster, it's a big story for the media. But if that many - or far more - people die over a period of time by drinking pesticides, that's not as big a story.
- So many people have to die in one place at the same time for it to qualify as 'news' in today's media world. Mega-narrative of disaster is attractive to the media. For them, the motto seems to be: "If it bleeds, it leads".
- We must question how the media perceives 'news'. For instance, in 2005, 98.22% of the total number of people affected by all disasters in South Asia were those affected by floods. But the story of flood disasters was buried under issues like Kashmir earthquake and the Tsunami.
- There are 'missing' disasters (which don't get reflected in the media). Among them are climate-induced, technological or biological disasters. Talking openly about HIV/AIDS is still a taboo in many parts of South Asia. Sea level rise in Bangladesh is not seen as a potential disaster. Famine becomes a story, drought doesn't - because the latter kills slowly.
- The disaster-management discourse has to be linked with the media perspective, and vice versa.



Thananch Sanguanak, TVEAP image archive

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**A S Panneerselvan, Executive Director, Panos South Asia**, argued that development professionals and disaster managers should not view the 'media' as a monolithic entity.

- If they want to engage the media, development professionals must first understand the complexity, nuances and diversity in what is collectively labeled as 'media'. In fact, the very term 'media' is a plural!
- Yet, development professionals regard and engage the media on simplistic presumptions. To many deep-immersed in text, media are only or largely broadsheet newspapers. A few romanticise community media as if that's the panacea for everything.
- In reality, there is a multiplicity of narratives that go on in the mainstream media all the time. Contending and contesting viewpoints co-exist, negotiate their space and offer a wider view of the world as it is, rather than the world as we want it to be. Important as it is, development is only one of many areas of human endeavour that the media cover.
- Within media, it's always a constant struggle to get important stories out, and seasoned journalists have developed various tactics, e.g. subtle subversion, creative trespassing, passing a story to a rival media organisation if it can't be covered in one's own media outlet, etc.



Thananch Sanguanak, TVEAP image archive

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**Shahidul Alam, Director, Drik Picture Library**, argued that it is always assumed that one primary concern of the media is to inform (and sometimes educate) the people... and one primary concern of developmental agencies is to remove poverty. Are these premises correct in all situations?

- These romanticised notions ignore the political economy of both the media and development sectors. If we are to make both media and development more effective, we have to wake up and recognise the driving forces and realities.
- Let's face it: the commercialised media's job is to make money for its owners or shareholders, while the development agencies are constantly trying to secure more funding to sustain themselves. Self interest,



Thananch Sanguanak, TVEAP image archive

rather than the public interest or the greater good, seems to dominate.

- Reporting about poverty or disasters (in the media) is as much an industry as working on poverty reduction or disaster management (in the development sector). But can we find ways to do well and do good at the same time? This needs more attention and discussion. We need to move beyond the platitudes and rhetoric. We need to take the reality head on and find creative ways to push our own public interest agendas within existing inequalities.
- Some of us don't like to confront this reality, and opt for terms and strategies like 'alternative media'. Well meant as these are, we often tend to marginalise ourselves in doing so. The so-called mainstream media can, in fact, be used as a vehicle for all kinds of reformist, progressive agendas – we just need to be smart and tactical about it.
- The biggest challenge is to make what is currently perceived as 'alternative' viewpoints into mainstream viewpoints.



TVEAP image archive

### Interactive session: “My wish. . .”

During this interactive session, each participant had the opportunity to express a personal wish on one of the following aspects:

- How hazards, disasters and post-disaster situations can be better communicated in the media;
- How to improve linkages and partnerships between media practitioners and disaster managers; and
- In what ways can the more established and newer ICTs support this process?



Thananuch Sangunsak, TVEAP image archive

Here are the wishes expressed by participants, reproduced in their original wording (excepting improvements on grammar for clarity), as sorted into several categories by the meeting co-moderators:

### Avoiding Conflict:

- Developmental agencies and NGOs often feel that they 'possess' or 'own' the community that they provide assistance to. This creates tension/conflict between journalists and developmental agencies.
- To avoid confrontation, there is a need to focus on the public interest.
- Disaster officials should avoid using jargon. They need to be responsive to the journalists' questions.
- If a question is a complex one, journalists need to take the time to listen to the complex answer. Don't ask for the simplistic response.
- Both journalists and disaster managers should indulge in more self-reflection.



### Practices:

- Give utmost importance to "commons" (and common interest) rather than "exclusive", "logo and brand" exercises.
- See and consider the media as a partner.
- Disaster communicators to think like a CEO of an enterprise and see journalists/media as consumers of information.

### Integrating:

- What are the best models and examples for media and disaster managers cooperating well?
  - Involving the media as a stakeholder.
  - Involve media in joint assessments (not just after the project is over). After that, sponsor media professionals to visit projects and discuss issues.
  - "Embed" journalists in your work.
  - Co-creation of content.

### Community-centred:

- Idea: Set up community-based communication channels in disaster prone areas (e.g. community radios, community newspapers, theatres, etc.)
- How best to magnify the voice of disaster-affected people:
  - Magnify access to tech-help-know-how
  - Sensitize managers about the difficult circumstances of minorities
  - Drama can be used to simulate a situation that requires a quick response (knee-jerk reaction). So dramatize a disaster in training.
- Provide a venue (or numerous venues) for affected people to air their grievances, needs, etc., and act on these ASAP.
- Effective disaster management is difficult without local capacity to organise and direct volunteer action when disaster hits, and without building the capacity for disaster preparedness within the communities. Volunteerism has a proven value. Use it!
- Develop and encourage New Media (blogs, picture blogs, video blogs or video collections like YouTube.com) to give a voice to the poor and rural communities who do not get their fair share of voice in the mainstream media.
- Media should give as much space to the affected people through live group sessions on the ground, phone-in or SMS. This helps in the affected people getting to voice their pain and needs. It works better than the traditional way of doing a "human interest" story.



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### Building Understanding/trust:

- Having standard practices or standard operating procedures (SOP) in place for disaster response, relief and recovery. There is no time to think or plan during the stress. So follow SOP only or act automatically.
- Help media to understand the issue, while not promoting the organisation.
- Develop (cultivate and nurture) an ongoing relationship with the media.
- Establish a network for media and 'disaster relief providers' for better and efficient communications. (A possible outcome of this meeting.)
- Understanding the limitations of each other.

- Journalists, disaster managers and development workers should be provided a milieu to share their concerns and success on a common platform.
- Best practices/models: Mutual understanding on expectations has helped.
- An effective co-ordinating mechanism (for example, TNTRC, a neutral forum) is already working on balancing interests of government, local I/NGOs.
- Just try to understand the \*priorities\* of the "other" side. \* To build trust and respect: exchange opportunities -- let journalists work with organisations, and officials into the newsroom, for a day.
- Development workers put on media glasses. Journalists put on development glasses. Both need to talk in the people's language.
- Find common interests and work together.
- Let the disaster-affected people speak, communication. Be fair with them (there 'no competition'). Respect and (try to) understand each other's constraints and roles.

