

Executive Summary and Recommendations

Objective and approach: This review of “Disaster Management: Policy and Practice” was conducted over three months by the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka in collaboration with and financial support from Oxfam America.¹ It is intended to assist the government, NGOs and other stakeholders to improve disaster management in Sri Lanka. It is just over a year since the Parliamentary Select Committee on Natural Disasters presented their recommendations and it seems timely to review whether their recommendations have been implemented in practice. This report is based on an analysis of the legal and policy documents, interviews with stakeholders from government, civil society and the private sector, field visits in Ratnapura, Hambantota and Ampara, a workshop in Hambantota on 25 September 2006 and a national workshop in Colombo with over 90 participants on 28 September 2006.

Disaster management: opportunities and challenges: Disaster management is, after the 2004 tsunami, a much higher priority with new government structures and interventions and a host of activities by NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs). This is a major opportunity presenting a once in a generation chance to use all this political attention, financial investment and activism to put in place a robust system for disaster management. With resources plentiful now, Sri Lanka needs to invest wisely for the future. But the sheer number of organizations and range of different interventions creates new challenges of clarity of roles and responsibilities, the need to keep the focus on affected people and the financial and institutional sustainability of some interventions. Much still needs to be done, even to prevent the impacts of a future tsunami, which has received the most attention. An IPS survey of 600 families from 14 tsunami-affected Grama Niladhari divisions in the South and East found that 50 per cent of households had identified safe places to evacuate, but only 6 per cent had actually practiced tsunami evacuation and only 4 per cent had been able to purchase any insurance to protect against future disasters.

Disasters as an ongoing feature of Sri Lanka’s history: The December 2004 tsunami was Sri Lanka’s most catastrophic natural disaster in living memory with over 35,000 dead and almost a million displaced. However parts of Sri Lanka have suffered regularly from floods or droughts. The floods in 1989 and 2003 together claimed 560 lives; the cyclone in 1978 killed 740. Drought affected almost 2 million people each year in 1987, 1983 and 1982 – more than the tsunami – although here the death toll was negligible. Man-made disasters continue with the 20 year long civil war. Over 65,000 have died in the conflict and currently 2 per cent of the population are displaced internally, and many thousands have emigrated overseas partly as a result of the conflict.

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Key Recommendations for all working on Disaster Management

Focus on the coping strategies of affected people

Local people have coping strategies to mitigate, prepare for and respond to disasters (e.g. safe places and warning). They are the first to respond or not. Others must serve their needs and concerns (e.g. the many false alarms after the 2004 tsunami). It is vital to find out what they want and why, as they have the most to gain from disaster management and are first on the scene in a disaster. They may lack some skills and funds and so need support from the government, NGOs and the private sector.

Vulnerable and marginalized people require special attention

Certain people may be especially vulnerable to disasters (e.g. women, children, elderly, disabled) and need special attention. There is a need for women to be actively involved as they are often the most affected and there are positive signs this is happening in some places. Household level planning and participation are required to identify location specific solutions for vulnerable people.

Mitigation and prevention must be the focus, not just response

Mitigation and prevention save lives and are much more cost effective than post disaster responses. Actions must necessarily be disaster specific. For drought, actions include tank rehabilitation, drought resistant crops and rainwater harvesting. For tsunami, coastal set backs, and hard and soft coastal protection are required. Common to much prevention is location of infrastructure and land use decisions (especially avoiding housing in disaster prone locations) and redesigning infrastructure and materials (e.g. building regulations). Attempts to provide alternative lands for resettlement are vital, but have had mixed records of success. With proper guidance, preparedness activities identified by the affected communities themselves can be much more cost-effective than top-down type approaches. In the long run, mitigation activities are also more important than training for preparedness, which tackles only the symptoms but not the root cause. The danger is that by seeming easier and more visible, government and NGOs may focus more on preparedness and less on the more important mitigation and prevention.

