RIGHT TO INFORMATION IN DISASTER SITUATIONS AND LOCAL INFORMATION NETWORKS

Dhanush Senanayake

Master of Arts Degree in Mass Communication
University of Sri Jayawardanepura
Thesis submitted to the Department of Mass Communication, University of Sri Jayawardanepura in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Arts Degree examination in Mass Communication.
ACRONYMS

DMC  -  Disaster Management Centre
GN   -  Grama Niladhari (GN)
ICTs -  Information Communication Technologies
IDPs -  Internally Displaced Persons
MOH  -  Ministry of Health
NGO  -  Non-governmental organisation
PHI  -  Public Health Inspector
SIFFS - South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS) is a non governmental organization (NGO) working in the marine fisheries sector.
SNEHA- Sneha is a voluntary organisation founded in 1986 to cater to the befriending needs of the lonely, desperate and the suicidal
UN   -  United Nations
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to all who helped me in a number of ways to make this thesis a reality. If not for the support and encouragement of my husband - Kolitha and my family it would not have been possible for me to attempt and complete this thesis. My special thank you is also extended to Madumali and Sandamali at Internt Kade who helped me to take the print outs of this report.

It was my batch mate Ananda Jayasekera who directed me to identify a topic such as this and helped me to find background information whom I thank first and foremost.

I am very much thankful and appreciate the cooperation and valuable inputs provided to me by Mr Menaka Wijesinghe from the Disaster Management Centre, Ms Fiona Barton from Internews, and my friend Captain N.S.B Piyasena from Sri Lanka Red Cross, and the Village Disaster Management Committee representatives from Katepol a GN division in Ratnepura district.

The sincere support provided to me by my ex colleague Tushani Kalugalgedera by doing an excellent job of editing for which am very grateful.
RIGHT TO INFORMATION IN DISASTER SITUATIONS AND LOCAL INFORMATION NETWORKS

Dhanushi Senanayake

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a context where the space is shrinking even for the activists or media for deliberations on right to information; this study adds a dimension- communities affected by disasters. This study explores the prevailing situation in Sri Lanka related to right to information regime as spelt out in the legislation: with emphasis on disaster situations, the role of information for communities at risk and other key players involved in disaster risk management.

Rationale: In disaster situations access to information at the right time can not only save lives but reduce the expenses on relief provisions and save money for development and even stop corruption and mal practices. Further, poor and marginalized communities who are more vulnerable to disasters could be made more resilient by ensuring their right to information and making them an informed community and the disaster management processes could thereby benefit from an environment when right to information is possible.

Objective: This study aims at highlighting the gaps and best practices and the role of local information networks for communities’ access to information in disasters and recommends a model that addresses such gaps and lessons from the best practices.
Conclusion and recommendations

In Sri Lanka denial of the right to information and freedom of expression has been the norm and no changes can be expected during disaster situations as media freedom, the public’s right to know, and the individual’s fundamental rights to freely hold and express opinions are taken for granted.

In order to establish right to information of survivors and communities at risk to disasters there has to be legal reforms and systems in place within media and humanitarian organisations for implementation by the government and application of the right to information by the public including marginalised groups.

Recommendations

At every stage of the post disaster response efforts must be made to actively share all relevant information with survivors.

Assigned information officers from government and humanitarian organisations need to proactively share information and use appropriate language and formats with communities at risk to disasters.

In the provision of information the different needs of marginalised groups such as elderly, children, disabled and women has to be taken into account.

Provide a climate in which free media can operate and encourage community media initiatives.
CHAPTER 1

1. INTRODUCTION

Today disasters in the form of floods, cyclones, tornadoes, landslides, droughts, and epidemics have become almost a common day occurrence all over the world. While a majority of the population in South Asia live in abject poverty it has also become a hotspot for disasters resulting in the severe loss of life and resources. It is often the poor and marginalised communities in South Asia, including Sri Lanka, who are most vulnerable to disaster situations. They lack the capacity and resources to deal with disasters and recover from them effectively.

Poor and marginalised communities often live and depend on fragile resource bases for their livelihoods. These include coastal areas which are subject to coastal erosion and vulnerable to tsunamis as well as flood plains and hilly areas which are subject to landslides. These communities, although aware of the imminent danger to their lives, continue live in the same areas as they do not have diversified livelihoods to do otherwise. After a disaster these communities have neither the bargaining power nor the community governance structures to ensure they receive the required services or assistance. They are unable to demand for their share of allocated relief from the Ministry of Social Services or to question the Meteorological Department for not detecting signs of an impending disaster or not issuing early warnings in time for people to evacuate.

The lack of accurate information, lack of community awareness on their right to information and the lack of effort from support organisations to address this situation
awareness among development agencies and media in relation to the right to information of survivors of disaster situations but also lack of a vision to ensure this right.

1.2 Objective

This research report aims to explore the current situation in relation to communities affected by disasters and argues for strengthening the protection and promotion of disaster affected populations' right to know and right to be heard. The importance of ensuring the survivors' right to information and the vital contribution it could make to strengthen disaster management processes is elaborated in the report. While hoping this report will benefit the efforts of civil society organisations and journalists who are striving to create an environment that will put affected populations at the heart of disaster management work, I also firmly believe this will add to the growing awareness regarding the denied rights of affected communities in Sri Lanka and the world over.

1.3 Terminology

Right to information of survivors and communities prone to threats from disasters

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster situation survivors are provided relief items that comprise of food, clothes and other basic needs by organisations and individuals who come with the good intention of helping the affected communities.

Survivors of disasters also need information on whether their near and dear ones are alive or dead, reassurance of whether there are chances of the disaster reoccurring and
that they are housed in a safe area, whether children can or cannot go to the nearby school, whether the people in camps can go back to their former livelihoods, who is planning to help resettlement, and information on the allocation from the government Department of Social Welfare as reimbursement for communities affected by disasters.

Survivors need to have access to a credible and acceptable source of media such as news broadcasts on radio, newspapers, etc. Furthermore, survivors also need to have access to relief providing organisations and organisations involved in resettlement and rebuilding to give feedback on the type of relief or rebuilding measures provided to them.

**Disaster situations** - A natural hazard or hazard triggered due to human activity that negatively impacts on a particular community is considered a disaster. Disaster situations have three stages - namely pre, during and post disaster situations. Disasters can bring about a loss of lives, property and infrastructure, as well as destroy resources that are necessary for people's livelihoods, education, etc. Formal information channels such as telephones and media are often disrupted or cannot be accessed during disaster situations. However, for the survivors the need for information is as critical as essential items such as food, water, sanitation etc. The amount of information and areas on which information is required during a disaster is much greater than under normal circumstances.

**Local information networks** - Local information networking can take place on a formal basis or can be informal in nature where community leaders get together for a
common purpose or to confront a common enemy such as a disaster that is likely to affect them. These associations can have a greater impact within the areas they operate than even other factors such as media. Furthermore, these associations could also serve as the link between external actors and the affected communities. Local information networks play a crucial role before, during and after a disaster when the affected communities do not have access to the accepted formal information channels such as telephones, newspapers, radio, etc.

Local information networks employ different types of tools and approaches for the dissemination of information. Some of these tools include the modern Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) which are used extensively by formal networks. They also use traditional tools (such as rituals, folk songs, chants) used by more informal networks.

1.4 Survivors’ right to information in disaster situations

Natural and man made disasters since 2004 show a trend of resulting in an increased loss of lives, destruction of infrastructure, hampering essential services and leaving many displaced all over the globe. Sri Lanka too has had its fair share of impacts from disasters.

Humanitarian organisations\(^1\) involved in providing relief and attending to rehabilitation and restoration work have prioritised and identified that they need to go beyond the

\(^1\) An organisation concerned about human welfare, especially as manifested through philanthropy.
mere provision of relief and rebuilding of infrastructure. There needs to be a shift
towards strengthening the resilience of the communities vulnerable to disasters.