### Day Two: 22 December 2006

The second day started with the moderators presenting a summary of the interactive session which ended the first day.

This was followed by the screening of audio-visual material.

- ***Children of Tsunami: No More Tears*** (24 mins) was a regional documentary co-produced in late 2005 by Channel News Asia of Singapore and TVE Asia Pacific, based on year-long filming carried out in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. It was broadcast Asia-wide on the first anniversary of the Asian Tsunami, in December 2005, and has since been repeated several times on Asia's leading English news channel.
- Asoka Dias screened extracts from his media network's news and current affairs coverage of the two Tsunami related Sri Lankan stories where the media had played a key role:
  - The case of two men who were caught on a freelance journalist's video camera on Tsunami day as they robbed the necklace of an affected woman and threw her back into the waters immediately after the first wave had struck Galle. Based mainly on this evidence, a judge sentenced both men to death in December 2006.<sup>2</sup>
  - The case of baby Abilash, who was separated from parents and washed away by Tsunami waves but miraculously survived. Dubbed 'Baby 81' by the media, he received worldwide coverage when the media claimed nine couples claimed him as their own – which turned out to be a fabrication. (See Box on page 131).
- Asoka saw the first example as one where the timely action by a professionally trained videographer – himself caught in the unfolding disaster – helped solve a crime. The second was where the media went overboard, and 'created news needlessly' when so many other, more legitimate stories were unfolding all around them.
- Nalaka Gunawardene, originator of *Children of Tsunami*, described how challenging it was to get regional and global broadcast media organisations to take note of the thousands of individual recovery stories behind the mega-story of the disaster's death and destruction. "When they were not following the blood, they were following the (aid) money. For sure, both were important, but was that all the Tsunami story was?" Nalaka referred to the insensitive conduct of some western media outlets – claiming to be global media – when they assigned a disproportionately high level of coverage for affected nationals from that media's country of origin/location. Jeremy Seabrook called this 'imperialism in death'.<sup>3</sup>

### Sri Lanka's Baby 81: Controversy manufactured by media?

A Sri Lankan baby who grabbed world media attention as a "celebrated" Tsunami orphan was later united with his biological family -- but not before it had created headlines.

The four-month-old boy, Abhilash Jeyarajah, was picked up by a neighbor who found the infant under a pile of garbage immediately after giant waves lashed Kalmunai on 26 December 2004. The man handed over the child to the Kalmunai hospital. The parents, who also survived the waves, later found their child.

Police denied nine couples claimed him as their own and hospital authorities confirmed that only one couple had come forward to claim the baby. The man who handed over the child to hospital has told police that he had known the child was that of his neighbors and that there was no dispute about the parentage.

"Because it had a miraculous escape, a lot of people showed interest in the child, but they never said they were the parents," chief inspector W. C. Wijetilleka was quoted as saying. "Only one couple claimed the child. No one else has come forward to make a legal claim."

But newspapers and news agencies said squabbling had broken out over "Baby 81" -- as he was dubbed by hospital authorities in Kalmunai, going by the admission number. Apparently, nine couples who lost infants in the tsunami had all said he was theirs. The New York Times referred to him as a "celebrated orphan".

"As far as the police and the courts are concerned, only one couple is claiming the child," inspector Wijetilleka said. "We have reported the facts to court and the judge ordered the hospital to release the child to the parents."

The story was fuelled by the hospital's initial reluctance to release the boy until he was well enough. The couple then petitioned the court, which ordered on 12 January 2005 that the baby be given to them. DNA tests, presented to court on 14 February 2005 confirmed their claim as biological parents.

"The young couple was at the centre of endless media coverage for several weeks," says Asoka Dias, Station Director of MTV/MBC Network, Sri Lanka. "This created public impression that they also received a great deal of money and other help, which was not the case. They have had to relocate to a new neighbourhood, and are struggling to lead normal lives."

Sources: Lanka Business Online, [www.lbo.lk](http://www.lbo.lk)  
IHT: <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/02/14/asia/web.01214baby81.php>

## Session 3: Enhancing the media's role in communicating disaster Panel 3: Communicating before disaster strikes

This panel was moderated by **Roopa Rakshit, Communications and Information Manager of the Asian Disaster preparedness Centre (ADPC), Bangkok**. She stressed on the need for "timely, accurate communication" which could be a cost effective way of saving lives and reducing property damage. Some of the suggested bullet-points for discussion were:

- What meaningful role can the mass media play in disaster awareness and preparedness at the community or national level?
- How can the media cover different types of disasters -- some evolving slowly (e.g. drought) and others more rapidly or without prior warning?



Thamudh Sangumak, TVEAP image archive

- How best can the mass media amplify credible hazard warnings, broadcast them to the largest numbers in the shortest possible time?
- What role do the new media play in disseminating early warnings?
- How can we improve the nexus between disaster managers, early warning systems and the media?



Thananuch Sangunsak, TVEAP image archive

**Cherdasak Virapat, National Disaster Warning Centre, Thailand**, said his country was preparing a national office to coordinate an early-warning system for impending disasters.

- We want to see the media play a key role in disseminating these early warnings to the public in a fast, efficient and reliable manner.
- But we are finding it difficult to engage the media. Some sections of the Thai media say they don't trust us. We feel they don't know very much, and they don't want to learn. When we invite them for media training, they say: 'No, we don't have much time. We want just the news.'



Thananuch Sangunsak, TVEAP image archive

**Lakshaman Bandaranayake, Managing Director, Vanguard Management (ETV Channel), Sri Lanka**, argued that the broadcast media offered wide reach and quick access in his country.

- We can reach 80% of our population through TV, and 90% through radio. It also has a value in terms of immediacy. But the media cannot be the only channel, and every available means of communications -- even the traditional village drummer -- needs to be looked at and creatively integrated into delivering disaster preparedness and disaster warning information to every section of society.
- Early warning is a pure public good. It can't be left to the market alone to decide and manage early warning information. This is where government, civil society, academics and commercialised media all have to join hands.
- The traditional school of journalism may not readily acknowledge the possibilities thrown up by the new media. But the fact is that the new media are here to stay. We can't just dismiss the new media saying 'they don't have enough accountability, or don't follow the same code of ethics as the more established media do'.
- There are exciting opportunities that emerge with the new media, such as user-generated content, social networking and video blogging. It's up to all public spirited people to explore how these can be put to serve the public interest. The new media offer strong ways of binding communities together. We can create user-groups that are attracted by disaster concerns, and encourage them to share best practices.



Thananuch Sangunsak, TVEAP image archive

**Pablo Torrealba, Regional Risk Reduction Specialist of the UNDP's Crisis Prevention and Recovery (CPR) Team**, contested the view that disasters were "natural".

- Disasters are triggered by a natural event which shocks society. We cannot change the event, but we can change society's response so that it doesn't become a disaster.
- Most disasters build up over time, some aggravated human action or apathy. It's a question of: how do we create a disaster (over a period of time).
- People who are most impacted by disasters are those who are always left out of the development process.



