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Communicating Disasters

Building on the Tsunami Experience and Responding to Future Challenges

A Regional Brainstorming Meet
Bangkok, Thailand: 21 - 22 December 2006

Organised by TVE Asia Pacific (TVEAP)
and
United Nations Development Programme Regional Centre in Bangkok (UNDP-RCB)

First Announcement

The Indian Ocean Tsunami challenged the media professionals and media organisations in Asia in many different ways. On the eve of the disaster's second anniversary, TVE Asia Pacific - a regional leader in communicating sustainable development using the broadcast and new media - is organising this small regional gathering that will bring together up to two dozen media professionals, disaster researchers and managers and development communication specialists from the main Tsunami affected countries in Asia.

Our goal is to discern the key communication lessons of the Tsunami (and other disasters), both in terms of the mass media and new media. We have two specific objectives:

- To explore the role of media professionals and their use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) before, during and after a disaster.
- To share lessons learned among media professionals and key players in disaster risk reduction based on the experience of the Tsunami disaster, and suggest some guidelines for mass media and new media professionals for effective communication before, during and after disasters in the future.

The discussions, findings and conclusions of the brainstorming meeting will be captured in a book to be published following the meeting.

Despite media and ICT, the Tsunami arrived with little warning

December 2006 will mark the second anniversary of the Indian Ocean Tsunami, which devastated coastal areas in South and Southeast Asia, and to a lesser extent in eastern Africa. The event of Boxing Day 2004 ranks among the top ten disasters of all time, with the affected countries and families still recovering from its mighty blow.

It was astonishing that a disaster of this magnitude could arrive in so many places in Asia without any public warning. The region has witnessed a rapid proliferation of ICTs in recent years. Yet with thunderous impact, the tsunami drove home the point that the timely and efficient management of information mattered more than mere delivery technologies.

In response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, the United Nations and aid donor countries initiated an inter-governmental process to build a high-tech tsunami early warning system in the Indian Ocean. By June 2006, UNESCO - whose Inter-governmental Oceanographic Commission coordinated the effort - reported that the system was 'up and running'.

Some 25 new seismographic stations would detect underwater earthquake tremors, while three deep-seabed sensors were in place to detect tsunami waves through tiny changes in water pressure. More equipment, including satellite sensors and additional seabed sensors, are to be added to the system in 2007 and 2008. A network of 26 national information centres will enable Indian Ocean countries to receive and distribute warnings of potential tsunamis, UNESCO added.¹

Even the most sophisticated early warning system will be rendered ineffective without adequate mechanisms to disseminate warnings in a timely, credible manner. Setting up a state-of-the-art, high-tech and high-cost system is not a solution by itself. Because the most advanced early warning system in the world can *only do half the job*: alert governments and other centres of power (e.g. military) of an impending disaster. The far bigger challenge is to *disseminate* that warning to large numbers of people spread across vast areas in the shortest possible time,² and ensure that people understand the warning and take appropriate evacuation measures.

The crucial question remains: *how can credible disaster warnings travel that all important 'last mile'?*

"The Asian tsunami's death toll could have been drastically reduced if the warning - already known to scientists -- was disseminated quickly and effectively to millions of coastal dwellers on the Indian Ocean rim. It is appalling that our sophisticated global communications systems simply failed us that fateful day."

- **Sir Arthur C Clarke**, novelist and long time resident in Sri Lanka

¹ <http://www.scidev.net/News/index.cfm?fuseaction=readNews&itemid=2945&language=1>

² <http://www.scidev.net/content/opinions/eng/a-long-last-mile-the-lesson-of-the-asian-tsunami.cfm>

Media and the 'last mile'

Bridging the 'last mile' requires a combination of national and local level capacity building, community-based disaster preparedness and strategic alliances with those who already have swift, inexpensive outreach to communities. Strategic partnerships with the mass media (radio, television, online and print media) would be key to success in these efforts.

During the past 15 years, Asia's airwaves have become crowded with a cacophony of FM radio and television channels that reach out to most households day and night. These media outlets can play a major role both in disseminating disaster warnings, and also in:

- coordinating relief and rehabilitation;
- preparing communities for disaster risks; and
- raising public awareness about actions taken or should be taken by different organizations and individuals to minimize future risks before disasters strike.

A well-coordinated, collaborative plan would enable tapping the mass media's unparalleled outreach in times of impending or unfolding disasters, as well as in post-disaster coordination.

The Tsunami and the media

The post-Tsunami experience demonstrated how the mass media and ICTs could meaningfully serve communities in time of disaster and crisis. For example:

- Amateur radio enthusiasts helped relief workers to communicate when all other communications systems were down.
- At country level, the print and broadcast media went beyond its call of duty to help find missing persons and mobilise donations.
- On the new media front, websites and web loggers (bloggers) sustained detailed reporting, commentary and analysis.
- After the news media left the scenes of the disaster, media activists kept the story alive through sustained coverage and engagement of affected families.

Many communications- and media-related lessons can be drawn from the Asia Pacific's experience in the two years following the Tsunami. Some of this has been discussed and documented in various fora and publications, mostly at national level. This brainstorming meeting and planned book will attempt a reflective and comparative analysis at a regional level, with an eye to providing some practical tips for the future.