Humanitarian agencies, governments, and media often tend to see communities affected
by disasters as helpless victims. Nevertheless in disaster situations affected communities
have demonstrated immense strength to cope with the disaster situation and possess
knowledge about coping in such adverse situations.

The perception of affected communities as passive recipients of relief does not help
communities to recognise their strengths or to take part in reconstruction efforts and get
back to their livelihoods. The present approach to disaster relief and rehabilitation work
does not provide much information to humanitarian and other interested organisations
about the actual needs and capacities of communities. In addition, it does not give
affected communities an opportunity to obtain information regarding their missing
relatives, how much they are entitled to as relief and where their houses are to be
rebuilt. Therefore, it is vital that there is a conducive situation that allows for the free
flow of information between communities, aid workers, the government and the media.

While the correct information at the relevant time can save lives in the wake of a
disaster it is also capable of assisting in quick recovery. Having access to information
can help affected communities trace their lost family and friends, know how much
compensation they are entitled to or where they are going to live, and helps in simply
understanding why a disaster struck. Such information means a lot to survivors left
homeless and traumatised.
The free flow of information and the right to expression and to seek and receive information held by public bodies can be categorised as the right to information. The right to information has been subject to debate and discussed globally as well as in Sri Lanka. Right or access to information has been recognised as a human right since 1946. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Article 19 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (1966) recognise the right to seek, impart and receive information as part of the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression. The constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka also recognises this right as per Article 14(1), (a).

1.5 Who does what, where, when, and for whom?

In the case of governments, and even development or relief agencies, there is a tendency to not disclose or to even conceal certain information which could expose instances of negligence or the misappropriation of funds. Media on the other hand tend to overstate the casualty and loss figures and the extent of the crisis. The absence of legal and formal frameworks to access official information in many South Asian countries, with the exception of India, hampers transparent reporting of the disasters. In Pakistan and Sri Lanka the Official Secrets Act and the Prevention of Terrorism Act strategically control and conceal information from the public and disaster affected communities. In such situations journalists tend to bank on informal and personal connections to obtain information. This may have strong consequences (regarding accuracy of information provided) on ‘at risk’ communities.

---

2 On December 10, 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in order to ensure the protection of rights of all humans.
3 The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is a multilateral treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly
4 Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1978 is a law in Sri Lanka. It provides the police with broad powers to search, arrest, and detain suspects.
1.6 The present context that needs a shift

Victims of a disaster want to unite with their families and need assistance in terms of temporary shelter, sanitation, food and housing. What often happens is that people are informed but not consulted when there is an onset of a disaster with regard to the provision of relief, resettlement and rehabilitation.

In a disaster situation, for certain functions the government machinery is expected to take the lead. It is the government that has to proclaim that a disaster has affected a particular location. It is the government that has to direct government relief mechanisms and issue statements to the media about the deaths and missing persons. However, exceptions to this could be observed in the immediate aftermath of the 2004 tsunami where Sri Lankan media and other civil society actors assumed leadership in informing people about deaths and missing persons and what relief items were needed where.

Generally, the tendency is for media reporting to be done using an event based approach. Media reports highlight stories about victims and survivors. These types of stories tend to be highly sensationalised and therefore can have negative impacts on the affected communities and relief efforts. In 2001, Hambantota District was not only affected by a severe drought but was also flooded with non degradable plastic water bottles that came as relief due to the sensationalising of the drought in reporting by Sirasa (a local television channel), and local radio channels and print media. The problem with such stories is that the victims are portrayed as helpless – as lacking the knowledge and capacity to become part of the rebuilding process. Another common

---

5 Unstructured data gathered from sources of intelligence of any nature.
function that government and humanitarian agencies expect from media is to be a propaganda arm of the relief and rehabilitation efforts. For instance, huge amounts of money were directed towards getting media organisations to feature the rebuilding activities of the humanitarian organisations that operated in Sri Lanka. This is money which could have been channelled more effectively towards the actual rebuilding process.

Humanitarian organisations, government authorities and social welfare organisations contribute in providing information to the affected communities who are living in disaster prone areas. This information is provided in order to generate community awareness about scientific reasons as to why certain disasters (such as floods, tsunami, and hazard, lightening) occur and about disaster prevention and preparation. These were developed in the form of posters, radio programmes, videos and so on. However, there were no instances of such informative education material creating an impact in terms of saving lives. The main reason for this was the failure to get the messages internalised by the targeted community.

However, there are also instances where due to active engagement and enabling the two-way flow of information through awareness programmes there were lasting positive impacts. Lakhima⁶ reported of an incident in 2008 where a student of a school had been able to save the lives of other children and teachers who would have been

---

⁶ A sinhala mainstream newspaper which has a daily and a weekend issue.
affected by a landslide. The student had learnt about the warning signs of an impending landslide from an awareness programme organised by Save the Children. While the government and humanitarian organisations request the media to publicise their relief and rehabilitation efforts, there are instances where the government has denied media and/or humanitarian organisations access to particular sites or to interview survivors, etc. Governments sometimes fear that the media would highlight their negligence or that the humanitarian organisations’ media may report about gaps in their processes. A classic example is the Sri Lankan governments’ denial of access to journalists to visit the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Menik Farm in Vavuniya, Jaffna District, who were displaced by the war and affected by floods recently.

Thus, it is clear that although information itself is a vital form of aid, its potential is not properly understood nor is it paid due emphasis in disaster management. The existing disaster management mechanisms of governments and humanitarian organisations are reluctant to consider affected communities as having the capacity to contribute to speedy recovery efforts and this undermines the role of local information networks. The local information networks possess indigenous knowledge on disseminating early warning signs of an impending disasters and coping with situations where there is limited access to resources. Furthermore, these information systems are linked to a central location in a village, such as the temple or village school, and contain unwritten rules which form part of the system. Some of these unwritten rules include ensuring the protection of life and dignity of vulnerable groups such as children, women, the elderly.

---

7 An international children's charity based in the UK which supports both emergency and long-term relief and development projects.
and the disabled. In some countries, such as India and Nepal, community radio stations were established using the local information networks as a base. However, unfortunately in Sri Lanka the formal disaster management mechanisms have been eroding the local information networks in most disaster prone areas.

1.7 An ideal situation that we should strive for

A responsible government in a disaster situation keeps media and other humanitarian organisations informed about the prevailing situation. In a situation where there is a proper flow of information the government could also keep a tab on whether humanitarian organisations cater to the actual needs of the affected communities and conform to the accepted standards.

The proper coordination of relief and rehabilitation efforts helps ensure that humanitarian work brings equal benefits to all affected communities. For example, if such coordination had prevailed in the aftermath of the tsunami we would not have seen aid flowing into one particular area, such as Hambantota, while other areas, such as fisher communities along the coastal line in Moratuwa, were neglected. In addition, it would have also helped avoid the attention on one affected communities being shifted to another, and avoided marginalising communities which were affected earlier due to a previous disaster situation. For example, in Sri Lanka humanitarian organisations left war affected communities in camps and flocked to aid the tsunami affected communities in the Northern and Eastern Provinces after the 2004 tsunami hit.
In an ideal situation it would be the local media which would provide accurate and first hand information about the scale of the disaster or about the government's early intervention for an impending situation. Media freedom and having adequate access to affected or vulnerable communities and disaster prone locations are indicators of an ideal situation that ensures survivors of disasters their right to information.

