

Building resilience through capacity strengthening

Lessons learned brief

December 2024 | Sri Lanka

Key learning insights

- Local authority participants in Karachchi achieved in average an 83% improvement in rapid needs assessments (RNA) scores and a 37% improvement in DRR scores, demonstrating **enhanced understanding of hazard and needs assessments**. Participants in Addalachchanai showed a more modest improvement, with a 21% and 11% increase in RNA and DRR scores respectively.
- Training content was effectively utilized during the December 2024 flooding**, with participants in Karachchi applying GIS mapping and risk assessment tools to collect and analyze critical data. Participants from Addalachchanai experienced external challenges (e.g., flooding of their homes) which limited their capacity to apply learnings from the training.
- High levels of motivation, contextual application, and teamwork were observed**, with female participants actively assuming leadership roles.
- Challenges such as technical delays, limited practical learning, and inadequate access to laptops and reliable internet hindered the full application of training materials and knowledge acquisition. **These elements will be addressed for the next sessions of the training program.**

Introduction

The 2022 economic crisis in Sri Lanka, exacerbated by COVID-19, hyperinflation, and job losses, intensified hardships for vulnerable communities, leaving over 5 million people in need¹. Agriculture and fisheries, employing over 30% of the population, were severely affected by climate-induced disasters like droughts, floods, and landslides, highlighting the urgent need for disaster resilience.

Disaster risk reduction (DRR) in Sri Lanka faces significant challenges, particularly due to gaps in disaster data systems. Local authorities face challenges related to infrastructure limitations, capacity gaps in data collection, and the need to enhance inter-departmental coordination. The lack of reliable, disaggregated data on hazards, exposure, and disaster impacts hinders informed decision-making, as evidenced by the December 2024 flooding.

To address these gaps, **a capacity-strengthening training program was developed to improve the disaster response of local authorities and community organizations**. The training introduces a risk assessment tool for evidence-based decision-making and aims to strengthen skills in risk data management, rapid needs assessments, and community-driven mitigation actions. It aims to empower communities to identify hazards and implement localized solutions, complementing AGORA's activities related to area-based risk assessments (ABRA)² and livelihood resilience assessments (LRA)³.

Methodology

In order to design an effective capacity-strengthening training program, AGORA conducted a series of scoping consultations with representatives from 9 local authorities across Ampara and Kilinochchi districts. The two districts were covered under AGORA's ABRA and LRA and Acted selected two divisions from these districts, Addalachchenai (Ampara) and Karachchi (Kilinochchi) for the program. Karachchi was chosen as a positive control group, given its higher observed capacity in data management compared to Addalachchenai. The goal of these consultations was to identify the key areas where training was most needed and to understand the challenges faced by local authorities in managing disaster risks. Key findings from the consultations revealed that disaster management, data collection and analysis, and the use of GIS/GPS were priority areas for capacity strengthening. A number of challenges in DRR emerged, including poor coordination among departments, insufficient data collection methods, lack of standardized tools for assessments, and issues with fragmented data storage and usage.

Based on these insights, the training program was designed to address these gaps. **It was structured into three sessions and this report covers the lessons learned from the first session**. The first session covered DRR, RNA, and participatory risk mapping, delivered through three modules, two aimed at local authorities and one for local interface (LIFs) members from the Acted-led organizations

working in the same areas. The first session was repeated twice to reach participants in the two targeted districts. The modules for local authorities consisted of strengthening theoretical knowledge in DRR and providing technical guidance, tools and methodologies for performing RNA during emergencies. The module for LIFs centred on participatory mapping, with a focus on GIS, satellite imagery, and community vulnerabilities.

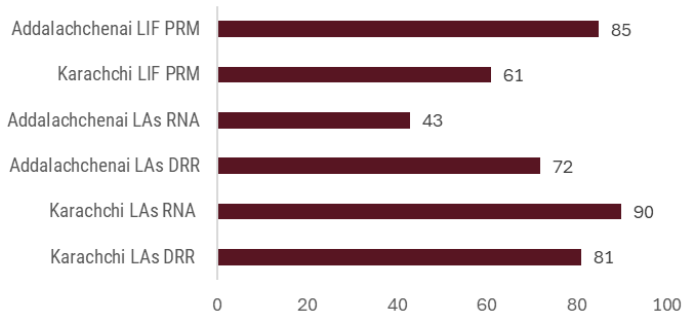
The second and third sessions of the training will be directed to the same participants, increasing their knowledge, utilizing simulations, practical exercises, enumerator training, and other data collection tools.

This design aimed to strengthen the skills of participants in DRR, enhance their ability to conduct high quality needs assessments, and introduce community-driven mitigation strategies. The training also aimed to provide participants with the necessary tools and knowledge to make informed, evidence-based decisions in disaster response and risk reduction activities. A total of 86 participants attended this training, 43 in each district: 22 local authority staff and 21 LIF members in Karachchi, and 19 and 24, respectively in Addalachchanai. Please refer to the training **Methodology Note** for further details.

