



Forecasts or premonitions?

Cyclonic Storm Ditwah exposed both the strength of Sri Lanka's communities and the fragility of its preparedness. **Luavut Zahid** investigates

The grand idea was to end the year on a high note. When a small part of *Crisis Response Journal's* editorial team landed in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in late November last year, we were there to attend the A-PAD International Symposium 2025, to engage with practitioners and experts grappling with an increasingly volatile risk landscape. The running theme across most conversations was familiar: how strained existing resource pools are against ever-growing threats.

Despite the disturbing nature of many discussions, they were punctuated with hope. Many of the symposium's 150 participants were people focused on solutions that could hold their own in the mud, rather than simply trying to put out fires.

Two days later, some of those participants, including our team, were caught in the web of Cyclonic Storm Ditwah.

Warnings from earlier conversations began to sound like omens we had failed to recognise. We speak endlessly about the dangers of operating in siloes, enough for it to have become a broken record, and yet here we were.

According to a December situation report from Sri Lanka's Disaster Management Centre (DMC), roughly 650 people died in the aftermath, with another 183 reported missing. The country is facing over US\$4.1 billion in damage. The cyclone triggered over 4,000 landslides, severely disrupting agricultural supply chains and resulting in losses estimated at US\$800 million.

UN estimates suggest over 1.8 million people remain affected, with 1.2 million requiring humanitarian assistance. The International Organization for Migration reported that 107,000 homes were destroyed and 272,000 people displaced.



For all the horrific numbers, community resilience was remarkable in equal measure.

In the immediate aftermath, when infrastructure was damaged, access routes were severed, and formal systems were struggling to scale up, community-led initiatives moved quickly to fill gaps. One such effort was the Maharagama Community Kitchen, where volunteer Sakuna Gamage was part of what became one of the most effective volunteer-led response platforms during the early phase of the disaster.

What began as a localised effort rapidly expanded its scope and geography. “While the initial and immediate focus was on providing home-cooked meals to those displaced, the efforts soon mushroomed into essential supplies needed for short-term survival, including medicine, drinking water, sanitary items, and more,” he said.

This expansion unfolded amid severe logistical and operational constraints. “The initial phase was marked by severe communication breakdowns,” Gamage told me. “For nearly a week, mobile networks, Internet access, and electricity were unreliable or completely unavailable due to

widespread infrastructure damage caused by heavy rains, cyclones, and flooding. This made co-ordination extremely difficult at a time when real-time information was critical.”

Meanwhile, accessing affected areas also proved to be a challenge. “Roads to hill-country districts such as Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, and Matale were badly damaged by landslides and floods, leaving many villages cut off for weeks. In places like Meemure in the Kandy district, ground access was completely blocked, forcing volunteers to walk 10–15 kilometres to deliver supplies,” he said.

Among the most visible consequences of these disruptions were food shortages. During the first two weeks of December, I noticed even coastal areas that were not in the line of the cyclone’s eye ran out of basic vegetables. Each time we interviewed a vendor, we were told the routes were blocked. “At the height of the crisis, even basic vegetables and dry rations were unavailable in many regions,” Gamage confirmed.

The problems that stemmed from the destruction were not limited to food and agriculture. Response structures as

In Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, flood-affected residents hurry through water from the overflowing Kelani River

Photo: UNICEF | InceptChange

a whole reflected this. Trinushka Perera, a private-sector representative to the Sri Lanka Preparedness Partnership (SLPP), was directly involved in supporting the official 117 Disaster Management hotline during the response. As call volumes surged beyond capacity, volunteers from the private sector, civil society and NGO networks were mobilised to support the DMC.

“We were called in to support the Disaster Management Centre because the volume of calls had become extremely high and the system needed to function 24/7 with additional manpower,” Perera said.

“For over ten days, we supported the hotline on a shift basis, working in three rotations around the clock. Every shift also had DMC officials rostered alongside us,” she explained. “They are the professionals who manage this system long-term, and they guided us closely in the early days.”

The hotline served as the first point of contact for the public: every call had to be categorised. Perera explained that the hotline handled various types of calls, including emergency search and rescue requests, information about road closures, evacuation guidance, and requests for relief support such as food and shelter.

And it was overwhelmed quickly: “At first, it was quite chaotic. The calls were nonstop and highly repetitive. But after a short period, we got into a rhythm and understood the system,” she explained.

Yet even as co-ordination improved, information flow remained uneven.

Breaking the silo

“Information was sometimes reactive rather than proactive. Often, we would receive multiple calls from the same area before we were officially informed about a developing situation,” Perera added.

This gap between warning, perception, and action surfaced repeatedly, not just within formal systems, but at the household level. Journalist Thulasi Muttulingam, based in Jaffna, described the storm as a rupture in assumed norms.

“Nobody was prepared because a cyclone with this level of unprecedented devastation is a first for Sri Lanka,” she said. The cyclone is being labelled by some as a once-in-200-year event: “We are still looking for answers. Was it climate change? Unsustainable urban development without heed to water runways? Could the government have been better prepared? Could we, as communities?”

Some criticism of the Sri Lankan Government has focused on how it failed to act on early warnings that had already been provided. However, the scale of destruction Ditwah produced was not something any warning could have prepared anyone for.