Thananuch Sangunsak, TVEAP image archive

**Joe Carlos, Programme Manager, Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development**, called for "good journalism" that would help turn a story into an "interesting, moving piece of story-telling".

- We need better protection to ensure the safety of journalists covering disaster and conflict situations. It is important to have guidelines for the media's own safety in times of disaster.
- We also need ethical guidelines on aspects such as interviewing those traumatised by disasters, handling privacy issues of disaster affected people, and in breaking bad news to the next-of-kin.
- Investigative journalism is needed to understand the factors and processes that turn hazards into disasters.

### Be better prepared!

Journalists across Asia can benefit from training on how to cover hazards and disasters in greater depth and with more sensitivity, the meeting was told. Joe Carlos, who works for AIBD, a regional organisation that builds the skills and knowledge of broadcast media personnel, had several specific suggestions:

- Regular dialogue between the media and different stakeholders;
- Media awards for the most appropriate coverage of any kind of disaster;
- Using local Asian languages more widely and effectively for such coverage;
- Training journalists in how to cope with trauma themselves, and those traumatised by a disaster;
- Training of community broadcasting staff as this media could play a bigger role in taking the knowledge to the grassroots.

### Working group activity

Participants divided themselves into three smaller groups and worked in parallel sessions to come up with some guidelines for more effective engagement of mass media and new media before, during and after disasters.

These guidelines are presented as Appendix 3 of the book.



Thananuch Sanguansak, TVEAP image archive



Thananuch Sanguansak, TVEAP image archive

### Session 4: Strengthening links between media and disaster managers

This concluding session of the meeting was joined by a few representatives from Bangkok-based UN agencies, disaster management organisations and mass media organisations.

Workshop moderators welcomed them, provided a summary of meeting activities thus far, and invited them to introduce themselves.



## Debate 2: Communication under duress: Do disaster managers make good communication managers?

This debate was moderated by Chin Saik Yoon, and involved four participants.

Suggested discussion points were:

- When disaster strikes, how to balance the media's insatiable thirst for new information with ground realities and survival needs of the affected?
- How can disaster managers cope with media scrutiny and criticism? Do journalists get in the way of relief and rescue efforts?
- Who looks after public accountability and transparency?
- What media can disaster managers take into confidence?
- Which media outlets are the most important -- local, national or global?
- How can we optimise the strengths of print, broadcast and the online media?
- Can anything be done about 'checkbook journalism' that some media organisations indulge in at disaster scenes (paying or rewarding affected people to talk to them exclusively)?
- What non-media communications methods are available to disaster managers?



Thananuch Sangunsak, TVEAP image archive

**Heru Hendratmoko, Radio 68H community radio network, Indonesia** described the challenges his network faced in covering the Tsunami's aftermath.

- We first heard of the Tsunami through an SMS, which simply said: "Earthquake in Aceh. Seawater rising." We sent in our first reporter to Aceh with a satellite phone, and he was given a ride on the plane carrying the Indonesian vice-president.
- Several international TV networks were beaming pictures from Sri Lanka and Thailand showing the damage. But the devastation in Aceh turned out to be much bigger than initially thought. This became known only after a few days, and then the world responded generously.
- But the post-disaster management could have been better handled by the Indonesian government. Relief materials were piling up at airport and harbours. People's needs and expectations were not being met. Frustrations were setting in, and morale was very low.
- We decided to use the airwaves to uplift the morale of the Achenese. We felt this would help them to start rebuilding their lives. Of course, it was not easy.
- We also started rebuilding the local radio station damaged by the waves, and sought international assistance. Before the disaster, we had 14 radio stations in Aceh and we now have 25.



Thananuch Sangunsak, TVEAP image archive

**Lisa Hiller, Communications Manager, UNDP Nepal**, held the view that the priority of development organisations arriving at disaster scenes "is not primarily to communicate, but to respond to the emergency situation on the ground".

- This frustrates many journalists. It is therefore necessary for development organisations to see information as a 'commodity' -- in the same way they see emergency shelters or water supply as a commodity.
- As relief workers, we don't just arrive, bringing the tents, and then say 'Oh, here it is - you guys pick it up'. We would find distribution networks, and make sure the tents reach the right people. We have to manage information in the same way.
- It's a bit surprising that in Asia -- where a majority of countries are still developing -- that development is not considered a top news story.

**Surein J S Peiris, Deputy Director General, Sri Lanka Red Cross** said the Tsunami was major challenge to his relief organisation. The Red Cross did have decades of experience in dealing with various types of disasters, but the Tsunami was of an unprecedented scale and magnitude.

- The strength of the Red Cross is in its volunteerism. We had the capacity and readiness to mobilise

thousands of volunteers for rescue and relief within hours.

- Under the overall banner of Red Cross, over two dozen organisations operated in Sri Lanka in the months following the Tsunami. This included the ICRC, IFRC, a number of Red Cross societies from other countries, and of course the Sri Lanka Red Cross. Most sections of the media did not grasp nor appreciate this complexity. To them, it was all one and the same Red Cross. Some misreporting and confusion arose as a result.
- As the Red Cross operates on a neutral basis, its preferred mode of operation is collaboration and partnership building. Sometimes the Red Cross cannot make statements as expected by the media, criticizing aid agencies or governments.
- In my view, the media needs to raise and sustain the coverage of the issue of internally displaced people (IDPs) both in times of disaster and conflict.



TVEIP image archive

**Prof Nalini Rajan, Dean, Asian College of Journalism (India)** stressed the value of self reflection by both media practitioners and development/disaster professionals.

- While journalists dislike it when they are criticised, they seldom exercise the adversarial role they are expected to play.
- The media is good at reporting an event in terms of the 5 Ws in journalism -- who, what, where, when and why -- they but not so good at explaining processes that lead to an event, or the 'how' part of it.
- Criticism is needed on both sides: development workers need to focus the spotlight of criticism on themselves because there is a good deal of self-congratulation going on while there is much unfinished business.



Thananuch Sanguanak, TVEIP image archive

### Governments, disasters and communications

Indian environmentalist Anil Agarwal wrote a scathing comment after the Bhuj earthquake of 2001: "Disasters come and go but, our government has become a permanent disaster". While we are vulnerable to natural disasters, he said, these temporary and preventable disasters turn into massive calamities because of the "perpetual disaster that this country's governance system has come to represent".

The uneasy relationship between Asian governments and the governed came into focus several times during the meeting. Whether it was the failure of governments to adequately prepare or warn people of impending disasters, or the inadequacies in post-disaster relief, recovery and rehabilitation, participants felt that governments did too little, too late.

Lack of good communications was part of the problem. "Governments don't trust their citizens," was one observation that many agreed with. In some countries, this could be traced to their colonial or dictatorial past. Similarly, many citizens feel they cannot count on their governments: the authorities often just want to avoid causing panic and alarm -- and hence play down or even deliberately suppress early warnings.