Take a multi-hazard approach that does not focus just on tsunami

There has been a tendency to over-emphasise the tsunami, when in fact larger numbers more regularly suffer from less extreme disasters such as droughts. The focus on tsunami is like the “general who fights the last war”. Less high profile events such as lightning strikes must also be covered. Good work is ongoing on landslips.

Take a location specific approach avoiding “one-size-fits all” uniformity

There are challenges in the wide range of different disasters such as sudden (i.e., landslides) versus slow (i.e., droughts) and man-made versus natural – all of which may require quite different interventions and skills. There is a danger of taking a “one-size-fits all” approach to different disasters, which are actually very location and cause specific.

Learn from experience in other countries, and innovations in Sri Lanka

To identify which interventions are key, and how best to undertake them, there is a need to learn from other countries (e.g. Bangladesh) and emerging experience in Sri Lanka (e.g. Peraliya community tsunami early warning centre). How effective is technology in reaching the last mile? Some interventions are obvious, but hard in practice (e.g. current problems of procuring ships to deliver food to Jaffna and unloading this food once in Jaffna).

Psychological needs are a priority for natural and man-made disasters

There is evidence that many people, especially children, are still traumatised by the tsunami and are having nightmares. Many people are still fleeing from their houses due to false tsunami rumours. The IPS survey of 600 families in tsunami areas in the south and east found that 10 per cent of households knew of someone who has tried to take their life due to tsunami related distress. This psychological strain is also a concern for people who have suffered in the conflict. While there have been some ad hoc counselling programmes, there is a need to develop a long term approach with these services integrated into the government health care system.

Move on from planning to effective coordinated implementation

Sri Lanka, as in so many areas of public policy, does have high quality plans and a Road Map developed with broad participation. The Road Map is an evolving document with flexibility for changes. However, the focus must now be on implementation of the Road Map with agencies working on areas where they have comparative advantage.

Ensure interventions are useful and financially, institutionally sustainable

It is vital for interventions, especially the many groups being formed, to last even once the spotlight moves on. This has been a feature of the success of disaster management in the Philippines and Bangladesh, which Sri Lanka can learn from. In some places, households complained that they were receiving multiple training from many groups and the money could be better spent on other activities. Civilians need to take over from the military the DMC activities in the Districts, and work closely with affected people, local political bodies (e.g. Pradeshiya Sabhas) and local government.

Key Recommendations to Government

Government priority for disasters needs clearer roles and responsibilities

Government has many institutions related to disasters. These include the Ministry of Disaster Relief Services with the National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC) set up in 1996 and the recently created Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights with the Disaster Management Centre (DMC) set up in 2005 under the new Disaster Management Act. There are also the Ministry of Nation Building and Development and the Ministry of Social Services and Social Welfare. The Reconstruction and Development

Agency (RADA) works on longer term reconstruction and the Commissioner General of Essential Services is responsible for dry ration relief. These institutional developments indicate a greater priority for disaster management. They are also positive, as the new Disaster Management Act and the agencies working on the subject give natural and man-made disasters equal focus. However the plethora of different institutions necessitates a much clearer sense of roles and responsibilities.

The Ministry of Disaster Management must focus on mitigation

Disaster mitigation and prevention save lives and are more cost effective than post disaster responses. The Ministry must focus on mitigation. This will be a challenge as many of the agencies coming under the Ministry such as the Met Dept and hazard warning centre will focus on preparedness and many mitigation actions (e.g. land use planning, building regulations) fall under other Ministries. The Parliamentary Select Committee on Natural Disasters grappled with this, concluding that “a Building Technology Unit has been proposed as a division of the DMC with the aim of i.) Reviewing existing and developing new codes and guidelines, ii.) Taking action to adopt them legally and making them mandatory and iii.) Ensuring compliance. So while it may be more difficult, the Ministry must keep the focus on mitigation and prevention.

