

The Role of Disaster Communication in Cyclone Ditwah, Sri Lanka

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91200111>

Received: 10 December 2025; Accepted: 17 December 2025; Published: 01 January 2026

ABSTRACT

Over a million people were affected by the massive flooding, landslides, infrastructure collapse, and humanitarian disaster caused by Cyclone Ditwah, which hit Sri Lanka in late November 2025. This article looks at how well disaster communication systems performed during Ditwah, highlights significant shortcomings, particularly in terms of timely notifications and linguistic inclusivity, and analyzes how these shortcomings affected the catastrophe's scope. Recommendations for improving disaster communication systems to better serve all communities are included in the article's conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

It is often acknowledged that a key component of disaster risk reduction is effective disaster communication, which includes early warnings, timely notifications, clear instructions, and inclusive language (ex. UN DRR guidelines). The ability of official authorities to quickly and fairly distribute warnings when a strong hurricane is approaching could be the difference between life and death. Serious deficiencies in the institutional capacity for disaster communication, particularly along linguistic and ethnic lines, are revealed by the case of Cyclone Ditwah in Sri Lanka.

Background: Cyclone Ditwah and Impact on Sri Lanka

Over 275,000 children were among the nearly 1.4 million people in Sri Lanka who were impacted by Cyclone Ditwah, according to official estimates (Colombo Guardian, 2025). Numerous districts notably isolated and hill country areas, experienced extensive flooding, landslides, and infrastructure collapse as a result of the tragedy (Daily Mirror, 2025). Hospitals were swamped, roads were obstructed or flooded, telecom towers were unavailable, and many villages were totally cut off from rescue and communication services, according to reports detailing serious disruptions in vital services (Daily Mirror, 2025). Disaster communication, including early warnings, evacuation alerts, and rescue coordination, should have been crucial given the extent of the destruction and human suffering. However, numerous assessments and first-hand reports show that a significant portion of the population particularly Tamil-speaking communities was let down by the communication system.

Disaster Communication during Ditwah: What Was Done

Disaster-management mechanisms, such as coordination under applicable legal frameworks, mobilizing first responders (armed forces, police), and using multiple channels SMS, local announcements, district-level alerts, and in certain cases, physical visits to reach communities were activated once the approaching storm was identified, according to statements made by officials from the Disaster Management Center (DMC) (Tamil Guardian, 2025). There have apparently been flood advisories, landslide warnings, and district-level alerts (Tamil Guardian, 2025). But there seem to have been a significant gap between technical preparedness and inclusive, successful communication.

Critical Failures: Where Disaster Communication Broke Down

Linguistic Exclusion and Inequitable Access

The almost total omission of Tamil, one of Sri Lanka's official languages, from important alerts and emergency communications was arguably the most well-documented and criticized failure. A assessment of the DMC's public output during the crucial storm period (November 25–29) revealed that, out of 68 posts, only 12 had any Tamil content (primarily basic flood notices), and all important information on the site banner was in Sinhala (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Significant alerts, including those about the possibility of landslides, flood evacuations, road closures, and weather updates, were either not issued at all or were delayed in (Tamil Guardian, 2025). According to one interpretation, this is a structural failing that stems from systemic linguistic discrimination within governmental communication infrastructure rather than technical issues. The Sun Sri Lanka plus one "Minutes and hours matter when a cyclone approaches," one commentator said. There was a lethal information imbalance as a result of the warnings' lack or delay in the Tamil language (Colombo Telegraph, 2025).

Delay and Lack of Urgency in Alerts

Critics contend that although forecasts and raw meteorological data were accessible far in advance of Ditwah's impact, these warnings were not converted into public notifications that were sufficiently detailed or urgent (Colombo Telegraph, 2025). Early communications apparently employed weaker terminology like "heavy rain warnings" or "flood advisories" rather than a clear "cyclone/deep depression" alarm, which may not have communicated urgency to the people (Colombo Telegraph, 2025). Due to this ambiguity and language barriers, many people, particularly in distant and Tamil speaking villages, probably did not realize how serious the looming calamity was until it actually happened.