Although the media is attracted by the numbers of deaths, survivors stories and the scale of a disaster there should be a shift from this approach. Such a shift could be initiated by holding a public debate on the existing arrangement for disaster management or investigatory coverage on the preparedness by communities in disaster prone locations. Such a debate should ascertain if the media coverage of a disaster helps uncover gaps in the disaster management structure of a country and helps to answer pertinent questions - Are the funds allocated for relief and rehabilitation spent in a transparent manner? Has the government taken into account the concerns of ‘at risk’ communities when designing the early warning systems? What are some of the concerns or questions that media could highlight? The media could also easily tie up with local information networks to obtain information regarding indigenous coping mechanisms and highlight the importance of incorporating some of these to the formal mechanisms of disaster management.

An enabling environment that allows the free flow of information\(^8\) does not need rumours as the basis of information. The transparency of humanitarian organisations' activities and the space for communities to express their voices will facilitate

\(^8\) Journalists and general public have access to information and can express their ideas.
cooperation from the affected communities for disaster recovery restoration activities. In addition, there will be reduced instances of government or humanitarian organisation corruption or misusing funds as there is an effective local information network that monitors the disaster management activities from the early warning stage to rebuilding.\(^9\)

In its constitution the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka recognises the right to information as a human right in Article 14. Yet during disaster situations, where affected vulnerable communities are concerned, it is not even paid lip service. Can this situation be improved and if so how? How do disaster management institutions perceive affected communities’ right to information? How do communities feel about their right to information in disaster situations? Why is the media not covering and addressing the denial of right to information of survivors in disaster situations? Do local information networks prove effective in disaster situations?

This research study attempts to find answers to these questions. This study also recommends a model approach to help ensure the right to information of survivors in disaster situations.

\(^9\) Restoring communities affected by disasters.
2. RIGHT TO INFORMATION - THE IDEAL APPROACH IN THE CONTEXT OF DISASTERS

Right to information and expression are fundamental human rights. They underpin all human rights and are central to human development. During a large scale disaster situation the fulfilment of these rights takes on particular importance. Appropriately targeted information not only ensures that assistance is effective and locally relevant, but it can also save lives and preserve human dignity. However, too often governments and even well meaning non-governmental aid

Right to information in relation to accessing information about impending disasters could save lives. At the same time it is also important to ensure that victims of a disaster are aware of the relief provisions available, government and civics society’s roles, etc.

There have been a number of instances where victims did not have adequate access to water and sanitation services, food, education, livelihoods. Furthermore, the affected communities had no way of expressing their concerns to service providers. After the landslides that occurred in Nuweraeliya District, Sri Lanka, in 2007 communities were evacuated to government buildings and other temporary shelters. Food for these communities in camps were supplied by neighbouring villagers. There was very little attention paid to the needs of these communities by the government machinery.
agencies consider survivors of natural disaster - men, women, children, the elderly and the disabled - as mere recipients of their relief and rehabilitation services.

After any disaster the major contribution to the restoration is made by the survivors themselves. In the aftermath of every disaster, natural or man made, there are often innumerable and mostly untold stories of survivor resilience and compassion. The innate strength and humanity of disaster survivors is the greatest resource of any post disaster response.

Government and non state actors undoubtedly have a duty and capacity to contribute a great deal to disaster response in terms of resources and technical expertise. Efforts of these organisations are likely to best succeed only if built on the foundations of a genuine partnership with survivor communities. It is therefore clear that the right to information of a disaster prone community has to be ensured as it will empower the community to make the right decision and prevent corruption and waste of resources.

Why is the access to information of particular importance in all stages of disaster management? Access to information is of importance as it helps to:

- Mitigate the loss of life
- Reduce panic during disasters
- Direct survivors on how and when to get essential services
- Link up survivors with their families
- Assist in the discovery of those who are missing
- Provide victims with an outlet for grief and counselling
• Monitor humanitarian assistance and prevent corruption

• Ensures two-way communication between assistance providers and the survivor communities

Protection and provision of the freedom of expression and access to information in disaster situations - from the pre-disaster situation up to reconstruction - have a legal, ethical and policy basis. Therefore, no state can evade the task of creating an enabling environment for the right to the information of survivors. This includes putting in place appropriate early warning systems; ensuring survivors have access to information they need to make the most of relief and reconstruction efforts, ensuring transparent and accountable delivery of assistance and providing the information necessary for effective participation by those affected for rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts.

2.1 The right to information can save lives

The lack of an official early warning system when the 2004 tsunami struck is a reminder that scientific knowledge alone is not enough to save lives and minimise property destruction. The scientists in the pacific who were equipped with the best information on the impending tsunami could not communicate this information to the countries which were to be hit by the tsunami. Information becomes useful only as a result of human interaction or communication.

There has to be appropriated channels in place to ensure adequate dissemination of information about disaster risks and threats. Information provided to warn people of
impending disasters must be timely, accurate and credible in order for people to trust and act on it. Success rests on information from all sides being brought together.

Early warning systems which fail to notice the needs and contributions of people on the ground tend to be rejected by people although the information the system issues is scientifically valid. In the present era knowledge command and the control of information is not realistic. People have become consumers of information which they obtain from different sources - they make their own choices on what information to use and from where to get it.

Information management at the local level is very important in providing an early warning to communities in disaster prone areas. In Guatamela in the Coyolate river basin community volunteers have been operating simple rain gauges to collect information in order to predict floods. This information is sent to the local forecasting centre via solar powered radios. As a result floods can be forecasted a few hours in advance. Since this information is based on a local source it has proven effective as in the time of approaching Hurricane Mitch where timely evacuation was possible and many lives were saved.

Although early warning messages are received by governments and aid agencies request early action before a disaster, this generally does not get translated into action easily and at the required speed. It is then not a lack of information that can affect the impact of a disaster but the lack of communication between governments, scientists, aid agencies and communities in disaster prone areas.
Organisations that issue early warnings have to ensure that:

- The warning is issued in a simple language
- Variety of warning channels and devices are used to reach all groups
- Warning messages also includes information on how imminent and severe the disaster is likely to be and suggestions for preventive action
- Local communities and authorities are involved in finding the most appropriate information strategy for obtaining information as well as providing feedback
- Local media from disaster prone locations have a professional and ethical obligation to inform the public about a pending disaster situation and as part of this initiative should build their capacity to convey alert messages in a timely manner.

CHAPTER 3

3. CONSULTATION IS A DUTY, PARTICIPATION A RIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY AN OBLIGATION

In Sri Lanka are disaster affected communities able to ask the government questions on funds, relief, and resource allocation? What is the nature of the external aid received and do victims get to take an active part in relief distribution? Are informal marginalised groups such as people with disabilities, women and children kept informed of the relief and rehabilitation processes? Does media portray the voices of the affected or does it only perform a superficial function of being propagandist for a particular group? How
sensitive is the Sri Lankan media about marginalised groups and does the media sensationalise stories? The right to information in disaster situations goes beyond merely providing information but it should also cover areas concerning the engagement of public funds for relief, exposing corruption, and emphasise the need for community involvement and participation in restoration and rebuilding activities.

The Red Cross, Red Crescents Code of Conduct\(^\text{10}\) states that the flow of information between organisations involved in relief and rebuilding and the affected communities need to be regulated by principles of consultation, participation and accountability. Sphere standards\(^\text{11}\) which are internalised by most aid agencies too emphasise these principles.

Yet, are governments, civil society and media aware of these principles? Do the government aid agencies and even media speak the same language or do they understand and apply these three principles differently? In relation to these three key principles why do we have to discuss and debate on survivors’ right to information?

Although local media does cover disasters the general tendency of reporting gives extra emphasis to an event based approach. An in-depth analysis is required. This would entail looking at processes or disasters as unresolved problems of development. The results from such an analysis would help awake policy makers to action and to give a voice to the disaster affected vulnerable communities.

\(^{10}\) 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. 