The sheer lack of reliable information and the many bottlenecks prevents its flow were also identified as problems. For instance, in the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster, it took a long time before the leaking deadly gas could be identified and its seriousness assessed.

The meeting agreed that for media to fulfill its role as public educator and early warning disseminator, governments need to get their act together and create an enabling environment. One participant -- a media manager - shared his bitter experience of having to face legal action for a bona fide error in a public interest website his company had put up after the Tsunami. Clearly, a good deal of 'bridge building' and confidence building is needed.



TVEAP image archive

In the ensuing discussion, participants cited both best and worst practices in disaster communications. One aspect that drew several comments was the obsession of many relief and development agencies for ‘branding’: the phenomenon of using disaster relief items, as well as disaster relief communications, as ‘logo delivery mechanisms’.

Nalaka Gunawardene drew attention to another unhealthy trend: some developmental agencies seeking favourable media coverage – basically, their propaganda - by paying for air time or print space. “This distorts the news values and makes it more difficult for other agencies to get the media coverage they deserve. This is corruption – I call it ‘chequebook development,’” he said.



Thananuch Sangunsak, TVEAP image archive

Development agencies present acknowledged they are under much pressure to document and account for resources they receive. While coping with these institutional imperatives, the meeting agreed, issue-based public communication of development and disasters should not be sidelined or abandoned.

### Concluding Remarks

The meeting concluded with a few remarks by the co-organisers and co-moderators.

- Nalaka Gunawardene described plans for compiling a regional resource book on Communicating Disasters, which would include: the full report of this meeting; invited contributions from several participants; and contributions from a number of other media or development professionals in the region.
- Participants agreed on the value of an internet-based mailing-list focusing on communications and disaster. The idea is to keep it open to others who are not present, but interested in the intersection-point of these two topics.<sup>4</sup>
- Building online (or print) directories of journalists interested in developmental communications was also mentioned. Shahidul Alam said he would be keen to build up a listing of photographers in various parts of Asia. Others pointed to the existence of some such lists.
- Amjad Bhatti mentioned attempts to create a global network of journalists working on disaster issues. He said special editions were also brought out, with six being released so far, related to disaster themes. “In South Asia, we are sharing mountains, river basins and deserts. The question is how to also share more information?”



Thananuch Sangunsak, TVEAP image archive

In her concluding remarks, **Cherie Hart, UNDP’s Regional Communications Advisor**, said looking at the issue in terms of “media vs. development practitioners or disaster practitioners” was a false divide. She added: “I don’t think they’re two different sides. We need to see each other through the same lens. We have more in common in goals that we have, than we might first realise.”

She also said it was another “false divide” to see things in terms of the mainstream media vs. alternative media. “I find that divide is really fuzzy. More and more, we’re seeing bloggers breaking the stories. We’re seeing alternative media coming to the fore. We’ve already seen how cell phones are taking the lead.”



Thananuch Sangunsak, TVEAP image archive

**Manori Wijesekera, TVE Asia Pacific’s Regional Programme Manager**, concluded the meeting by thanking everyone for having participated with such energy and enthusiasm. “We had worked hard to bring together a good mix and balance of participants, and that resulted in a dynamic meeting of minds where discussion was forthright and honest. Our challenge is to carry these ideas forward in our own spheres of work.”

Endnotes:

- 1 More information at: <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/tsunami/article.asp?parentid=21428>
- 2 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/6178779.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6178779.stm)
- 3 <http://media.guardian.co.uk/site/story/0,14173,1381297,00.html>
- 4 This has since been launched, and can be accessed at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/communicating-disaster/>

# Appendix 2

## **‘Communicating Disasters: Building on the Tsunami Experience and Responding to Future Challenges’: Bangkok, 21 – 22 December 2006**

### **List of Meeting Participants, Facilitators and Organisers**

#### **New media and mass media organisations**

- Dr. Shahdiul Alam, Managing Director, Drik Picture Library Ltd, Dhaka, Bangladesh
- Mr. Lakshaman Bandaranayake, Chairman/Managing Director, Vanguard Management Services (Pvt) Limited, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- Ms. Lynette Lee Corporal, Project Editor, Inter Press Service Asia Pacific, Bangkok, Thailand
- Mr. Asoka Dias, Director Station, Sirasa TV, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- Mr. Heru Hendratmoko, Production Director, Radio News Agency KBR 68H, Jakarta, Indonesia
- Mr. Milind K Khandekar, Deputy Managing Editor, Star News, Mumbai, India
- Mr. Dendy F. Montgomery, Freelance Cameraman, Aceh, Indonesia
- Mr. Pipope Panitchpakdi, Director of Special Report and Documentary, Nation Broadcasting Corporation, Bangkok, Thailand
- Mr. Ahmed Shakeeb, Announcer, Television Maldives, Male, Maldives.
- Ms. Joanne Teoh Kheng Yau, Senior Producer, Channel News Asia, Singapore

#### **Research and academic organisations**

- Mr. Amjad Bhatti, Regional Coordinator, Duryog Nivaran, South Asian Network for Disaster Risk Reduction, Islamabad, Pakistan.
- Mr. Joe Carlos, Programme Manager, Asia Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Mr. A S Panneerselvam, Executive Director, Panos South Asia, Kathmandu, Nepal.
- Dr. Nalini Rajan, Dean of Studies & Associate Professor, Asian College of Journalism, Chennai, India.
- Ms. Roopa Rakshit, Communication & Information Manager, Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC), Bangkok, Thailand.

#### **Governmental and non governmental organisations**

- Ms. Nalini Keshavaraj, Manager, Tamil Nadu Tsunami Resource Centre, Chennai, India.
- Mr. Surein J.S. Peiris, Deputy Director General, Sri Lanka Red Cross Society, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- Mrs. Yupayong Thetapupa, Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, Ministry of Interior, Bangkok, Thailand.
- Mr. Cherdasak Virapat, Chief, International Coordination, National Disaster Warning Center, Thailand (NDWC), Bangkok, Thailand.

#### **Meeting facilitation and documentation**

- Mr. Chin, Saik Yoon, Publisher, Southbound, Penang, Malaysia.
- Mr. Frederick Noronha, Independent Journalist, Goa, India.