Learning results

To assess participant's knowledge development, a pre- and post-training evaluation was conducted before and after each module. Daily feedback surveys and trainer observations highlighted participants' preferred sessions and recommendations, shaping the second training. Final feedback surveys identified the program's strengths and challenges.

The results indicated significant improvements, particularly among **local authorities in Karachchi**, who increased their average RNA evaluation scores from 2.9 to 5.3 (max 6) and DRR scores from 3.2 to 4.4, demonstrating enhanced understanding of hazard assessment, GIS mapping, and RNA methodologies. **Local authorities in Addalachchanai** showed a more modest improvement, with an average score increase from 3.8 to 4.6 in RNA, and 3.5 to 3.9 in DRR, reflecting progress primarily in theoretical knowledge, especially in DRR theoretical knowledge and coping capacities. **LIF members** also exhibited notable gains. In Karachchi, the average score improved from 2.6 to 3.4, while in Addalachchanai, the participants average score increased from 2 to 3.7, highlighting the effectiveness of the training in strengthening capacity across sectors.



Graph 1. Average percentage increase in participants' knowledge.

Successes and strengths

The following is a summary of key successes and strengths observed during the training sessions, highlighting areas of effective implementation and positive outcomes.

Participation

- **High motivation and engagement:** Participants actively participated in discussions on DRR and RNA, demonstrating a strong desire to improve both theoretical and practical knowledge.
- **Contextual application:** Effectively connected training content to their roles, local contexts, and government functions, showcasing a clear understanding and ability to apply learned concepts.
- **Teamwork and collaboration:** Collaborated respectfully across departments and organizations during group activities, fostering teamwork and cross-sectoral understanding.
- **Appreciation for interactive learning:** Responded positively to group presentations, discussions, and other interactive activities, valuing diverse and engaging learning methods.
- **Eagerness for digital skills:** Displayed enthusiasm for practical sessions involving new technologies, tools, and digital materials, with a strong willingness to enhance digital literacy.
- **Leadership by female participants:** Female participants actively engaged in discussions and assumed leadership roles in group activities, contributing meaningfully despite being underrepresented.

Training program

- **Relevance and applicability:** Participants highlighted the training's alignment with their daily roles and recommended extending it to colleagues from other departments and organizations, reflecting its broad applicability.
- **Flexible agenda:** The training schedule was adapted based on participant feedback, incorporating more breaks, reducing overtime, and tailoring content to the specific needs of Kilinochchi and Ampara participants.
- **Effective translation support:** Consecutive translation, presentation summaries, and concept clarifications in local languages supported comprehension and active engagement.
- **Support for female participants:** Children were allowed to stay in the training room when participants were not able to get childcare.
- **Objective achievement:** The program effectively addressed capacity gaps in DRR, RNA, and participatory risk mapping, delivering measurable knowledge improvements.
- **Replicability:** The training design is easy to replicate and integrate into local systems, supporting scalability and sustainability.

Common challenges and suggestions

The following is a list of common challenges encountered in the training sessions provided accompanied by a list of suggestions to improve the future training sessions.

Language

Challenges

- **Complex terminology:** Participants struggled to grasp new theoretical concepts and technical terms presented, hindering content comprehension.
- **Limited translation resources:** A shortage of staff helping with translation resulted in overwork and fatigue.

Suggestions

- **Pre-translated materials:** Ensure all training materials are translated in advance and share post-training to enhance accessibility and understanding.
- **Capacity of translation staff:** Provide comprehensive training for field staff to ensure accurate and context-appropriate translations.
- **Increased use of local languages:** Actively incorporate local languages during discussions, presentations, and evaluations to improve participant engagement and understanding.
- **Enhanced staffing:** Have additional field staff to support translation needs and facilitate smoother group discussions.
- **Effective role rotation:** Implement a structured rotation system for translation roles to prevent burnout and maintain consistency in quality.

Equipment

Challenges

- **Access to laptops:** A limited number of laptops forced participants to rely on smartphones, which were often incompatible or cumbersome for using specific software. Sharing devices further hindered individual learning, particularly for GIS mapping, Kobo, and data cleaning exercises.
- **Unstable internet connectivity:** Wi-Fi limitations necessitated reliance on mobile hotspots, leading to frequent disconnections and interruptions that disrupted the learning process.

Suggestions

- **Additional equipment:** Secure more laptops or tablets through Acted/IMPACT to ensure every participant has access to appropriate devices for hands-on activities.
- **Equip venues adequately:** Organize training in venues with reliable internet access, sufficient laptops or desktops, and pre-installed software to support seamless learning.
- **Preemptive technical checks:** Resolve all potential technical issues, including connectivity and device functionality, before the training begins to minimize disruptions.