\(^{11}\) Aims at improving the effectiveness and accountability of disaster response.
3.1 Relief agencies

Organisations that provide relief often use ‘community consultation’ as a buzz word. They feel that it is inappropriate to ask people what they need in the first few weeks after such extreme trauma states the World Disasters Report (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2005).

This could result in an inaccurate picture about the communities’ needs and aspirations. The relief agencies’ failure to gather the most critical information from the affected communities could result in the waste of resources - such as large scale food and water distribution which go waste, inappropriate clothing, and the unequal distribution of livelihood related equipment. For instance, the drought that occurred in Hambantota District, Sri Lanka, in 2001 received huge media publicity resulting in the area being flooded with plastic water bottles (sent to the villages as aid), leading to an environmental hazard. Furthermore, for the IDPs in relief camps in Menik Farm\textsuperscript{12} in Vavuniya, Jaffna District, Sri Lanka, there were massive collections of food and clothing. However neither the recipients nor the donors knew where this aid went or who the donors were.

Lack of coordination by humanitarian agencies have resulted in several baseline surveys and needs assessments being repeatedly conducted for the same affected community. This leads to frustration and causes distress among affected communities. Although efforts have been made to improve coordination by introducing different mechanisms the world over (by the UN and other interested groups) to ensure the efforts of

\textsuperscript{12} A relief camp for war affected located in north of Jaffna where Tamils from the estate sector were settled years ago.
humanitarian organisations meet the actual needs of affected communities this does not seem to have worked.

One such example is Fednet (http://fednet.ifrc.org/sw17572.asp) which provides web based discussion forums and information to its 181 members worldwide but has not been successful. There are also the Humanitarian Information Centres of the UN which did not take off as expected. These systems were not aimed at addressing the affected communities’ right to information but mostly try to provide information management systems for humanitarian agencies.

The Sahana web based open source software tool (http://www.sahana.lk/) developed in Sri Lanka was much more holistic in the sense that it aimed to address the information needs of all relevant players in the aftermath of the tsunami, and improving coordination and linking humanitarian organisations with communities who are in need. However, it too did not take off as expected. Although the concept of Sahana was excellent the design of this web based tool was unable to reach and gain acceptance by the humanitarian organisations in the subsequent disasters that followed. There seems to be less emphasis given by the Sahana team about understanding the ground level situation in terms of the technical aspects of accessing a computer and installing and promoting the use of the software amongst all the players in disaster management from relief to rebuilding.

However, the World Disasters Report of 2005 reports a successful civil society initiative in India which guides humanitarian agencies about areas and communities in need and
is even providing feedback to affected communities. The information base 'Abhiyan', set up immediately in the aftermath of the Gujarat earthquake, had advised aid agencies about areas of need, basic requirements for starting work and supported the coordination of arrangements. Further, Abhiyan had been able to help NGOs to set up a similar network when the tsunami struck Tamil Nadu, known as the Nagapattinam NGO coordination cell. Volunteers attached to the Nagapattinam NGO coordination cell visited 100 villages across the district everyday to find out peoples' needs and key issues. This information was collated centrally and presented to the government and aid agencies to guide their interventions. Also information about response and recovery was fed back to the villages on a daily basis by the Nagapattinam NGO coordination cell.

Although humanitarian organisations are aware of the value of consulting affected communities, learning from affected communities and the importance of local players involvement in disaster management, such a consultation does not seem to be happening.

Requiring aid agencies to be accountable in disaster situations is often a challenge. The challenge which international humanitarian agencies face is to provide comprehensive and relevant information to local communities in a language and format that is easily understood by them. The other issue is providing affected communities with the information that is required by them. An example of when this lack of communication and consultation with communities was grossly lacking was in the wake of the 2004 tsunami. For instance, although aid agencies in Sri Lanka did a great deal of analysis for
themselves and talked among themselves about relocation options after the tsunami no efforts were made to ensure this information reached the affected people.

3.2 Checklist to ensure participation

- Disaster response strategies need to include the participation of local communities as a central aspect of relief, reconstruction and rehabilitation activities.
- Rapid relief should only be carried out without the consultation of the affected communities when such consultation would put the affected people's lives at risk.
- An effective system to ensure a two-way flow of information to and from affected communities should be put in place involving local media.

3.3 Ensuring accountability

- Financial allocations provided by donor agencies and the expenditure by the implementing NGOs and government level organisations on all relief, reconstruction and rehabilitation activities should be made available on a public domain.
- Monitoring of the disaster management activities and responding to complaints of beneficiary communities has to be looked into by an independent organisation.
- There should be a space for the voices of the affected communities regarding the rebuilding and restoration activities.
- Journalists should be ensured access to disaster affected areas and to information on relief efforts.
- Whistle blowers should benefit from legal protection.
- Tender procedures for work related to disaster response has to be transparent.

3.4 The right to monitor disaster response work

After a disaster strikes in a particular area, governmental and humanitarian organisations tend to receive both large and small donations from individuals from within the country and even other countries. Therefore, there is a special responsibility placed upon governments and the humanitarian community to provide detailed accounts, evaluation reports, and progress reports, as well as obtain authentic first hand reports from affected communities. This information should be made available in a common space, such as the internet, for individual donors to know how contributions were used.

Of even more importance is that the disaster response workers be accountable to the affected communities. Humanitarian organisations involved in disaster response could present information to the existing committees at village level, such as to the village disaster management committee or village development committee. This information could take the form of detailed accounts, along with relevant documents (such as bills, vouchers, etc.) and communities should be able to inspect available resource material stocks for a particular activity in the location. Similarly, the affected communities have to be involved in planning the relevant intervention. The completed plans along with progress reports should be free for verification, assessment and evaluation by the
community. Practical Action in Sri Lanka does have a system of the community reviewing their work as well as the work of other players involved in their initiatives. This helps to identify weaknesses in the development process and ensures sustainability of the development intervention as communities have a sense of ownership in the process.

In the aftermath of a disaster, a range of response activities involve several actors—from providing relief to rebuilding. The official government departments, humanitarian organisations, national media, political parties, donors and philanthropists, community media initiatives, affected communities and other communities from non-affected areas were identified as the key actors involved in the information flow that emerges in the aftermath of a disaster. In an ideal situation the information flow is the catalyst for networking among all these different actors. While the community concerns are conveyed to organisations involved in the provision of relief and rebuilding, gaps in the humanitarian process have to be highlighted through media. Various community groups (such as the village disaster management committee) or community media initiatives (for example, community newspapers or radio) should take the lead in ensuring the right to information of affected communities.
CHAPTER 4

4. MAKING RIGHT TO INFORMATION A POSSIBILITY FOR DISASTER PRONE AREAS THROUGH LOCAL INFORMATION NETWORKS

What are the types of local information networks available for people who are prone to disasters? What kind of information is generally conveyed and when, and what mechanisms are used? Do local information networks have a role play when there are no visible disaster threats? These are some of the questions to which this chapter attempts to provide a justifiable explanation.

4.1 Why are local information networks necessary?

Traditional or indigenous knowledge provides the content for local information networks and include early warning message generation and dissemination, and steps for preparedness. When there is an impending disaster situation, whether it has a sudden or slow onset, the primary source of information on early warning is the traditional knowledge passed from generation to generation - this is observable from nature. However, when experts are consulted by the media to explain early warning signs they hardly refer to the traditional knowledge which is deep rooted within communities. The organisations that have a mandate to issue early warnings to communities at risk are often expected to forecast the sudden onset of disasters such as floods, tsunami, cyclones, etc. In the cases of slow onset disasters, such as drought or signs of epidemics, there is hardly any official warning relayed to communities at risk. Mist and cold weather experienced during dry periods of the year, a lesser number of crow birds
hatches are unfailing signs in nature that predicts the onset of a drought. These signs would be captured by the local information networks.

