

Better SOPs For Effective Emergency Response



Community arriving at the safe center at kithulegoda primary school during the mock drill

Rationale “Sri Lanka is fast becoming a country affected by multi – hazards. For the past three years, the country faced fourteen major disasters” underlines Dr. S. Amalanathan, Additional Secretary (Development & Relief) of the Ministry of Public Administration, Disaster Management, Rural Economic and Livestock Development.



Recently, the Global Climate Risk Index 2019, published by German Watch, which analyses the latest data, pertaining to countries and regions that have been affected by the impact of weather-related events such as storms, floods, heat waves et al, has ranked Sri Lanka in second place, amongst the territories most affected in 2017. Floods, mostly due to monsoonal rain or effects of low - pressure systems and droughts, caused by failure of monsoonal rain are the most common hazards experienced in Sri Lanka. The Island is also

prone to hazards such as landslides, lightning strikes, coastal erosion, epidemics and effects of environmental pollution and Tsunami, as profiled by the Ministry of Disaster Management.

For effective disaster preparedness, an efficient and effective end-to-end warning system is indispensable, with readiness to act 24 /7, to confront any potential disaster threat, as well as to alert and motivate the at-risk communities and adopt immediate, appropriate measures to save lives.

The development of Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) in such a context, becomes a essential part of Early Warning dissemination. In Sri Lanka, there was no proper early warning system in place, prior to the devastating 2004 Tsunami. It was only post-2004, that preparations of SOPs were initiated for all hazards. Today, SOPs are available for most of the common hazards in Sri Lanka.

Updating SOPs. Under the initiative of the Sri Lanka Preparedness Partnership (SLPP), the importance of the review and update of existing SOPs has been duly recognized by the government. The SLPP, the country chapter of the Asian Preparedness Partnership (APP), was established by six countries to enhance the preparedness capacity of effective emergency response in South Asia and South-East Asia. The task of reviewing and updating SOPs has been undertaken by Disaster Management Centre (DMC) in collaboration with the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC) and Janathakshan (Gte) Ltd.

Today, all key officials in the Disaster Management Centre (DMC) are solidly agreed on the vital need for effective SOPs and are of firmly of the opinion that revision of the SOPs in Sri Lanka is long overdue. “Ten years have elapsed, and the latest changes in technology, responsibilities of various sectoral officers, coordinating mechanisms, have necessitated this urgent update of our SOPs” explained the Addl. Secretary, Dr. Amalanathan.

The former Director-General of the Department of Meteorology, Mr. Sarath Premalal, with over 30 years’ experience in the Dept., believes that the SOPs should be revised every three years because the stakeholder roles as defined in the SOPs, are changing frequently. “There some officers who do not even know their roles and responsibilities...” The Director Preparedness at the DMC, Mr.J.M.S. Jayaweera too welcomes the updating SOPs “They are outdated and sometimes not being practised” he points out. “Ours is a struggle with human lives. Timely warnings are a must. Due observance of SOPs is crucial, since it reinforces the fact that that warnings must be given within a specified time - frame.” The Director-General of the DMC, Mr.W.A.Dharmasiri, holds that “not only must SOPs be updated and effectively tabulated, they must also be practiced and drilled.” Mr. K.A.D.P. Kodipilli, Deputy Director Early Warning, further emphasised that since in the previous SOPs, no time - lines were enumerated, their inclusion in the current update were of paramount

importance. Also, he noted the importance and need for synergised or integrated SOPs.



The current ADPC assisted programme includes updating of the SOPs for Flood, Landslide, Cyclone, focussing on upstream – information from the relevant technical agency up to DMC,



as well as information sharing with relevant officers within the DMC. Moreover, the information flow from the DMC officials to the next level - national level officers, District Secretaries and Divisional Secretaries will

also be enhanced. The following institutions have been the engaged in the update process; Disaster Management Centre (DMC), National Building Research Organization (NBRO), Meteorological Department, and Irrigation Department, with the phases of disasters – before, during and after for Early Warning.

Through the updating of SOPs, it is expected to review and document the decision making process and organize the information & dissemination flow in Sri Lanka, for possible occurrences of floods & landslides consequent to rainfall and cyclones developing in the Bay of Bengal. Further, the updated SOPs will guide the DMC, to manage the different phases of disasters, stakeholders involved in response and those officers responsible.

The process During March-July in 2019, the SOP revision process included a wide stakeholder consultation process, under the aegis of the DMC. Initial discussions were carried out with the officers the DMC where new developments in human and physical resources and policy changes with regard to disaster early warning dissemination were analysed.

A two - day stakeholder consultation workshop was held with the participation of all the technical agencies engaged in landslide, cyclone and flood early warning, along with officials of the Disaster Management Centre representing

the Emergency Operation Centre (EOC), Preparedness and Planning division, Human Resource Division and Disaster Mitigation Division, to identify the gaps in the current SOPs and Early Warning System.