### **Co-organisers: TVE Asia Pacific**

- Mr. Nalaka Gunawardene, Director and CEO, TVE Asia Pacific
- Mr. Janaka Sri Jayalath, Audio Visual Officer, TVE Asia Pacific
- Ms. Geeta Saravanan, Administrative Officer, TVE Asia Pacific
- Ms. Manori Wijesekera, Regional Programme Manager, TVE Asia Pacific

### **Co-organisers: UNDP Regional Centre in Bangkok**

- Ms. Christine Apikul, Programme Specialist – Content Development and Knowledge Management, UNDP-APDIP, Bangkok, Thailand.
- Ms. Cherie Hart, Regional Communications Advisor, UNDP Regional Centre in Bangkok
- Ms. Lisa Hiller, Communications Manager, UNDP Nepal, Kathmandu, Nepal.
- Mr. Pablo Torrealba, Risk Reduction Specialist, UNDP, Regional Centre Bangkok, Thailand
- Mr. Chanuka Wattegama, Programme Specialist ICT4D, UNDP-APDIP, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

### **UN Participants for the special half day session on Day 2**

- Ms. Vero Balderas Iglesias, Communication Specialist, United Nations Volunteers, Aceh, Indonesia.
- Mr. Osama M. Rajkhan, Social Affairs Officer and Human Rights Focal Point, Emerging Social Issues Division, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (UNESCAP), Bangkok, Thailand.
- Ms. Anuje Pina Sirkit, Public Information Officer, UNESCO Bangkok, Thailand



# Appendix 3

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## **Suggested guidelines for more effective engagement of mass media and new media before, during and after disasters**

These guidelines were drafted by the participants of the Brainstorming on 'Communicating Disasters: Building on the Tsunami Experience and Responding to Future Challenges': Bangkok, 21 – 22 December 2006 (see also Appendices 1 and 2). They are carried here without editing.

### **Before a disaster strikes (hazard phase)**

Guidelines for media organisations, and also government/developmental organisations:

- Investigative reports are needed; on issues like institutional readiness.
- Pre-disaster work needs to start years before disaster, not minutes before.
- Need for credible government agencies tackling such issues.
- Institutional, developmental and academic institutions need to provide media with easy-to-digest information.
- Non-media institutions need to assist media in covering slow-moving stories, and to provide the 'human face' to what could otherwise be just dry stories.
- Fill in the 'resource gap'. Recognise logistical limitations of the media, with support from institutions for exposure visits and the like.
- Developmental organisations and institutions should make efforts to understand the diversity of the media. This means, diverse sections of the media need to be dealt with in differing ways.
- State of preparedness needed to be created among media organisations.
- Reach out to a greater variety of the media, and also the traditional media
- Institutions could make available B-roll footage available to the media, exploit existing networks such as the UNiFeed, <http://www.un.org/unifeed/>. Online photo libraries could also help to build awareness in the media. Institutions (working on disaster issues) should consider starting blogs.
- Local languages need to be deployed in media campaigns.
- Editors should be encouraged to have a 'disaster beat'
- Preparedness is a cultural value. It needs to be built upon.

### **During an unfolding disaster and immediately afterwards (first two weeks)**

- It's not possible nor realistic to compile a rigid list of do's and don'ts.
- This phase of the disaster, in most cases, involves a window of two weeks from the time a disaster breaks.
- Focus on the 'immediate' media -- newspapers, TV, radio, web, cell phone. (Theatre, music, etc., may not be relevant at this point of time.)
- Work actively to bridge the mismatch between victims' needs and relief agencies' interest/focus.
- Let media have access to all information and sites, without restriction. Don't prevent journalists from reaching the disaster and other relevant sites.
- Encourage active participation of affected parties in the information and communication processes.

- Rather than preparing any more manuals or guidelines for media, what is needed is training, reorientation and sensitising for developmental agencies.
- Media needs to be considered and build (based on spot-reporting), a central desk, expert panel and other suitable forms to better cover an unfolding disaster situation.
- The goal is to spread information effectively, and provide expression to the people affected.
- Media should be treated as (those generating information for) part of the public domain, and a space for complementing ideas.
- Guidelines: Encourage and support all forms of narratives, and visuals.
- Guidelines: Be sensitive. There can be a difference between showing bodies and gore.
- Guidelines: Don't be offensive.
- Guidelines: Be effective.
- Guidelines: Training needed for the authorities, donors, agencies to understand journalism and how media organisations work.
- Bridge the mismatch between information available and needed.
- Assessment should start from the ground up.
- Let media have access to real information.
- New media (including TV) requirement: good 'sound bytes'.
- Media needs to adopt an antagonistic position, based on its logic of operations. Idea is to make those in power more accountable, less cosy.

### After a disaster: long-term recovery

- Taking care of physical needs without overlooking mental disorders, stress, psychosomatic issues that are not often raised.
- Factors that exacerbate the problem need to be focused on: ethnic tensions, regional divisions, etc.
- Issues of gender need to be considered: especially concerns such as redefining women's role in the family after a disaster.
- Make available "cultural" emergency relief, as well as recovery support
- Disaster beat is recommended, the media should work to keep post-disaster issues in the news.
- Media should focus on both immediate aftermath and long-term effects.
- Be aware about possible mismatch between aid available, and the community needs.
- Media coverage needs to extend beyond the status quo in society (e.g. male control of households and assets).
- New media can play a special role in bypassing the hierarchy.
- Media has a role in 're-energising' the community during recovery phase.
- Media also has a role to play in sharing relevant stories with the community.

# Appendix 4

## Contributing Authors

The world's best known writer of science fiction, **Sir Arthur C Clarke** proposed the idea of satellite communications in 1945. One of his short stories inspired the World Wide Web, while another was later expanded to make the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey, which he co-wrote with director Stanley Kubrick. Sir Arthur has lived in Sri Lanka since 1956, where he pioneered underwater tourism.

**Johanna Son**, a journalist for two decades, is director of Inter Press Service (IPS) Asia-Pacific ([www.ipsnewsasia.net](http://www.ipsnewsasia.net)), the regional foundation that is part of the IPS international news agency ([www.ips.org](http://www.ips.org)). A Philippine national, Son was previously correspondent and editor for IPS Asia-Pacific, as well as staffer of the Manila Chronicle. She has led reporting teams for international conferences and newspapers and does training work with Mekong journalists.

**Peter Griffin** earns his living as a writer and communicator, in advertising and journalism, and on the web. He also writes poetry, co-moderates the writers' forum Caferati ([www.caferati.com](http://www.caferati.com)), does a bit of travel writing and photography, and spends large chunks of his day online, reading blogs and surfing web communities. He co-edited the short fiction anthology, *Stories at the Coffee Table* (Caferati Creative, 2007).

**Chanuka Wattagama** is Director - organisational development at LIRNEasia, a regional ICT think tank. Previously, he was Programme Specialist ICT4D at the UNDP Asia-Pacific Development Information Programme (APDIP) where he worked on various projects covering poverty reduction, telecom regulation, gender, disaster management and e-government. Chanuka has 15 years of experience at specialist and management level in development. He was the lead researcher for Sri Lanka in a nine-country study on ICT for Human Development in Asia conducted by the UNDP in 2004.