The local information networks which are more informal, such as the family, caste or farmer groups or even the dayaka sabhawa\textsuperscript{13} in a village conveys information to the community about the necessity for prevention and preparedness. Preserving food for difficult times was one such custom. This knowledge was passed on generally from mother to daughter or through other female relatives. The more formal local information network such the dayaka sabhawa generally mobilises the community for collective religious functions, rituals, etc. Furthermore, communities had knowledge about paddy varieties that could withstand harsh climatic conditions. In order to face unexpected weather pattern communities preserved seeds for cultivation.

In addition, when it is necessary to evacuate the community to a safer place the village priest often takes on the responsibility of ringing the temple bell. Ringing of the temple bell at unusual times spreads the message of caution among the village community.

In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami it was the neighbouring village youth who assumed responsibility in conveying the scale of damage to the non affected and even mobilising temples and churches to house the survivors and provide items necessary for first aid.

\textsuperscript{13} A group of villagers who got together for a common objective – that is look into the welfare of the temple.
According to reports from Tamil Nadu in India, tsunami affected communities did not passively accept the confusion created by the state about rebuilding and resettlement activities which were planned for tsunami victims. The local information networks included different groups such as the SIFFS that represents fishermen and SNEHA which represented women from the area. Another group from the same location, the Auroville tsunami rehabilitation coordination network, put pressure on the Indian government to accept their designs in the construction of permanent shelters.

In Sri Lanka the local information networks also informed others from the general public about the scale of damage of particular disasters such as an accident. This was done through a ‘kavi kolaya’ which was passed on at village fairs and sung at places where masses gather.

Local information networks, whether they are formal or informal, use different sets of tools to convey their messages effectively. The more informal mechanisms use meetings, displaying of symbols, kavi kolayas, or use tools such as the bell in a village temple. These tools are used at different times and/or different locations. There is also an unwritten code of ethics in the communication process used by local information networks which is strictly adhered by communities (described in section 4.3).

However, the traditional knowledge along with local information networks have now started to disappear with a formal institutionalised information mechanism taking its place. The absence of local information networks, or local information networks 14 A poem about a particular newsworthy event or a person sung at large public gatherings such as the fair, bus station etc
becoming obsolete, has had a negative impact on disaster survivors in situations where survivors have been required to stay in relief centres or camps. The lack of such networks have led to the increased marginalisation of children, women, the elderly and the disabled and may have even created an environment for sexual abuse and harassment.

### 4.2 Nature & potential of local information networks

Local information networks are often based on cultural or social institutions, both traditional and modern. These networks can include kin networks, religious or political groupings and professional or employment oriented associations. Two forms of local information networks are therefore evident - the formal and informal.

**Formal local information networks** have a legal or formal structure and have explicit procedures for communication such as committee meetings, sending out formal letters, etc. They often have executive bodies and a foundational constitution of some sort. Examples of such formal networks are school associations like the environmental committees, village development committee, disaster management committee and dayaka sabhawa of temples.

The more **informal local information networks** are variable in character depending upon such factors as location (rural/urban), size, demographic mobility, class and caste. Compared to the more formal networks the informal networks are characterised by the apparent constructed associations between people; in that encounters do not necessarily
take place according to schedules nor do they have overt agendas. Examples of such networks include neighborhood clusters, kin networks and provincial media groups.

Like in any other social system, in local information networks too the main functions of communication are information, socialisation, motivation, debate and discussion, education, cultural promotion, entertainment and integration. Local information networks, whether they are formal or informal, need information on political affairs, local and international events or weather conditions.

Local information networks can easily mobilise communities - especially for occasions or events that affect livelihoods of communities such as changing weather patterns (for example long spells of drought, epidemics, etc.). A very common occurrence is the dayaka sabhawa with other committee members organising various rituals at the temple to appease their gods to bring about rain or to stop the spread of an epidemic.

It is the indigenous institutions that often take the lead in conveying early warning messages. It is the local information networks which communicates the onset of a disaster and prepare food and other items. This knowledge is often communicated mostly through the more informal local information networks such as within kin families, neighbours or members of the same clan or caste.

4.3 Lessons from local information networks

In Sri Lanka there are many districts that experience and are affected by long spells of drought (such as Moneragela and Ampara). They hardly capture the attention of
mainstream media. The local information networks play a very vital role at such times. The farmer networks distribute the seed paddy varieties that are resistant to dry weather. Hetadawee\textsuperscript{15} is an indigenous paddy variety cultivated by farmers traditionally for dry spells of weather that they experience. However, this type of traditional technologies too have not survived with local information networks falling apart or being replaced by more formal institutions which have been set up with external assistance. Similarly, there are paddy varieties known as Maha mawee\textsuperscript{16} that could be cultivated for areas affected by flood. Elderly women or housewives would set aside rice to be used or to be donated to others who experience difficult conditions as relief. Specific Jak fruit processing methods were also used in order to prepare for food shortages.

The local information networks were also responsible for informing or giving early warnings. Ringing the Ghantara\textsuperscript{17} at the temple is one such mechanism to evacuate people from their houses. There are also unwritten but strongly endorsed principles within local information networks to look after marginalised groups, such as the elderly, disabled, children or women. No one would be left behind in an evacuation process in communities where local information networks were active.

Local networks could also be used to collect data and assist in weather and disaster forecasting. In Sri Lanka the Meteorological Department does not have location specific weather related information networks. If communities were given an opportunity they could collect such information, particularly the rainfall data, to help forecast flood occurrence or wind patterns.

\textsuperscript{15} A traditional rice variety that could be harvested within 2 months.

\textsuperscript{16} A traditional rice variety that could withstand flood conditions.

\textsuperscript{17} Temple bell.
Four Grama Niladhari divisions which are prone to landslides in Walasmulla DS division in Hambantota District have been provided with a system to measure rainfall and issue early warning messages Practical Action. The communities from these areas have been trained by the Meteorological Department to measure rainfall data scientifically and know how to identify signs of landslides due to training received by the National Building Research Organisation. Representatives of the village disaster management committees in these locations are, as a result, measuring rainfall daily and sending data on a monthly basis to the Meteorological Department. This data could help the scientists at the Meteorological Department predict rainfall trends of this particular location over an identified period of time. This community has been advised to ring the Ghantaras fixed in the area when the rainfall exceeds 150 mm in order to caution the community to evacuate due to the possibility of a landslide.

This type of information about rainfall could help provide location and context specific data on rainfall pattern. Having such accurate data will help the Meteorology Department and other experts involved in disaster management to analyse the occurrence and frequency of drought spells, floods, etc.

Local information networks such as the environment committees at school level can be mobilised to collect rainfall data or identify other environmental threats to the community.

---

18 Carries out research & development work in the diverse areas of geotechnical engineering, building materials, environmental, project management, human settlements planning and landslide disaster mitigation.
At village level the more formal networks such as the Vidatha Centres\(^9\), Nenasalas or Village Information Centres which are equipped with ICT and multimedia can collect information about the number of families occupying the village at a particular time and other socio-economic data (their occupations, the number of senior citizens, disabled etc.). In addition, these centres can also link up with other informediaries\(^{20}\) for disaster management such as the Meteorological Department, Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Health (MOH) office, district hospital, etc. Below is a case where the local village communication committee undertook to bring information to the community on relevant topics including disaster management.