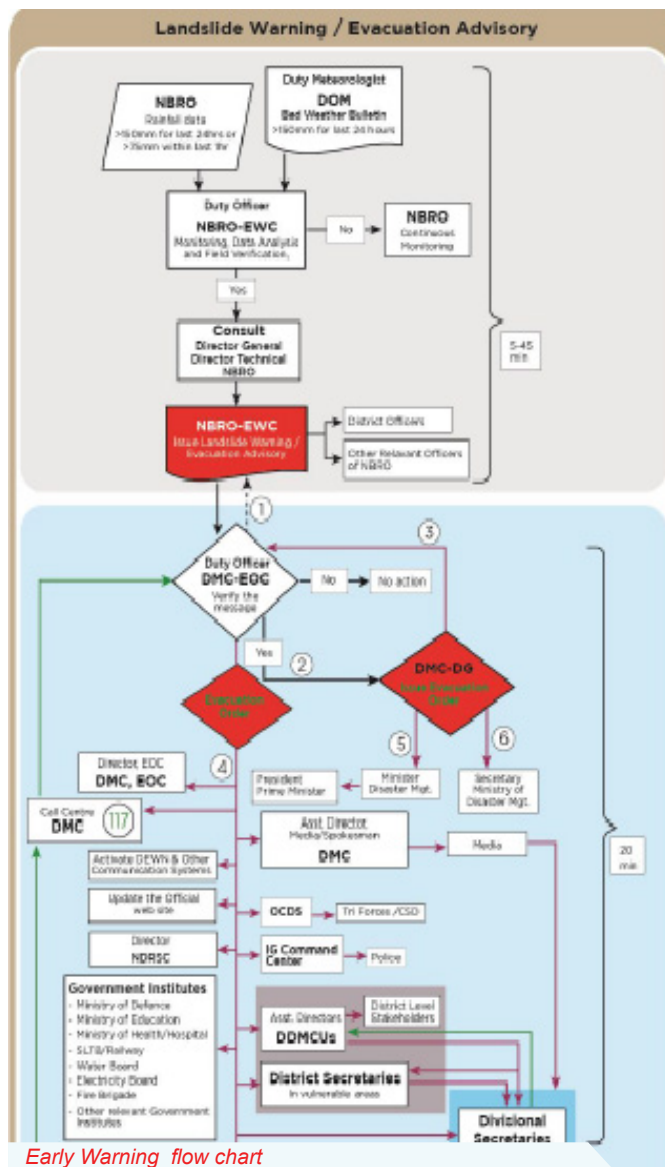
Stakeholders consultation workshop - Kukulegaga

Technical agencies presented their Early Warning issuing mechanisms and the requisite time frame to issue a field verified and scientifically or statistically tested disaster Early Warning. Three district level one-day workshops were held in Badulla, Batticaloa and Kilinochchi districts with the participation of relevant district level officers, divisional level officers, Grama Niladaris and the community to identify their expectations from the updated SOPs. The Landslide Early Warning system was discussed at a workshop in Badulla. Flood and Cyclone Early Warning systems were discussed at the Batticaloa and Kilinochchi district workshops respectively.



District level stakeholder workshop - Kilinochchi

The developed Early Warning flow charts and SOPs were validated at a workshop in Colombo held with the participation of technical agencies and relevant officials of Disaster Management Centre. The finalized Standard Operational Procedures handed over to the Disaster Management Centre are to be circulated among relevant stakeholders in landslides, floods and cyclone disaster Early Warning.



Early Warning flow chart

The SOP updating process has also included improvement in the current periphery-centre communication modes. For instance, new SOPs have been developed for the Dept. of Irrigation in the Northern Province, thus facilitating a better information flow to and coordination with the DMC.

The new SOPs, inter alia, have incorporated new communication modes such as SMS, DEWN (Disaster Early Warning Network), and Call Centres. What each official is required to do, when there is a disaster warning is now comprehensively documented. For the first time, separate SOPs have been included for the four officers at the Emergency Operations Centre EOC) at the DMC in Colombo.

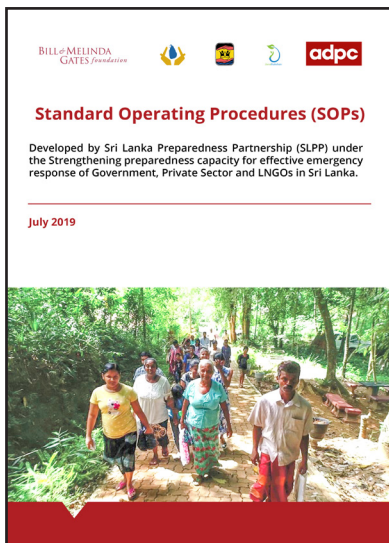


Validating the updated SOPs with stakeholders

The finalised SOPs will be printed and distributed amongst all stakeholders involved in the Early Warning mechanism.

The DMC is fully cognizant that for the SOPs to be meaningful, they should be persistently tested, reviewed and made more dynamic and relevant. Only then will the gaps disappear. Future drills, where SOPs are tested after major landslides, floods, and tsunamis are essential.

And the future? The bottom to top information flow, of SOPs requires to be standardized. For instance, the lack of coordination may result in hindering the prevention efforts of certain landslide disasters. Assistant Director DMC,



Badulla District, Mr. E.M.L. Udayakumar, points out that in an impending landslide disaster scenario, there is much vital information at the grass- root level in the village. For instance, people are aware of a flood situation, and areas of possible inundation. Therefore, a standardised mechanism is essential to utilise such valuable information to minimize casualties and deaths. imperative that in the next development phase, SOPs will be developed for District Secretaries, Divisional Secretaries and the Grama Niladari levels.

It is only when the SOPs are extended right up to ground level, its proper implementation is possible, thereby ensuring greater disaster preparedness and saving lives.

It is important to evaluate SOPs after major disasters. ‘A post-disaster monitoring or review mechanism is essential’ underlined the Director-General of the DMC. Such evaluations will be indeed crucial to identify gaps.”