This is where the community response has been key for Sri Lanka. “In terms of resilience and how communities came together to support each other, that was a thing of beauty to watch unfold too,” Muttulingam said, adding: “People moved far and wide to help out other communities in need. Within affected communities, those less affected worked round the clock to get help to the worst affected areas.”

This collective response emerged even as individuals faced deeply personal dilemmas. Muttulingam lives alone with seven rescue dogs.

“I live in a flood-prone area where water generally comes up to the knee. But I had no intention of evacuating,



leaving my dogs behind. As I watched the news and realised we were facing floods at a scale never seen before, I consoled myself that I'd move to the upstairs loft with the dogs. Then I saw people being evacuated off the rooftops of multistorey buildings and began to panic,” she told me.

Communication failures compounded that anxiety: “The Internet was not working. Electricity was on and off. So were telecom lines. How was I going to call for help if none of the communication channels were working?”

Her experience mirrored a broader pattern described by Perera from the hotline: “Despite multiple warnings and evacuation alerts, a significant number of people delayed action because they believed, ‘This has never happened to us before, so it won't happen now either.’ As a result, many calls came in when families were already trapped, sometimes 30 to 40 people at once, including children and the elderly, stranded on rooftops or small concrete slabs.

“In those situations, especially late at night, immediate rescue was not always possible. Boats cannot operate beyond certain water levels or current speeds. And as the person answering the phone, it is incredibly difficult to manage a call when you know help cannot realistically arrive right away.

“Another major challenge was the volume of rescue calls during night shifts. Many people did not expect water levels to rise so dramatically overnight, which meant the highest-risk situations often emerged between 2100 hrs and 0600 hrs.”

As the response shifted from rescue to relief, frustrations intensified. “People were calling about delays in food, clothing, and supplies. Each co-ordinator was responsible for hundreds or thousands of affected people.”

And volunteers bore the emotional weight of that annoyance. “Many callers were understandably distressed, but that frustration was often directed at the volunteers. We received political blame, verbal abuse, and harsh language – even though the person on the line was usually just a volunteer.”

That emotional labour, she noted, is rarely acknowledged: “Managing your own emotions in that environment is extremely difficult. You have to remain calm, professional, and empathetic, even when being unfairly attacked.”

For Gamage, the crisis exposed systemic vulnerabilities that went beyond any single institution: “The crisis exposed deep structural weaknesses in food distribution, disaster preparedness, and rural connectivity. These require long-term policy attention.

“Government preparedness was clearly inadequate during the early stages of the disaster. Decision-making

Sri Lankan Army transporting people affected by Cyclone Ditwah on November 19, 2025, in Gampaha District

Photo: UNICEF | InceptChange



processes were slow, and existing mechanisms were unable to respond swiftly to the scale and complexity of the crisis.”

Muttulingam echoed that assessment, while drawing a distinction between preparedness and response: “The government hadn’t taken enough precautions. They hadn’t realised what they were about to be hit with. However, once the crisis struck, they made every effort to respond effectively. Huge respect to our service personnel, some of whom sacrificed their lives in very dangerous rescue efforts,” she said.

Perera framed the lesson more bluntly: “No hotline or rescue team can fully compensate if people ignore evacuation advice until it is too late. Early action by citizens is one of the most powerful tools in disaster risk reduction.”

Both things, it seems, can be true at once.

“India had warned our government weeks ahead that an especially severe cyclone was about to hit. We are used to bad cyclones in the October-December monsoon, but this one was a whole other level,” Muttulingam said. Despite this, she does admit even she did not think she was headed towards murky waters: “Had I been told to evacuate the week prior, I’d have thought that did not apply to me too. We all think someone else is going to get the worst of it.”

Cyclonic Storm Ditwah exposed both the strength and the limits of Sri Lanka’s disaster landscape. Communities adapted quickly, improvised solutions and carried each other through the worst days. At the same time, the burden placed on that resilience was immense, in part because warnings were not fully translated into action, and systems struggled to anticipate scale. The resilience was real and remarkable,

but it should not have had to carry so much weight.

The devastation in Sri Lanka is no outlier; if anything, it is the new, harrowing normal. Tropical cyclones and monsoons clubbed together to batter a good portion of Asia last year, killing more than a thousand and displacing hundreds more. As climate risks accelerate and compound, disasters of this scale are no longer exceptional events to be analysed in hindsight, but recurring stress tests of systems that are already stretched thin.

What stood out in Sri Lanka was not preparedness, but people. Communities stepped in where systems faltered, adapting in real time, filling gaps, and holding one another up in the absence of certainty. That resilience, however, cannot be treated as a substitute for planning.

As humanitarian funding sinks to record lows and crises compete for attention, the temptation to move on is real. Sri Lanka’s experience is a reminder that this is precisely the moment when disengagement carries the highest cost.

As I said at the beginning of this article, the grand idea was to end the year on a high note – to feel that the work we do is leading somewhere and to engage with like-minded practitioners working on solutions that cause the right kind of disruptions. What Cyclonic Storm Ditwah left us with instead was a reality check: the work does not pause, the show must go on, and natural hazards spare no one. **C•R|**

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On November 30, 2025, in the Mawanella-Uthuwankanda area, Sri Lanka, major roads remained blocked by dangerous landslides

Photo: UNICEF | InceptChange