Originator of Children of Tsunami concept, **Nalaka Gunawardene** is Director and CEO of TVE Asia Pacific ([www.tveap.org](http://www.tveap.org)). Trained as a science writer and journalist, Nalaka has 20 years of experience with print and broadcast media, as well as with conservation groups and development organisations across Asia. In 1996, he co-founded the non-profit TVE Asia Pacific which uses television, video and new media to communicate sustainable development and social justice to half of humanity living in Asia. He continues to write and speak on public communication of science, technology and development, and blogs at <http://movingimages.wordpress.com>

**Manori Wijsekera** was a journalist and writer for several years, working for an English language daily, a business magazine and travel publications, before joining TVE Asia Pacific in 1998. She is Regional Programme Manager and Head of Distribution at TVEAP, promoting partnerships with dozens of broadcast, civil society and educational organisations across the Asia Pacific. Manori served as production manager of Children of Tsunami, managing four film-maker teams across eight locations in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

**Joanne Teoh Kheng Yau** is a veteran journalist and producer who has held editorial and creative positions in broadcasting. As news editor with Channel News Asia, Singapore, she produced coverage on major global events including the 1997 Asian financial crisis, September 11 attacks, Iraq War, SARS outbreak and the Indian Ocean Tsunami. She has written, produced and directed more than 40 documentaries and

TV programmes on environment, technology, business, culture and the impact of media. Her work has been honoured for excellence in journalism and broadcast internationally. Joanne has a special interest in convergent media and using online video for change.

**Frederick Noronha** is one of the early Indian journalists in cyberspace, and from his home in a Goan village of Saligao plays an active role in encouraging alternative voices to get heard on the internet. He has co-founded BytesForAll, a non-funded initiative looking at how ICTs can help social development, and is known for his involvement in dozens of emailing lists in India. [<http://wikiwikiweb.de/MailingListsInIndia>] Noronha's writing has focussed on environmental issues, technology, the Free Software movement in India, and documentary film in South Asia. He is currently looking at publishing books using alternative models.

**Shahidul Alam** is a Bangladeshi photographer, writer, teacher and activist. He set up the award winning picture agency Drik ([www.drik.net](http://www.drik.net)), as well as Pathshala, the South Asian Institute of Photography. He introduced email to Bangladesh and later setup the country's first webzine, Internet portal and the nation's human rights network. He is director of Chobi Mela, the festival of photography in Asia. Alam's work has been shown in the world's leading galleries and his photographs have been published in the most respected publications. He is an honorary fellow of the Royal Photographic Society and a member of the advisory board of the National Geographic Society.

**Max Martin** reported and photographed extensively in the aftermath of the tsunami and edited the independent website [indiadisasters.org](http://indiadisasters.org) from Jan 2005 to July 2007. Now he reports from Bangalore for Mail Today, covering development, disasters and migration.

**Amjad Bhatti** is an Islamabad-based development journalist studying and investigating the political economy of development and disasters in South Asia. He is the coordinating editor of the South Asia Disaster Report 2005, published by Duryog Nivaran, the Practical Action and Rural Development Policy Institute. He is also co-author of two books: *Disaster Communication: A Resource Kit for Media*, and *Livelihood Centred Approaches for Disaster Management: A Policy Framework for South Asia*.

Prior to joining the International Red Cross Movement, **Patrick Fuller** spent five years researching and producing documentary programmes for British television. He joined the Red Cross in 1993 as a communications specialist and has been on mission in East Africa, South Asia, the Balkans and the UK. He is currently working with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) as Communications Coordinator for their Tsunami operations in Sri Lanka.

**Veronica Balderas Iglesias** served as a United Nations volunteer in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami.

**A.S. Panneerselvan** is Executive Director of Panos South Asia, since 2004. A bi-lingual journalist and writer, he was Managing Editor of Sun TV, India between May 2001 and June 2004. He was in the founding team of the Outlook magazine and was its bureau chief in South India since its inception in 1995 to May 2001. Earlier he had worked for the Business India group. 'Panneer' has written extensively on neighbourhood relations and the nuclear issue. He works closely with the Delhi-based magazine --The Little Magazine -- looking at creative writing as well.

**Sanny Jegillos** leads the UNDP's regional tsunami project effort to provide strategic guidance on risk reduction and sustainable recovery in tsunami affected countries. He liaises among UN agencies, contributes to the design of the International Recovery platform, documents and shares lessons learned from the regional programme and develops alliances with regional partners. Sanny previously consulted on disaster risk management for UNDP in Bangladesh, Yemen and Lao PDR, with UNICEF in Vietnam, WFP in Cambodia and UNCRD in Japan.

**Rajesh Sharma** is responsible for information management on disaster recovery coordination and risk reduction. He analyses disaster trends and beneficiary tracking in India, Indonesia, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. This information is used to strengthen UNDP's disaster response coordination. Rajesh joined UNDP from the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC), Bangkok, where he managed and implemented the information and networking component of a ten-country regional programme - Asian Urban Disaster Mitigation Programme.

**Pablo Torrealba** provides advice and technical backstopping to tsunami-affected countries on disaster risk reduction, focusing on end-to-end early warning systems. He offers technical support on the tools available to understand disaster risks and offers advisory services on using the information they generate for decision-making on risk reduction. Pablo has over 14 years experience in disaster preparedness and natural resource management. Most recently, Pablo consulted with the Regional Bureau of the World Food Programme in Panama, designing and implementing a regional disaster preparedness and response strategy. Pablo has worked throughout Latin America and the Caribbean in community-based natural resource management.

With a degree in English Literature from the University of Delhi, India, and an Advanced Masters in Conflict Resolution and International Relations from the University of Queensland, Australia, **Sanjana Hattotuwa** was spared literary obscurity by his original writing on media, peacebuilding and technology. At present, he trades sanity for initiatives that attempt to use technology and new media to promote peace and reconciliation. Sanjana is a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Policy Alternatives, Sri Lanka, Head of ICT and Peacebuilding at InfoShare and a Senior Advisor to the ICT4Peace Foundation in Geneva.

**Ammu Joseph** is an independent journalist and author based in Bangalore, India, writing primarily on issues relating to gender, human development and the media. Among her publications are *Whose News? The Media and Women's Issues* (Sage, 1994 and 2006), *Women in Journalism: Making News* (Penguin, 2005), *Terror, Counter-Terror: Women Speak Out* (Kali/Zed, 2003), *Storylines: Conversations with Women Writers* and *Just Between Us: Women Speak about Their Writing* (Women's World India/Women Unlimited, 2003, 2004). She has also contributed chapters to several other books, including the *Encyclopedia of International Media and Communications* (2003), *Women and Media: International Perspectives* (2004), *Gender and Newsroom Cultures: Identities at Work* (2004), *Gender Perspectives in the Information Society: Emerging Issues* (2006), *21st Century Journalism in India* (2007), and *Tsunami 2004: Communication Perspectives* (2007).

**Chin Saik Yoon** is the founder and publisher of Southbound ([www.southbound.com.my](http://www.southbound.com.my)), a scholarly press specialising in books about information and communication processes. He continues to be a practitioner of communication for development and social change. Chin gained his field experience working with communicators and facilitators across Asia and the Arab regions. He continues to be a student of colleagues pioneering communication methodologies for facilitating participatory social processes and resolving conflicts. Chin serves on the boards of several international development networks and communities of practice for communication.