**The Village Communication Committee in Katepola GN Division**

The Village Communication Committee which is part of the Village Development Committee in Katepola Grama Niladhari (GN) Division in Ayagama Divisional Secretariat in Ratnepura District has a newspaper of their own for the village named “Bolaththa”. So far, the articles have given emphasis mostly to the problem of land ownership faced by the villagers. The Communication Committee in Katepola also conducts workshops on selected themes to generate awareness on a particular issue relevant to the community. A common most relevant issue they identified was disaster management as these communities were prone to floods. The communication committee organised a panel discussion on disaster management which had a mix of resource persons from extension services such as the Public Health Inspector (PHI) to represent the health sector, the manager of a Vidatha Centre, a representative from an NGO working on disaster management and two village elders – a doctor practicing indigenous

---

\(^9\) Village science and technology centers.

\(^{20}\) Information brokers.
medicine and a village leader. While the NGO representative presented what is meant by disaster management, the manager of the Aygama Vidatha Centre explained lightening and prevention measures. Regarding epidemics after floods, prevention and cure were explained by the PHI while the village leader explained about early warning signs from nature that predict severe rain and traditional disasters management systems. He was joined by the doctor who practices indigenous treatment methods of serpent attacks.

This programme attracted a large gathering of the village community despite it being a weekday morning. The panel discussion was facilitated by a former principal in the village. This programme was recorded and disseminated to others in the village through a narrowcast based radio system.

Lagoon fishermen from some parts of the country have lagoon management authorities that look at ways of addressing unsustainable fishing practices which are harmful to lagoon ecosystems. These lagoon management authorities also function as the local information networks among lagoon fisher communities. The chairman of Panama Lagoon Management Authority has a good rapport with provincial correspondents. This has helped to get the media to highlight the environmental issues caused due to unsustainable construction related to tourism and fisheries in and around the lagoon areas.

Local information networks whether formal or informal have a huge potential to mobilise communities to take necessary action during disaster situations. Possessing
indigenous knowledge to identify changes in weather patterns and knowledge on preparedness mechanisms are two important types of information communicated through local information networks. These efforts of the local information networks could complement the work carried out by infomediary and service providing organisations in the sectors of disaster management, health and livelihood restoration, etc. The role of the state in this context is to link local information networks with infomediaries and give more recognition to the potential of local information networks.

CHAPTER 5

5. SMALL STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

The objective of this chapter is to highlight some of the best practices in Sri Lanka of media institutions, civil society actors, relief workers and local information networks efforts to provide disaster survivors with their right to information in disaster situations. This chapter explores the nature of the measures taken by the relevant stakeholders to do this; whether they used technical or non technical and informal approaches. The detailed are scale of these operations, at which stage of disaster management – early warning, relief distribution or rebuilding and restoration - these efforts took place, and how successful they were in ensuring survivors’ right to information.
The experiences featured in this chapter are from a sample of organisations and individuals ranging from the formal national level institution to non-governmental organisation, media institutions, a relief provider attached to the defence forces, as well as a representative of a village development committee from a flood prone area.

5.1 Ensuring prevention through early warning systems – Disaster Management Centre of Sri Lanka

The Disaster Management Centre (DMC) was established under the National Council for Disaster Management in accordance with the Sri Lanka Disaster Management Act No. 13 of 2005 passed by the Parliament of Sri Lanka on 13th May 2005. The objectives of the DMC is to enforce, coordinate and monitor activities related to hazard mapping and risk assessment, long term disaster mitigation, forecasting early warning and information dissemination, preparedness to respond to disasters when they occur, emergency operations management and management of post disaster activities.

DMC has an extensive early warning system for tsunami, floods, and landslides. This system involves collaboration with the Meteorology Department, Department of Irrigation, National Building Research Organization and the Coast Conservation Department. These organisations have technical expertise and are involved in assessing the needs at ground level regarding the scale of disaster situations and they, in turn, inform the DMC for necessary action.
The DMC has a coordinator for each district. A number of tools are used by the DMC to disseminate information related to early warning, to keep communities from disaster prone locations informed and to generate awareness among local government officials about their role in disaster situations, etc. The website of the DMC is targeted at Civil Society Organisations, NGOs and Donors. This website also has a database titled ‘DYSINVENTA’ which provides information on disaster situations such as locations and the numbers affected. Since this database is not produced by DMC the target audience of it is not clear. The process of obtaining information from this database is time consuming as it requires the person to input certain details each time he or she wants to access the information in the database.

Apart from the traditional tools such as websites, newsletters, etc. the DMC also uses a number of other tools targeting the communities, local government officials and community based organisations. These include training programmes on mock drills and first aid, and early warning towers that provide signals for evacuation and displaying of evacuation routes/maps in public places. However, except for the tsunami warning issued in 2007 to communities from the eastern coastal areas there had been no instances to use the towers. The latest addition to the DMC early warning is the DEWN - the early warning alert system through a mobile network. DMC also has a hotline which anybody from any part of the island can call to provide and obtain disaster related information.

Although the DMC has the mandate and is equipped with a number of communication tools which are technical and non technical there is no system currently within the DMC
to assess the impact or obtain feedback on their effectiveness. The DMC also seems to have encountered resistance from the communities and local government authorities when they had to test some early warning towers when they were set up. The local communities and local government authorities upon sending out warning signals had responded in a cynical manner. Furthermore, it seems that at present there are some overlapping activities and lack of coordinated effort within the DMC and with other stakeholders about the messages they send out to the target audiences. The target audiences for the communication tools are more general than specific and the information provided is not disaggregated according to specific sub groups such as elderly women, small children, pregnant mothers, disabled men, etc.

Nevertheless, DMC does contribute in a big way in generating awareness among the general public and involving media about the importance of disaster management. It was after setting up the DMC that publicity and media campaigns were conducted each year on national safety day (the day of the 2004 Tsunami - December 26th) and media awards were hosted for journalists for disaster reporting.

In research and development on disaster management, the DMC is working closely with other organisations such as the Central Environmental Authority, Ministry of Environment, Climate Change Secretariat and Ministry of Legal Affairs and NGOs and this will be vital for improved coordination. The DMC also needs to collaborate with existing formal local information networks, such the Nenasalas and Vidatha Centres, to strengthen the information flow between communities at risk from disasters and the other stakeholders involved in disaster management.
5.2 Right information at the right time through the Lifeline information service of Internews

The right information is crucial to making the right decisions, especially when one’s life had been turned upside down by circumstances outside of one’s control. In recent months, when war-weary Tamil civilians had begun to emerge from hiding in Sri Lanka. Many of them had known where to go for help largely because of the Internews’ Lifeline project. This project had provided thousands of transistor radios to families that had been driven from their homes in the war ravaged Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. The Lifeline team had broadcast news bulletins in local languages for over a year including during the recent intensified fighting in Sri Lanka’s north and east.

Internews, which has been working in Sri Lanka since the 2004 Asian tsunami, began its Lifeline project in early 2008 to help displaced Sri Lankans get vital humanitarian information. The local Lifeline team produces a weekly newspaper and broadcasts daily radio programs on national radio stations about services that the government and relief agencies are providing. Lifeline also covers key topics such as how to replace birth certificates that were lost when people fled their homes due to the fighting, or provides information on when the next health mobile clinic visit to their area will take place.

Lifeline is a Humanitarian Information Service aimed to improve access to information by IDPs and other vulnerable communities affected by the conflict through media productions in Tamil and Sinhala languages. Lifeline is producing a weekly 30 minute radio show broadcast through national (Sooriyan FM) and regional radio stations (Pirai FM) and a 4 page newspaper distributed directly and to IDPs camps for free. It also produces an insert with Sunday Virakesari newspaper which has a good circulation in
the conflict affected areas of Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Mannar, Jaffna, Vavuniya and Puttalam. It broadcasts stories in Sinhala through its media house in Matara. Through these media productions Internews tries to disseminate relevant and accurate information to the IDPs and conflict affected communities for them to know about humanitarian projects, campaigns and services that the government, I/NGOs, UN agencies and others are providing, and more importantly, how these communities can access and benefit from those services and information. The goal is to support these communities to obtain information that can help them to better cope with their situation.