Institutional Weaknesses, Lack of Inclusive Infrastructure

Analyses of the aftermath of the tragedy highlight how underfunded local councils and disaster management organizations were, without contemporary infrastructure, qualified staff, and real-time communication systems to handle a disaster of Ditwah's size. Journalism for (Colombo Telegraph, 2025) Ground views additionally, there is no proof that a fully functional multilingual national early warning system one that could consistently send voice, SMS, and alerts in various languages (Sinhala, Tamil, and probably English) at the same time existed. Journalism for (Colombo Telegraph, 2025). Ground views the chain from "forecast → public alert → evacuation/rescue" appears to have broken down due to a lack of coordination between meteorological agencies (forecasting), disaster-management organizations (evacuation planning), and local authorities (Ceylon Today, 2025).

Communication Infrastructure Collapse

Even in cases where warnings were provided, many impacted populations were unable to receive them because of the collapse of infrastructure: roads were blocked, telecommunications towers broke down, phones and the internet stopped working, and power outages occurred all of which were noted in damage assessments (Daily Mirror, 2025). This collapse is summed up in the account of a rural hill country resident: "There is no current here and the network is also bad." Roads remain blocked. Nobody came to check on us. The Daily Mirror Even when national-level agencies attempted to respond, such communication breakdowns made rescue and coordination very challenging.

Consequences: Disparate Impact and Amplification of Disaster

Many individuals were left ignorant or under informed when the storm hit due to the cumulative effect of these mistakes, particularly Tamil-speaking multiethnic populations, isolated hill country residents, plantation laborers, and those without access to other communication. It is said that many were unaware of the severity until floodwaters arrived at their homes (Daily Mirror, 2025). This "information vacuum" led to extreme exposure

during floods and landslides, delayed evacuation, increased fatality rates, and an inability to seek assistance in a timely manner. The humanitarian impact was further exacerbated by delayed and insufficient rescue aid, which was made worse by damaged roads, disrupted communications, and overworked response agencies (Daily Mirror, 2025).

DISCUSSION: SYSTEMIC GAPS AND STRUCTURAL FAILURES

1. It is not sufficient to blame "bad luck" or unanticipated intensification for the disaster communication failures during Cyclone Ditwah. Instead, they are a reflection of systemic governance shortcomings, including biased communication rules, underfunded agencies, institutional flaws, and a lack of inclusive planning.
2. Language and equity as risk factors for disasters. Effective disaster communication in multilingual communities like Sri Lanka requires respect for linguistic variety. Tamil-speaking populations were essentially put at greater risk by the disregard for one official language. Such language injustice has life-or-death repercussions and functions as structural discrimination.
3. Strong, redundant communication infrastructure is required. Without backup radio systems, community-level networks, or non-digital alert methods, relying mostly on digital or telecommunication channels exposes vulnerable communities when infrastructure is disrupted by disasters.
4. 1. Coordination between institutions must be integrated. With explicit procedures for escalation, multilingual alerts, evacuation orders, and community engagement, forecasting agencies, disaster-management authorities, local governments, and community organizations must function in a coordinated, prearranged manner.
2. Giving social vulnerability and inclusivity top priority. Planning for disaster communication must take social and economic vulnerabilities into consideration, such as low-income households, plantation workers, rural communities, and speakers of minority languages. Disaster risk governance must incorporate equity as a fundamental component rather than an afterthought.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following suggestions are put out in light of the Ditwah experience:

- Create a nationwide multilingual early-warning alert system that is required to concurrently send voice, SMS, and alerts in Sinhala, Tamil, and (if necessary) English to every district.
- Create backup communication channels that don't rely only on mobile and internet infrastructure, such as community radios, loudspeakers, local volunteers, and ham radio networks.
- Create and finance programs for disaster preparedness and communication at the local level, with community involvement and local language outreach, particularly in isolated, hill country, and plantation areas.
- Boost capacity-building and institutional coordination: make sure the meteorological department, disaster-management organizations, local governments, and first responders have well-defined procedures for forecasting, public alerts, evacuation, rescue, and relief.
- Integrate equity and inclusion into disaster governance to guarantee that vulnerable groups, marginalized areas, and minority populations receive information and assistance of the same caliber and promptness.

CONCLUSION

Cyclone Ditwah showed that communication is essential for public safety during disasters and is not a luxury. An environmental incident in Sri Lanka became a social disaster due to the lack of prompt, inclusive, and

accessible disaster communication. The human cost was increased by the lack of inclusive planning, institutional deficiencies, infrastructure vulnerability, and the language isolation of Tamil-speaking populations. Sri Lanka's disaster communication networks need to be strengthened, redundant, inclusive, multilingual, and equitable if it is to become more resilient to future disasters, which are becoming more common as a result of climate change. Then and only then can early warnings result in lives saved rather than disasters.

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