



The Role of Dialect Specific Radio Warnings in Saving Lives During Cyclonic Disaster in Bangladesh

Ullah writes about a study conducted by FOCUS which reveals that aside from scientific accuracy, the appropriateness of culture, language and medium is critical for disseminating early warning information.

Mohammad Sahid Ullah
Department of Journalism
Chittagong University
sahid@ctgu.edu
www.ctgu.edu

Bangladesh generally faces cyclonic storms before and after monsoon periods in April- May and November-December. According to worldwide data, around 70-80 cyclonic storms are generated in the tropical zone, and 7 percent of these originate from the Bay of Bengal, hitting the Bangladeshi coast with devastating results. Around 7 million people live in the 710 km coastal areas, off shore islands, and chars in the Bay of Bengal. A total of 102 cyclones were recorded during the last 230 years in the country. Of them, 64 were recorded as severe claiming between fifty thousand to half a million lives.

A study¹ on media, perception and disaster related behavior in Bangladesh reveals that early, easily understandable and language appropriate warning dissemination through radio can reduce the potential death toll of catastrophic cyclone and tidal bore. The study, conducted by the Forum for Development, Journalism and Communication Studies (FOCUS) recommended that relevant authorities develop innovative warning signal systems and take necessary steps in disseminating

the warning in easily understood language through radio at least two days before a cyclone hits, hence mitigating the loss of lives and property every year in Bangladesh. Mohammad Sahid Ullah, a professor at Chittagong University, who led the study, suggests that part of the process is increasing public confidence in the broadcast media since self-evacuation and shelters quality are the major causes of deaths.

The survey was carried out on eight severely cyclone-affected coastal and off shore islands during July and August 2000 (see map). The areas included Kutubdia of Cox's Bazar, Banskhali and Sandwip of Chittagong, Hatiya island of Noakhali, Char Alexander of Laxmipur, Charfashion of Bhola, Patherghata of Barguna, and Galachipa of Patuakhali districts.

The respondents were chosen using proportionately allocated sample methods and were interviewed in their own homes using a pre-set questionnaire containing questions on cyclone knowledge and preparedness behavior. Around 400 affected community members, 21 correspondents of different news media working in the coast areas and 63 *Upa-zila*

(district) officials, who were involved with disaster management directly throughout the coastal regions, were interviewed. The survey revealed that in addition to critical issues such as overpopulation, poverty, inadequate shelter and low level of disaster preparedness, factors such



Areas of study on cyclone-affected coastal and off-shore islands
Source: UN Cartographic Section, 1992

Living with Risk
Turning the tide on
disasters towards
sustainable development

2003
World Disaster
Reduction Campaign

¹The study was entitled 'Disaster Preparedness and Mass Media: A Case Study in the Coastal Region of Bangladesh' conducted in 1999-2000 with the support of the Hoso-Bunka Foundation of Japan.



as lack of public confidence in the media, lack of understanding of the warning system and poor communication infrastructure also contribute to the high rate of drowning during cyclonic disasters.

The respondents, comprising two thirds males and one third females, fell in the age range of 15 to 70. The monthly family incomes of majority of the respondents were Tk 1,000 to Tk 3,000 (\$18-\$53 US). Around 40 per cent of the participants depend on agricultural crops for their livelihood and have a family group consisting of 7-8 people.

Over 60 per cent of those interviewed had experienced 7 to 8 cyclones in their lifetime and lost some one close to them to one of the disasters. The study report revealed that many people heard the cyclone warning for the first time through a radio announcement but less than half of the respondents evacuated and sought emergency shelter, only after seeing warning publicity from the Red Crescent's Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP) volunteers.

Around 60 per cent of the people in the survey reported that they had problems understanding the signals or announcements due to complicated and technical language. However, they utilized the number of signals as an indication of the severity of the storm. The greater the frequency of signals, the greater the apparent danger.

Almost 30 per cent did not leave their houses until they were fully submerged in flood waters due to the fear of household theft. Others waited inside their houses because they believed their survival depended only on God and did not seek emergency assistance due to inadequate facilities, water and sanitations, and lack of *parda* for women (a separate space for religious and security reasons).

Almost 80 per cent of the people stated their preference for broadcast bulletins in local dialect for easier understanding. Of them, two thirds of the respondents said they were interested in learning more details about the cyclone and tidal bore, such as its track and intensity.

The 13 coastal districts represent the most severely affected areas and serve as a home to a population of almost 20 million. Around 138 thousand people lost their lives in the catastrophic cyclone of 29 April 1991. After this mass casualty, the government and local authorities invested in better radio warning systems conducted in three dialects (Chittagonian, Noakhalian and Barishyallya) instead of the previous announcements which were only transmitted in polished urban Bangla. The grassroots administration provided vehicles to facilitate evacuation to cyclone shelters and school buildings. Local Red Crescent volunteers stepped up their intervention to actually visiting people in their own homes to convince them to evacuate. The results were astonishing. When the region was hit with a similar cyclone in May 19, 1997, the death toll was reduced to 155 people, only 0.1 per cent of the previous fatality rate.

Although the study may not show a direct cause and effect relationship between language specific warning systems and disaster prevention, it makes a strong case for greater sensitivity to the actual acceptance and understanding of cyclone warning signals. Furthermore, it elucidates some barriers to disaster preparedness that exist in these communities.