5.3 Media a catalyst to ensure survivors right to information

In Sri Lanka it was the mainstream electronic media channels such as radio and television and the local regional media services which immediately identified the affected and survivor communities’ needs after the tsunami, and mobilised individuals and groups to provide the necessary help. Immediately reacting to the situation Sirasa, MTV and Shakthi stopped their routine programming and started broadcasting information and covering the disaster on their channels. While the engineering staff was taking all possible measures to reactivate transmissions which had been affected by the tsunami, live updates were given on the scale of the damage; whether roads were motorable, information on missing family members, friends, relatives of survivors, what type of immediate relief was needed in which locations, etc. When this commercial electronic media network initiated information provision all other channels, including the state run channels, followed suit. When state run mechanisms were not visible, absent and struggling to figure out a mechanism for a disaster response, and when there was no communication taking place, it was the media that assumed these duties.
Media also highlighted stories of corruption and the misuse of aid. Further, on a number of occasions the print media highlighted the importance of community consultation for developing the resettlement plans by the government and the problems that the 100 metre buffer zone the government imposed might cause for communities.

However, due to government imposed indirect censorship on media during the fighting that resumed in the north and east of Sri Lanka in 2006 there was very little reporting about the plight of the thousands of civilians killed, wounded or missing and also about their living conditions. Sri Lankan citizens had to rely on, and form opinions based on, the statements issued by the government, the military and the LTTE - much of which was propaganda or misinformation. The lack of information on the conflict has far reaching implications on the right of the Sri Lankan people to know what was happening in the conflict zone and to participate in the shaping of their own future.

5.4 Defence forces - the first point of contact for survivors

In Sri Lanka and the world over, during many disaster situations the military is called upon to address the immediate basic needs of survivors. The role played by defence forces during natural disasters in Sri Lanka in the recent past is commendable even without any formal training on disaster management. Even though uniformed defence force staff members duty is to merely carry out the orders given to them the Sri Lankan defence forces are known to go beyond the tasks given to them to assist survivors.

In Sri Lanka the military played a key role during the 2003 flood situation and in the aftermath of the tsunami devastation. The role of military in disaster situations is mainly to expedite the provision of relief to the affected, to clear debris, make the roads
passable and establish civil life. Although the defence forces did an excellent job of coordinating with the Divisional Secretariat and the Grama Niladhari to provide relief to those affected by floods they did not have the mandate to crosscheck whether relief was being distributed according to the needs of the survivors or whether the relief items were of good condition.

A more equipped defence force could have contributed immensely - as relief providers, trauma counsellors, etc. - to the survivors of the tsunami. Affected communities in Sri Lanka, irrespective of their nationalities, seem to have felt a sense of security and protection from the defence force personnel who were deployed as relief workers who listened to their agony, helped them to trace their missing relatives, gave some sort of funeral rites to their dead relatives and saw to their immediate needs.

However, there were also negative reports about defence forces personnel regarding their contribution as relief providers to the IDPs in the Northern Province after the war and when tsunami warnings were issued in 2007 to communities in the coastal areas of the Eastern Province in Sri Lanka. When tsunami warning were issued to communities from coastal areas in Karathivu, Ampara District, in the Eastern Province and when communities had started evacuating their villages, the special task force unit of the Sri Lanka army in charge of security in the area had ordered the communities to immediately return to their village despite the tsunami threat. There were a number of reports that demonstrated instances where IDPs showed their displeasure towards defence forces personnel. However these reports, although published in international media, were not picked up and featured in the local media.
In natural disaster situations where the survivors are desperate for information and when there is a breakdown in the formal communication channels the uniformed defence forces personnel have unintentionally addressed the need for the right to information of survivors. At the initial stages of a disaster, defence force personnel have better access to attend to relief and recovery activities and capturing the information needs of survivors and communicating them to relevant external actors. Therefore, it is vital that defence force personnel are involved not only as relief providers but also as key players in disaster risk reduction. They should be consciously sensitised on the right to information of survivors. Defence forces staff should be constantly kept informed about evacuation routes and maps in disaster situations, to link with weather forecasting organisations, health authorities and to provide capacity building on sensitivity to vulnerable groups such as women, children, elderly, physically and mentally challenged groups in disaster situations.

CHAPTER 6

6.1 CONCLUSIONS

Since the 1990s there has been a growing international consensus about the relationship between freedom of expression and information on the one hand and sustainable development and disasters management on the other. At the Johannesburg World Summit on sustainable development, paragraph 26 states that sustainable development requires a long term perspective and broad based participation in policy formulation, decision making and implementation at all levels. The 27 principles of the 1992 Rio Declaration of Earth Summit I, Rio De Janeiro, and Agenda 21 of the UN blueprint for
action guarantees the rights of all citizens, freedom of expression, access to information and public participation in all development affairs.

In Sri Lanka too there have been many deliberations about the freedom of expression for journalists, right to information, and the need for law reform - yet things remain unchanged. Denial of the right to information and freedom of expression has been the norm in Sri Lanka for decades. This situation gets much worse during disaster situations as media freedom, the public’s right to know, and the individual’s fundamental rights to freely hold and express opinions are taken for granted.

Over time governments has used formal and informal methods to impose censorship. Sri Lanka’s Emergency Regulations, Official Secrets Act, and the Terrorism Prevention Act have been used to justify the closing down of newspapers, questioning of journalists who expose corruption of the government, stopping the publics’ right to protest and have accused or found fault with humanitarian organisations who have tried to address the public right to information issue.

Amidst the many challenges in the country the civil society activists and humanitarian organisations have failed to meet the information needs of affected populations. They are ill-prepared to cope with the increasing challenges they face from the government. In addition, aid agencies tend to focus more on information for their own needs, rather than on using it to help the populations they serve.
It was in the aftermath of the tsunami that the Disaster Management Centre was set up with a mandate to provide information to affected and communities from disaster prone areas. The DMC has its own awareness creation programs, training on evacuation and first aid, etc. It also has district level coordinators and at each GN level disaster management committees have been set up. However, representatives of these committees in certain areas have not been given any training nor are they aware of the district level coordinator or the responsibilities of the position. Most of these district level coordinators are appointed on secondment or have served in the defence forces. Therefore these district level coordinators are not used to the concept of community consultation and consensus building prior to executing a plan. Instead they focus only on carrying out a particular assigned task. It is important that these officers are exposed to bottom up development approaches that put the community at the centre of development rather than the top down approaches. It is the responsibility of the agencies that support the DMC to strengthen their monitoring and evaluation skills which in turn ensures accountability to the communities that obtains the services from the DMC.

Furthermore, it is necessary for agencies like the DMC to work in a holistic manner. It needs to work in collaboration with other stakeholders and develop a common plan of action with the Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Social Services, Central Environmental Authority, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry, and the Ministry of Education as there are reports of more intense and frequent disasters that are likely to occur due to climate change.
The media has an important role to play in disaster situations, such as to communicate complex warning messages in meaningful simple language for the communities who are in disaster prone areas. The media also needs to expose instances of abuse and corruption which may happen in the aftermath of a disaster situations and to raise awareness and facilitate discussions on disasters and other risks and to educate people on preparedness measures. However, in order to do this the media needs to be able to access accurate and timely information from credible sources.

The continuous involvement of media to expose them to the seriousness of the lack of right to information is vital in lobbying for the enactment of the right to information in legislation. At the same time it is important to develop media as a profession rather than a livelihood by providing the necessary infrastructure, training opportunities, higher salaries, etc. More efforts need to be taken to encourage a public service journalism model so that the receivers of information are empowered. In locations where the local information networks are strong there should be facilitation and support for community media initiatives.