Combine the DMC and NDMC

Confusion has emerged over the role of the similarly named National Disaster Management Centre and Disaster Management Centre, from all stakeholders, including from the staff of these institutions themselves. Some ad hoc division of labour seems to be emerging over DMC leading on preparedness and coordination of response, with NDMC dealing with post disaster relief, but there is still substantial overlap and the names are very confusing. In the event of a disaster, where clarity and accountability are key, this could cost lives. Ideally the two institutions could be combined within one Ministry. The Parliamentary Select Committee on Disasters recommended in 2005: “The present National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC) is to be restructured with legal powers to form the proposed DMC, but this did not happen and it is vital is that the two agencies are now brought together.

Government needs to play a stronger role in engaging and coordinating with NGOs and facilitating bottom-up community approaches

NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) can assist in implementing the Road Map. But government needs to take a much more strategic role in coordinating and integrating these individual inputs. The DMC should undertake less ad hoc training and other interventions, and focus on developing a database of ongoing implementation linking stakeholders against concrete steps, specifying definite roles and responsibilities and monitoring progress. Following the Road Map development, government has undertaken inadequate stakeholder engagement to jointly implement the Road Map. There is a need for more systematic and regular “communication and dialogue between the government and NGOs and others.

Government has the responsibility to push the final warning button, but must work with others on dissemination and reaching the last mile

Government's responsibility is to make the warning (e.g. Met Department in the case of tsunami). For warnings, NGOs and others cannot be a substitute for the State. However, the government can work with many innovative NGO, CBO and private sector initiatives to disseminate the warning and reach the last mile.

Local government can play a larger role with central government support

Many disaster-prone areas such as Ratnapura already had District Disaster Management Committees pre-tsunami, which are now often supported by DMC and NDMC staff. Below these are Divisional Disaster Management Committees and Village Committees headed by the Grama Niladari. In some cases Disaster Preparedness and Response Plans have been prepared or are being updated at District, Division, and Village level. As was clear in the tsunami, local government is often best informed of local needs and can monitor impacts. But they need clear policies from the centre, and financial and human resources. There is concern about how the DMC activities can be institutionalised into local government, for example through the Social Service Officers.

Key Recommendations to NGOs and the Private Sector

NGOs and CBOs are vital, but can work more closely with each other and with government to implement the Road Map

There is a major growth in the attention paid by civil society to disaster management, such as disaster mitigation (e.g. drought mitigation), disaster preparedness (e.g. early warning) and disaster response and recovery (e.g. relief). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) can provide skills and financing needed by households and government. But CBOs and NGOs need to work with each other and with the government more closely. They need to ensure that disaster management interventions and groups formed are useful and sustainable. On the other hand, in some villages there has been duplication between the government and NGOs. In Thalpitiya in Wadduwa villagers were first trained by the Red Cross, then by the military and finally by Sarvodaya; while in other places people have received almost no training. There are particular difficulties for NGOs in engaging during civil conflict, which requires a close dialogue with government in a fast changing security context.

Private sector role in disaster management - insurance, telecoms, media and banking – must be welcomed by government

The private sector can play a key role in disaster mitigation (insurance), disaster preparedness (telecommunications, media) and disaster response and recovery (banking, insurance). Private sector can provide finance and skills that households and government need. But the private sector may not serve marginalized groups. The private sector needs a government framework within which to operate, i.e., clear "rules of the game."

Micro insurance needs private sector, government and NGO cooperation

Sri Lanka has very low insurance cover, with only 1,000 claims from 36,000 who died in the 2004 tsunami. The insurance industry is working with RADA on a micro-insurance scheme where donors who have funded tsunami housing pay insurance premiums on behalf of the low income householders. There is a need to simplify the documentation process, and promote risk reduction awareness. But micro-insurance is still often done on non-profit basis as corporate social responsibility (CSR). The real challenge is how to make micro-insurance more profitable.