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Early warning systems are only part of disaster response planning

From: *Professor Debarati Guha-Sapir*

Sir, Tsunamis are not the most frequent or most destructive natural disasters in East Asia. Nearly 300 floods and 129 storms occurred in the last 30 years in the four worst tsunami-affected countries. In the last decades, nearly 150 000 were wiped out in the 1991 Bangladesh cyclone and 226 000 in 1976 by the Tangshan earthquake in China.

The main thrust of the world reaction to the tsunami has been the need for early warning systems. Four initiatives at a total cost of about US\$100 million have been announced. Including one for India on a budget of US\$ 27.5 million- a curious decision given that floods and droughts decimate its population practically every year for the last three decades and there has not been a disastrous tsunami in recorded history.

What should be the priorities instead?

First, **invest in local preparedness**. The communities at risk have the largest stake in this matter and most likely to sustain efforts through the generations. Donor interest in costly high tech early warning systems may disappear with changes in administrations. Strengthening preparedness of the health sector for search and rescue and first line care could go a long way in reducing deaths from disasters like earthquakes and cyclones. Most deaths occur within 6 hours after the shock and the reality is that international teams can

never be on the spot within this time.

Second, no **early warning systems without national action plans**. National systems have often failed to pass on or act appropriately to the early warning information they did receive. The Indian Ministry of Defence, it appears was content having informed the Home Ministry by fax on a Sunday. Early warning is effective if Ministries know who to inform, families know where to go for protection and hospitals know what to shut down.

Third, **tsunami early warnings should be part of a multi-hazard system**. Setting up an warning system just for tsunamis is simply not cost effective for this region. Monitoring rare events will lead inevitably to disuse and end up being a marginal task of the geological service officer. A better idea would be one multi-hazard system which includes floods, storms droughts along with the rarer events. This will keep the system alive and fixed costs down.

Fourth, **skip the international conferences and inter-governmental meetings**. Disaster preparedness is better done than said. The cost-benefit of these mammoth events is doubtful for the poor countries for whom they are purportedly held. We must work more concretely with development banks to mainstream disaster management with countries that show willingness and commitment.

Finally, the international community must not overlook other disasters in its haste to respond to the tsunami. Currently, a famine unrolls in Burundi accompanied by a cholera outbreak. Furthermore, despite peace agreements in Sudan, nearly a million children are hungry and mortality still hover around emergency levels in large parts of Darfur.

To manage disasters, we need an approach grounded in evidence and current realities. The recent tsunami is widely described as the worst ever and victims were expected to double from ensuing disease and pestilence. It is not in the anyone's interest to indulge in hyperbole, for who knows a worse catastrophe may be lurking around the corner and we will have used up all the words.

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