The brainstorming meeting

The meeting to be held in Thailand on December 21 - 22 will bring together up to 20 - 25 key communications professionals - journalists, broadcasters, ICT-related civil society groups and media researchers - to share their experiences in communicating the tsunami during and after the disaster. Participation would be by invitation only.

Our participants would be recognised senior professionals in their circles, working at local, national or regional levels. Our emphasis would be national and regional media from countries most affected by the Asian Tsunami - India, Indonesia, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Thailand - rather than global media.

Governmental and non-governmental disaster management organizations in the countries most affected by the Asian Tsunami - India, Indonesia, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Thailand - will also be invited to participate in the meeting and share their experiences in working with communications/media professionals.

Topics to be covered

The brainstorming meeting will be conducted on a carefully planned agenda to optimise on the time, experience and perspectives of the select participants.

It is envisaged that the following themes and topics will be addressed:

- Effective public communication of hazard risks: the role of the media (radio, TV, print, online)
- The use of conventional and new ICTs in amplifying and disseminating disaster warnings
- Increasing the level of sensitivity and accuracy in mass media coverage of disasters
- Ensuring the communications rights of disaster affected persons in media coverage
- Understanding the role and limitations of mass media as good Samaritan in times of distress and crisis
- The emerging roles of online media - blogs, wiki, websites - in pre and post disaster communication
- Going beyond news and current affairs coverage: how to stay on with gently unfolding stories, issues and developments
- Diversifying story telling formats and approaches in media coverage of disasters
- Enhancing greater community participation in media coverage, including the role of citizen journalists and 'amateur' photographers/videographers on the spot
- Content of coverage: balance of information on the disasters and analysis of what has been/can be done to minimize the risks

A draft agenda to be circulated closer to the meetings dates will expand on the above, and seek inputs from confirmed participants.

Meeting format

The Brainstorming Meeting will be held over two working days, with approximately 6 - 7 hours of meeting time each day. It will adopt an informal yet structured approach.

The main features would be:

- Usual meeting formalities and prepared speeches will not be followed.
- There will be no keynote speakers or lead presenters. Recognising everyone's expertise and seniority, all will be treated as resource persons.
- For discussion moderation purposes, a series of panels will be organised, with sufficient time and opportunity for everyone to participate and interact.
- The television debate format will be adapted, even if this will not be broadcast.
- Meeting convenors will moderate only for the purpose of keeping discussions focused and programme on schedule.
- Participants will be encouraged to speak openly. If we feel the need, we may keep one session 'off the record' to allow free exchange of views and concerns.

Meeting logistics

All meeting participants are expected to attend in an honorary capacity. Using limited funding support made available by the UNDP, TVE Asia Pacific would provide the following support to invited participants:

- Economy return air travel on the most direct route between participant's home city and the meeting venue (Bangkok or Phuket)
- Three nights of hotel accommodation at the meeting venue (single room, bed and breakfast basis)
- Meals and refreshments during meeting sessions
- Modest daily subsistence allowance to cover meals not provided by meeting, as well as incidental and transit expenses
- Visa fees and any other specific expenses pre-approved by the organisers

Confirmed participants would receive further details on logistical arrangements as well as the draft agenda.

Communicating Disasters **(-a regional publication)**

Drawing on the presentations and discussions at the brainstorming meeting, but also including several invited contributions from noted media and communications professionals in the region, this publication would document the communication lessons and experiences of post-Tsunami Asia for wider dissemination, and come up with suggestive guidelines for effective communications before, during and after disasters.

The book is to be released in early 2007, and will carry a special foreword by Sir Arthur C Clarke (for which his consent has been obtained in principle).

TVE Asia Pacific: Moving images, Moving people

Television for Education - Asia Pacific, trading as TVE Asia Pacific (TVEAP), has a decade's experience in documenting the Asia Pacific region's quest for environmentally and socially sustainable development. It taps the power of moving images -- by telling factual, authentic stories drawn from across the world's largest and most diverse region, home to more than half of humanity including a majority of its poor.

Communicating Disasters will build on this communications expertise, networking capabilities and wide-ranging partnerships that have been built up over the years. All TVEAP films, websites and other media products are produced journalistically aimed at a regional, non-technical public. Across the Asia Pacific, over 50 TV stations and media networks carry TVEAP content, while hundreds of schools, universities, NGOs, government agencies and training institutes use them on DVD/video for advocacy, awareness raising, learning or activist purposes.

Established in 1996, TVE Asia Pacific is a regional not-for-profit organisation that uses television, video and Internet to raise awareness on environment, development, health and social justice issues. Governed by an international Board of Directors comprising Asian and European communications/development professionals, TVE Asia Pacific operates as an editorially independent, journalistic organisation committed to public communication of development issues.

For more information, please visit:

www.tveap.org, www.digits4change.net, www.childrenoftsunami.info

The meeting will be planned and coordinated by TVE Asia Pacific in consultation with UNDP regional offices in Bangkok and Colombo.

**Content and logistics are being coordinated by TVE Asia Pacific
Nalaka Gunawardene, Director, <nalaka@tveap.org>
Manori Wijesekera, Regional Programme Manager, <manori@tveap.org>
Phone: + 94 11 4412 195; Fax: + 94 11 4403 443**