

GDRC working with local governments in Sri Lanka

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Photo: Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities Board with Hemanthi Goonasekera (National Coordinator and Chief Executive Officer) seated first from right)

GDRC's Professor Richard Haigh and Dilanthi Amaratunga travelled to Sri Lanka this week to meet with the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities as part of their ongoing work to reduce disaster risk in Sri Lanka. They recently launched CRESCENDO (Community Resilience Engaging Society, Culture, and Environment against Disaster Outcomes) a two year initiative, working alongside the EU funded CADRE (<http://www.disaster-resilience.net/cadre>) and ASCENT (<http://www.disaster-resilience.net/ascent>) projects and co-funded by the University's Research Fund, aimed at developing risk-sensitive urban planning and development processes, and local metrics with effective accountability mechanisms, as well as strategies for capacity development for urban and risk management local government officers and associated professionals.

The Sendai Framework, signed by 187 countries in March 2015, is a 15-year, voluntary, non-binding agreement which recognises that the State has the primary role to reduce disaster risk but that responsibility should be shared with other stakeholders including local government, the private sector and other stakeholders. The vital role of local government in tackling disaster risk is increasingly being recognised. While the drivers of disaster risk may be local, national, regional or global in scope, disaster risks have local and specific characteristics that must be understood and managed to effectively reduce disaster risk.

Various types and scales of urban plans at the local government level, from territorial to land-use zoning, can help to protect environmentally sensitive areas, reduce vulnerability and disaster risk, mitigate climate change and increase resilience. However, to be effective, there is a need to develop risk-sensitive urban planning and development processes should consider multiple steps from data collection to plan design and its implementation in a sustainable time-period. This process must engage urban and risk management professionals working in various stages of risk-sensitive urban planning and development, including local officials, urban planners and designers, architects, civil engineers and the construction workforce.

An important aspect of any such development processes is accountability. Any investigation of the outcomes of external interventions following a disaster would reveal the nature and extent of recovery in terms of relief, resettlement, livelihood, community building and access to services. It is also important to look at related accountability issues within the pre-disaster phase as there is more emphasis now on disaster risk reduction, and what we could do to prevent disasters and/ or to minimise losses. Many shortcomings that may be present might have been avoided if there were effective accountability mechanisms built into the urban planning processes at the local level.

GDRC members have led important research on the challenges faced by Sri Lankan municipalities in creating a disaster resilient built environment, providing recommendations to empower municipalities to effectively contribute to resilience building at the city level, and developing and testing an innovative professional doctoral programme that integrates professional and academic knowledge in the construction industry to develop societal resilience to disasters. With this as the basis, there is a need for further research to develop risk-sensitive urban planning and development processes, and local metrics. These will be the focus of the planned research and underpinning publications to be developed under CRESCENDO.

GDRC has strong links with users and beneficiaries at the national and local level in Sri Lanka that have already been engaged to identify this problem and develop an appropriate research plan. These include the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities, the University of Colombo Social Policy and Analysis Research Centre, the University of Moratuwa, the Ministry of Disaster Management in Sri Lanka, the Disaster Management Centre in Sri Lanka, CIDA (Construction Industry Development Authority), and the National Science Foundation of Sri Lanka.

Professor Haigh and Professor Amaratunga met with Hemanthi Goonasekera (National Coordinator and Chief Executive Officer) and Shiva Goonasekera at the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities. Together they set out a detailed research plan that includes embedding the findings within local government frameworks, with the support of the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities, as well as in the *Programme to national policy framework for Sri Lanka* that is being led by Professor Siri Hettige, University of Colombo and Executive Committee Convener of this five-year framework development programme. This programme is based on the premise of a need to have research-based national policy and emphasises the need to get together and work out national policies based on objective evidence coming from scientific research. The *Programme to national policy framework for Sri Lanka* has been launched by the new Government of Sri Lanka under the patronage of His Excellency, The President of Sri Lanka, Maithripala Sirisena. The research will therefore have very strong and demonstrable policy relevance.

The research plan also includes an opportunity to extend the reach of the work through incorporating the research findings within the UN "Words into Action" Sendai Framework guides on priority topics. Professor Amaratunga was recently appointed to lead the "Words into Action" working group on Governance and Accountability.

In May this year, Professor Haigh and Professor Amaratunga will be returning to Sri Lanka to lead a series of roundtable events aimed at engaging potential users and beneficiaries from the outset, carrying out strategic scoping of opportunities, and developing strategies and methodologies for engagement.

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