Time management

Challenges

- **Technical delays:** Excessive time was spent resolving technical issues, reducing the time available for learning.
- **Limited practical learning:** Insufficient time allocation, coupled with delays, restricted the focus on hands-on exercises, limiting participants' practical understanding.
- **Overrunning sessions:** Some sessions exceeded their planned time, disrupting the overall agenda.
- **Focus on complex concepts:** Limited time was allocated to fully explain and break down theoretical concepts, leaving participants with gaps in understanding.

Suggestions

- **Include buffer time:** Integrate buffer periods in the agenda to accommodate unforeseen delays without disrupting the schedule.
- **Adaptable scheduling:** Ensure flexibility in the agenda to address unexpected issues or changes.
- **Increase practical exercise time:** Allocate additional time specifically for hands-on exercises to enhance practical learning.
- **Thorough theoretical explanations:** Dedicate more time to clarifying complex theoretical jargon to ensure participants grasp the concepts fully.
- **Optimize time planning:** Minimize overtime through meticulous session planning. Ensure punctuality by starting sessions promptly in the morning and after lunch breaks. Monitor and regulate time spent on breaks to stay on schedule.

Training modes

Challenges

- **Decreased focus:** Participants exhibited reduced engagement by the third day of training.
- **Limited responsiveness to theory:** Participants were less receptive to sessions heavily focused on theoretical content.

Suggestions

- **Adjust training duration:** Shorten overall training hours or days to sustain participant focus.
- **Incorporate breaks and energizers:** Increase the number of breaks and integrate energizing activities between sessions to maintain engagement.
- **Diversify teaching methods:** Introduce simulations, case studies, and interactive group exercises to create a balance between theoretical and practical learning.
- **Leverage guest speakers:** Invite guest speakers to provide contextual insights and inspire participants through real-world examples.

Inclusivity

Challenges

- **Low diversity:** Limited participation of women and marginalized groups in the training sessions.

Suggestions

- **Flexible and inclusive arrangements:** Design flexible schedules to encourage participation from diverse groups.
- **Engage high-level authorities:** Actively collaborate with senior officials to advocate for increased involvement of women and marginalized groups in future training programs.
- **Promote representation:** Work with authorities to set participation targets or policies that prioritize women and marginalized communities, ensuring equitable representation.

From knowledge to action

This section reflects feedback from training participants who applied their learnings during the December 2024 flooding in eastern Sri Lanka. This real-world scenario highlighted both the program's impact and areas for improvement.

In Karachchi, participants effectively utilized GIS mapping and tools like the UNDAC question bank to assess risks, collect and clean data, and inform decision-making. For example, a Pradeshiya Sabha (legislative body at the municipality level) staff member drafted questionnaires to evaluate flood impacts on businesses, while another local government trained personnel took the leading role in the preparation of the Kilinochchi District Situation Report, showcasing the practical application of training content.

In Addalachchanai, external challenges such as flooding of participants' homes and increased workloads limited the use of training materials. However, some participants applied tools like Google Maps for road assessments. Both district participants reported difficulties with tools like KOBO, emphasizing the need for extended practical training to build confidence in their use during emergencies.

The December flooding demonstrated the training's potential for real-world impact. Addressing gaps in practical tool usage and providing follow-up support can further enhance the program's effectiveness, underscoring the need to scale it to other at-risk areas.

Conclusion

The capacity-strengthening training program successfully addressed critical gaps in DRR and RNA across Kilinochchi and Ampara districts. Significant knowledge gains were recorded, and participants effectively applied training tools during the December 2024 flooding, demonstrating the program's real-world relevance. However, challenges such as inadequate access to equipment, technical delays, and limited time for practical exercises highlight areas for improvement.

Moving forward, **the two upcoming sessions will address these challenges through extended practical training, enhanced resources, and tailored support.** The program's design and demonstrated impact position it as a scalable model for other at-risk regions in Sri Lanka, offering the potential to strengthen disaster resilience and preparedness across the country.

References and notes

1 OCHA, **Sri Lanka Multi-Dimensional Crisis: Humanitarian Needs and Priorities, Response Overview (9 Jun 2022 - 31 Mar 2023).**

2 In 2024, AGORA Sri Lanka performed eight ABRAs in different Divisional Secretariats within four districts. **Poonankari** and **Karachchi**, in Kilinochchi District; **Vavuniya North** and **Vavuniya South**, in Vavuniya District; **Addalachchanai** and **Mahaoya**, in Ampara District; and **Kiran (Koralai Pattu South)** and **Vellawalai (Porativo Pattu)**, in Batticaloa District.

3 In 2024, AGORA Sri Lanka performed eight LRAs in different Divisional Secretariats within four districts. **Poonankari** and **Karachchi**, in Kilinochchi District; **Vavuniya North** and **Vavuniya South**, in Vavuniya District; **Addalachchanai** and **Mahaoya**, in Ampara District; and **Kiran (Koralai Pattu South)** and **Vellawalai (Porativo Pattu)**, in Batticaloa District.



Picture 1. Training session with members of the local authorities from Karachchi.