In Sri Lanka although many debates and discussions take place regarding the right to information and the importance of ensuring the right to information of survivors in disaster situations this does not get translated into results for the general public, academia or even the media. The report by the Committee to advice on the law reforms affecting media freedom and the freedom of expression in 1995 headed by the R.K.W Goonesekera recommended the enactment of a freedom of information act and the inclusion of their right to information in the draft constitutions which were being
considered at that time. However, apart from the organisations and a few individuals who are interested in the subject there has been no effort to communicate this report and recommendations even within established media training institutions or at grass root level organisations which are involved in lobbying for the right to information of marginalised communities. The reason for the culture of authority and secrecy that exists is that when it comes to obtaining information from the government for the public good, due to the established code in public service and in the constitution (paragraph 6 of chapter XLVII) it is specifically stated that a secretary to a ministry or the head of a department may exercise discretion with respect to the release of information to the public. Even if this information may be of interest and value to the public. However, this is not common knowledge, and neither are their any attempts by civil society groups to make this common knowledge.

There were a number of initiatives by humanitarian and government organisations to communicate preparedness measures, relay early warning messages, etc. This information material and even the tools developed were sometimes designed without really taking into account the available resources or capacities of communities or community organisations in vulnerable locations. Some of these tools require some sort of investment in the infrastructure, for instance at least access to a computer or knowledge of the English language. The communications budgets of many humanitarian organisations enable them to spend lavishly on developing material on colourful glossy paper or investing for media sponsored programmes. However, they are still unable to figure out an exact way of communicating effectively with vulnerable communities and how to initiate a two-way information process. There needs to be
efforts taken to explore the existing local information networks in order to communicate with the communities from disaster prone areas.

6.2 SUGGESTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Information plays a crucial role in the way in which societies deal with disasters, both in terms of being prepared for the disaster before it strikes and dealing with it in the aftermath. Information provided to survivors should not trigger panic but be used to help the affected persons help themselves further. Although it might take days to put together an effective humanitarian response, information is crucial in providing guidance and emotional support to survivors who are often the first responders in crisis situations, helping families and neighbours long before aid workers arrive on the scene.

Evaluations carried out have shown that humanitarian agencies often base initial relief distribution on guesswork, without establishing accurate information on needs. The reasons for this include: competition between agencies, pressure from media and donors, and the arrival of plane loads of relief items which need to be transferred onto the fields. This has resulted in the needs of certain vulnerable groups going unnoticed.

The usual practice of bolstering information exchanges between relief agencies has to be changed to focus on improving the flow of information between humanitarian agencies, local communities and the media. What is needed is institutional change that mainstreams communication for local populations and that includes local media.
Humanitarian agencies, while answering the most frequently asked questions by affected communities, such as - Are schools open? Which hospitals are up and running? - aid agencies could go further. They could also provide information about where the nearest radio station is to relay the names of community members who are reported to have gone missing after a particular disaster or provide the times of local news casts. Humanitarian agencies could also stockpile battery-operated or wind-up radios just as they stockpile food and other relief supplies.

At every stage of the post disaster response efforts must be made to actively share all relevant information with survivors. Some of the types of information that would be relevant to the survivors’ well being are as follows:

- the causes and impact of the disasters
- chances of recurrence
- steps undertaken by state and humanitarian organisations for rescue, relief, reconstruction and disaster response
- names and contact details of officials at each level starting from the Grama Niladhar level and their responsibilities
- where the communities could go to voice their grievances
- legal entitlements of each category of survivors and the full details of government schemes, including how these schemes can be accessed.
- budget allocations and expenditures of ministries and relevant government departments
- funds received by NGOs, their sources and disaggregated details of expenditure for the committed work.
More than making this information available upon request, officials attached to government and humanitarian organisations have to have mechanisms in place to proactively share this information in appropriate languages and formats with all communities living in disaster prone areas.

Even though lot of investments in time, finances have gone for producing valuable researched information related to disaster preparedness such as for planning and construction of infrastructure in disaster prone areas very little publicity has been given to this information. After the 1978 cyclone in the eastern province, considerable studies had been carried out which include a design manual – *Design of Buildings for High Winds in Sri Lanka* published Ministry of Local Government Housing and Construction. However, later on assessments carried out by the Centre for Housing Planning and Building (CHPB) identified that contractors and others in government agencies in the east were unaware of this guideline. Efforts to reprint this have not been materialised. The Centre for Housing Planning and Building has published construction guidelines for other hazards such as floods, landslides, lightening and cyclone. However these guidelines are of no use if not adopted legally and made it mandatory and not complied with. This type of information needs to be made public knowledge so that public can demand from the professionals in the construction industry to adhere to such guidelines when doing constructions in disaster prone areas.
Media has a key role to play in disaster situations that goes beyond event based reporting and the sensationalising of stories. It needs to link up with relevant institutions such as the Meteorological Department, Ministry of Environment, and the Climate Change secretariat and build a consciousness among the general public about disasters and thereby promote preparedness measures. Therefore it is central to provide an environment in which free media can operate.

Furthermore, at the post disaster response stage all categories of survivors need to be consulted and consensus obtained for all decisions related to all stages and aspects of responses ranging from location designing of shelter, upgrading public buildings and shelter, to providing equipment and training related to new livelihoods. Corruption and the unconscious waste of funds is likely to happen due to lack of consultation and agreement on the plans with affected communities. For instance, there were a number of instances in Sri Lanka where tsunami resettlement villages were abandoned by the affected communities due to the lack of appropriateness of design, location, etc.

A value for money audit (a process that seeks to transcend the scope of conventional auditing) carried out by Transparency International Sri Lanka Chapter notes that responses to monitor reconstruction work of the post tsunami rebuilding projects met with very poor responses from donors and humanitarian organisations. Some of the main findings of this process were: lack of organised methods in maintaining financial records, reluctance among donors and implementing organisations to work with the government. Another organisation Practical Action
organised consultation with all organisations involved in rebuilding activities for the tsunami affected titled “Building back better”. The aim of this consultation was to assess the gaps and highlight the best practices that emerged in the rebuilding process and thereby to integrate the lessons learnt for future. However, after the ending of the civil war in the north and east a complete opposite of this is being applied by the government which forcefully denies right to information for the IDPs and the Humanitarian organisations which plan to contribute to resettlement process.

The state and humanitarian organisations share all relevant information and technical options to enable people to make informed decisions. Furthermore, the needs of the elderly, children, disabled and women should also be taken into consideration as they will be not be the same as the rest of the community.

The process of consultation could be done using participatory tools such as social mapping, focus group discussions and also getting regional or local media to be part of the process. The consultation process should also be sensitive to the needs and capacities of vulnerable groups.

The ideal model that Sri Lanka and other countries should strive towards should not look at the right to information and communities affected by disasters in isolation. It should take a more holistic approach that will focus on the macro level, aiming at also changing other systems and approaches that will create an enabling environment to ensure there is a right to information. In the move towards an ideal context there has to be legal reforms that provide the right to information in the
legislation and constitution. The implementation of the right to information by the government and application of the right to information by public and civil society, reaching marginalised groups, involving media and other local information networks are other factors that need to consider.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

• Edirisingha Rohan. The Case for a freedom of information act in Sri Lanka

• Democracy Governance, National advocacy campaign for the right to information in Sri Lanka

• International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies (2005), Focus on information in disasters, World Disasters Report 2005


• Report of Sri Lankan Parliament Select Committee on Natural Disasters.
- Nair Seema, Jennaway Megan and Skuse Andrew (2006), Local information Networks; social and technological considerations, UNESCO publication.


- United Nations (2009) 'Left in the dark; the unmet need for communication in humanitarian response' subject of high-level panel held at United Nations headquarters Press Release, IHA/1273 26 March 2009 Department of Public Information.