**Buddhi Weerasinghe** started his career as a university lecturer in botany. After dabbling in radio and print communication for some years, he switched to working in the video medium in the mid 1980s. Media for education became his interest, and he served as Director of Educational Technology at the Open University of Sri Lanka from 1991 to 2000. He then spent five years with the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC), a regional organisation based in Bangkok, Thailand, as its Training Manager. Currently he is UNDP Expert in training and public awareness attached to the Disaster Management Center, Sri Lanka.

**Kalpana Sharma** is a Mumbai-based independent journalist and columnist. She has held senior editorial positions with *The Hindu*, *Times of India* and *Indian Express*.



# Appendix 5



## **Reuters AlertNet: Helping journalists cover crises**

“What I find indispensable about AlertNet is its coverage of corners of the world that the mainstream media reports from less and less. When you click on the country name, there’s a country profile, statistics, analyses and the latest news. It’s a terrific research tool.”

**- Mahtab Haider, Senior Assistant Editor, New Age English language daily in Bangladesh who has reported on floods and cyclones in Bangladesh.**

Ever had to get your head around an unfamiliar war minutes before going on air? Or had to rewrite the front page after an earthquake struck just as you were going to print?

Reuters AlertNet has launched a set of free online tools to make your life a whole lot easier when it comes to reporting on emergencies.

AlertNet for Journalists is designed to help editors and reporters cover conflicts and disasters. It provides a shortcut to the context and contacts journalists need to get to grips with complex stories.

There are background briefings on scores of emergencies – the big ones as well as those that get overlooked. You may think you can explain Iraq, but could you write a sidebar on the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh?

If you couldn’t actually place Nagorno-Karabakh on a map then AlertNet can help there too. Its interactive mapping service lets you zoom in on anywhere in the world and measure distances – useful when you need to pinpoint a flare-up of fighting in a Sri Lankan town you’ve never heard of.

And if you wanted to interview someone on the ground about the violence there’s an online contacts book listing phone numbers and email addresses for hundreds of aid workers in war zones and disaster areas around the world.

AlertNet also provides tip-offs about brewing crises before they hit the headlines and offers journalists ideas for features and new angles on long-running emergencies.

There are statistics on every country and a tool that lets you create graphs to illustrate your stories – handy if you’re comparing refugee populations across Asia, for example.

So what is Reuters AlertNet and why is it offering this free of charge?

AlertNet is a humanitarian news and information website set up by the Reuters Foundation charity in 1997 following the Rwandan genocide.

Aid agencies were strongly criticised for their lack of co-ordination in the post-Rwanda relief operation. AlertNet was launched to help improve communication and co-operation.

Although the service is primarily aimed at aid workers, increasing numbers of journalists are using it too.

“I use AlertNet a lot, and find it an extremely useful resource,” says Alope Devichand, an Al Jazeera International journalist based in Kuala Lumpur. “It often highlights issues and regions which you don’t hear about in the mainstream media, and if I’m looking into a particular issue, it’s a great place to find detailed info about the humanitarian impact.”

In 2004, AlertNet and the Columbia School of Journalism in New York carried out the biggest survey to date of relations between aid agencies and the media.

The resulting report examined the barriers reporters face in covering humanitarian crises – whether they be conflicts, earthquakes, floods or famines.

Journalists’ gripes included the difficulty in finding aid workers willing to talk to the media, a lack of authoritative background on complex crises and a dearth of reliable statistics.

To address these and other problems highlighted by the report, AlertNet put together a toolkit specifically for journalists (<http://www.alertnet.org/journalists>).

The project is being funded by Britain’s Department for International Development.

The services include:

- Crisis briefings: Background on around 80 emergencies, including timelines and web links
- Country statistics: Up-to-date, sourced data on all countries, from health indicators to refugee numbers
- Who works where: Which aid agencies are on the ground? Who can you call?
- Aid agency newswire: Press releases, case studies and features from relief groups
- Humanitarian Heads Up: A weekly email newsletter with early warning of looming crises
- World Press Tracker: An interactive graph that lets you keep tabs on global trends in crisis coverage
- Mediawatch: Provocative articles on humanitarian themes picked from the world’s press
- Interactive training: Online modules to improve your humanitarian reporting

One of AlertNet’s major goals from the outset has been to raise awareness of humanitarian crises across the globe, particularly “forgotten” emergencies that rarely make headlines.

The new project, AlertNet for Journalists, hopes to improve both the breadth and quality of the media’s coverage of such crises.

It aims to do this in practical ways by providing the tools journalists need to get better informed on humanitarian emergencies and by facilitating contact between reporters and aid workers. It also hopes to challenge journalists to think again about the way they report crises.

AlertNet has some 400 member aid agencies who are committed to sharing information on the website. (Benefits for them include free access to Reuters photographs, which they can use in their emergency appeals and publications.)



*Kashmiri earthquake survivors rebuild their home in the mountains 30km (18 miles), north of the earthquake-devastated city of Muzaffarabad in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, January 20, 2006.*

REUTERS/Yannis Behrakis



*An Indian woman mourns the death of a relative killed in the Asian tsunami. The picture was taken in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu, on December 28, 2004.*

REUTERS/Arko Datta

A dozen other organisations with humanitarian expertise provide news and information feeds to the AlertNet site. These content partners include several U.N. agencies, the U.N.'s news service IRIN, the International Crisis Group think tank, Human Rights Watch, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network and the Tropical Storm Risk warning service.

On top of this, there are reports and analyses from Reuters correspondents around the world and from AlertNet's own reporters.

In a new departure, AlertNet is embracing the blogosphere, encouraging aid workers and reporters to contribute personal accounts from the field and their thoughts on humanitarian issues – everything from China's involvement in Africa to the merits, or otherwise, of using celebrities in campaigns.

Members of the public are free to comment on the blogs, helping to generate a lively, global debate. Journalists have said that they find the blogs a great source of story ideas.

Any reporter who has ever had to jump on a plane to get to a crisis zone knows the value of solid, concise background and news updates.

"The AlertNet site gives you exactly that," says Lindsey Hilsum, Channel 4's China Correspondent and International Editor.

"The NGO (non governmental organisation) phone numbers and contacts are very useful, and the thoughtful blogs will help journalists chew over the deeper issues."

The Reuters AlertNet team is available to brief media organisations on the service. Its journalists speak at conferences and debates, and can be contacted for media commentary on humanitarian issues. AlertNet also offers disaster reporting workshops for journalists and media students.

This note was contributed by Emma Batha, Journalist, Reuters AlertNet, London, UK.  
Phone: +44 207 542 6237

AlertNet for Journalists  
<http://www.alertnet.org/journalists>

# Appendix 6



## **United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR) Media Network on Disaster Risk Reduction**

Disaster risk reduction cuts across almost every aspect of daily life and has political, economic, social and cultural implications. It is a global challenge that requires action at all levels to reduce the suffering of millions of victims affected every year by disasters triggered by natural hazards. After the Indian Ocean Tsunami, the many earthquakes around the world, the frequent hurricanes in the Caribbean, and the onset of increasingly severe, weather-related disasters, more people want to know: Why do disasters happen? Who is responsible for them? How can we prevent them? The media play a critical role in answering these questions and the UN/ISDR secretariat attaches great importance to working closely with print media and broadcasters to promote disaster risk reduction policies. Journalists can go beyond the brutal facts of an avalanche or a flood and help people and governments understand the whole process.

The Media Network on Disaster Risk Reduction is a partnership made up of international organizations and communication professionals. The Network seeks to develop a new approach to reduce risks and vulnerabilities to disasters worldwide. This new approach aims to raise awareness about disasters as a process, not just as a fact. It goes beyond the humanitarian coverage and gets disaster risk reduction into the news, current affairs, information programmes and talk shows in order to build a culture of safety and disaster resilience at all levels.

### **Who Are the Members of the Network?**

The core group of the network includes: journalists and communicators from Reuters Alertnet, Radio France International, European Broadcasting Union, MEDIA 21, Voice of America, the Guardian, Duryog Nivaran, the ISDR African media network, the BBC, Asian Pacific Broadcasting Union, OCHA, UNDP, UNEP, WMO, IFRC and the World Bank. The Network will be open to any professional interested in covering disaster risk reduction issues.

### **What Is the Role of Each Member?**

The UN/ISDR secretariat facilitates initial consultations and acts as the catalyst of the initiative. Media individuals raise awareness about the importance of the issue internally and discuss with their executive directors how they can help to make progress on the activities of the network respecting their editorial choices.

### **The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction**

The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction aims at building disaster resilient communities by promoting increased awareness of disaster risk reduction, with the goal of reducing human, social, economic and environmental losses caused by the combination of natural hazards and vulnerabilities.

The ISDR system, which includes a wide range of stakeholders such as Governments, UN agencies, regional bodies, non-governmental organizations and scientific institutions, works together to reduce disaster losses, in lives and in social, economic and environmental assets and to implement the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters.

The UN/ISDR secretariat serves as catalyst, advocates for the implementation of the International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Hyogo Framework for Action worldwide, and mobilizes commitment and resources for disaster risk reduction through partnerships at all levels. The UN/ISDR secretariat also provides services to support the ISDR system.

If you are interested in learning more about the Media Network on Disaster Risk Reduction or getting involved in this initiative, please contact:

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Secretariat, the Americas in Panama:

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Secretariat, Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok:

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[www.unisdr.org/asiapacific](http://www.unisdr.org/asiapacific)

Secretariat, West Asia and North Africa in Geneva:

[www.unisdr.org/wana](http://www.unisdr.org/wana)

Platform for the Promotion of Early Warning:

<isdr-ppew@un.org>

[www.unisdr-earlywarning.org](http://www.unisdr-earlywarning.org)



# Appendix 7

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## **ReliefWeb Project** **[www.reliefweb.int](http://www.reliefweb.int)**

ReliefWeb was created in 1996, following the Great Lakes crisis. The project came about as a result of the collective acknowledgement within the humanitarian community that the lack of information exchange had forestalled early action. United Nations member states recognized the need for a tool to support appropriate decision-making, and the expanding capabilities of the Internet offered a way forward. ReliefWeb was endorsed by two General Assembly resolutions that established its mandate: to strengthen the response capacity of the humanitarian relief community through the timely dissemination of reliable information on preparedness, response and disaster prevention.

ReliefWeb is administered by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). In order to provide balanced coverage, it gathers and disseminates information from more than 2500 sources from the United Nations, non-governmental organisations, governments, academic institutions and the media. These information providers are also the primary users of ReliefWeb. With an archive of over 300,000 documents in three languages (English, French and Spanish) dating back to 1981, ReliefWeb is the largest existing source of documents and maps for humanitarian response on the Web. ReliefWeb operates in three time zones with offices in Geneva, New York and Kobe, which enables it to provide 24-hour coverage and to communicate and reach out to partners around the world.

Through constant monitoring of disasters, ReliefWeb ensures timely coverage of natural disasters and complex emergencies. As delivery of relief reaches disaster-affected areas, ReliefWeb shifts from its early-warning role to full coverage of humanitarian action, and thus fulfils its mission as an information-exchange tool in support of coordination on the ground. Coverage of complex emergencies includes countries and regions in conflict or post-conflict situations. The scope of this coverage is adjusted in relation with the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP), and in consultation with experts in the field.

When the tsunami struck South Asia on 26 December 2004, ReliefWeb started coverage the same day and posted information from 318 sources in the first three weeks. During the following year, 8,000 documents and over 150 maps were posted.

Information posted to ReliefWeb is selected after rigorous assessment of its reliability and relevance. In addition to featuring documents and maps provided by its partners, the site offers original maps produced by ReliefWeb's map centre. In the first stage of an emergency, a simple location map is created, followed later by a more detailed situation map that includes response information.

To complement the emergency-specific information described above, the "Policy and Issues" section provides a collection of documents on thematic issues relating to humanitarian response, often of a more

academic nature, such as analyses, evaluations and lessons learned, manuals and guidelines. Contributions to this section can be sent via an online submission form.

The “Professional Resources” section includes a training inventory, with courses relevant to those working or wishing to work in the field of humanitarian response. It also offers one of the most comprehensive job vacancies listings in the humanitarian sector. Other professional resources include “Communities of Practice”, a directory of peer groups to encourage professional networking within the humanitarian sector, as well as the contact directory, which includes contact information for all of ReliefWeb’s sources of information. Online submission forms are available in this section.

In addition to appearing on the site, ReliefWeb content is syndicated to websites of partner organisations and disseminated via both email and RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds.

ReliefWeb’s editorial decisions are based on a set of information principles: accessibility, accuracy, comprehensiveness, humanitarianism, independence, relevance, transparency, timeliness and service-orientation. With a view to encouraging best practices in humanitarian information management, ReliefWeb is regularly involved in organising regional and global meetings bringing together information management practitioners to agree on global standards and best practices in the field of humanitarian information.

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# Communicating Disasters

An Asia Pacific Resource Book

“Where there is no camera, there is no humanitarian intervention,” said Bernard Kouchner, co-founder of Médecins Sans Frontières who later became the Foreign Minister of France. Disaster managers and relief agencies acknowledge the mass media’s key role at times of distress. Yet, the relationship between media practitioners and those managing disasters can often be stressful, difficult and fraught with misunderstandings. Communicating about disasters sometimes ends up as communication disasters.

How can these mishaps be minimised, so that the power of conventional and new media can be harnessed to create more disaster resilient communities? What value addition can the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) bring in? In this book, media and development professionals from across the Asia Pacific share their views based on decades of experience in covering or managing a variety of disasters – cyclones, earthquakes, floods, landslides and tsunamis.

This book is aimed at journalists, disaster managers and civil society groups who want to use information and communication to create safer societies and communities.

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