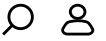


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Yorkshire professors working to prevent tsunami tragedy

By
LINDSAY PANTRY
[Email](#)

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WHEN the Indian ocean drew back hundreds of metres from the shoreline on the morning of December 26, 2004, leaving thousands of fish behind, people rushed to collect them, unaware that the tsunami wave that would kill more than 200,000 people would soon be upon them.

Ten years on, two Yorkshire academics have played a key role in developing a new warning system which has the potential to save thousands of lives should a tsunami hit again.

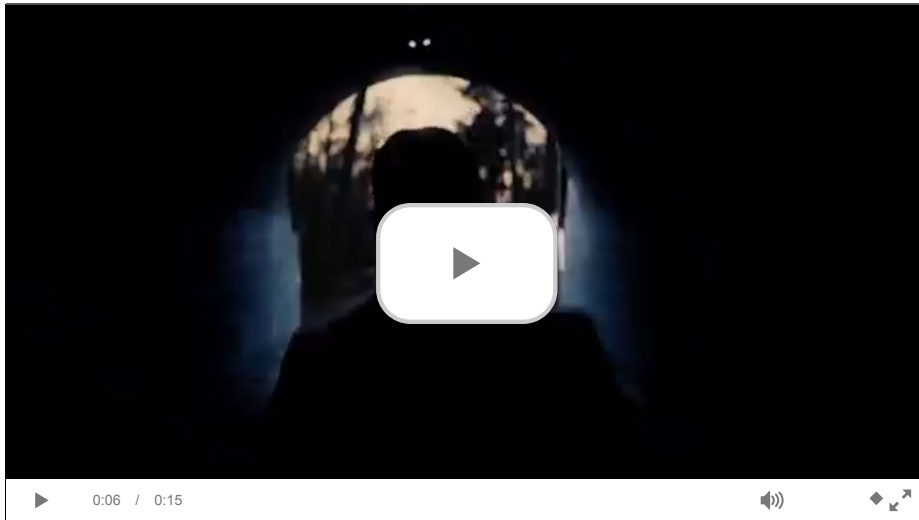
Professors Dilanthi Amaratunga and Richard Haigh, co-directors of the University of Huddersfield's Global Disaster Resilience Centre, are part of an international team working on UNESCO's Intergovernmental Co-ordination Group for the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System.

Their work has taken them to Sri Lanka and Indonesia more than 40 times as part of major efforts to ensure that communities are better equipped to cope with a future catastrophe and recover more quickly from its impact.

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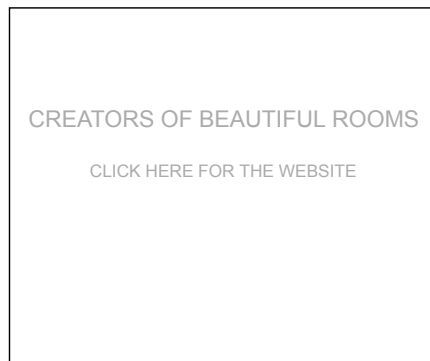


Professor Amaratunga was coming to the end of a visit to family in her home country of Sri Lanka on Boxing Day 2004

“Small boys were running towards us saying the sea was coming to the land,” she said.

It was a tsunami wave, caused by a 9.1 magnitude earthquake off the coast of Sumatra. It took more than 30,000 lives in Sri Lanka alone, and displaced 1.5million people.

In Sri Lanka, Professor Amaratunga said, the tsunami’s impact was exacerbated by the civil war that was then raging in the country.



International aid programmes made a significant impact in the south, but the east was less accessible because of the conflict and scars from tsunami were still apparent there many years later.

Accessibility in the aftermath of disaster and communication beforehand are key parts of the warning and mitigation system that is being developed. Early warning technology, which was not in place in 2004, is now up and running, but the challenge remains to ensure that the people on the ground are reachable.

“They have 25 seismographic stations relaying information to 26 national tsunami information centres, as well as six deep-ocean buoys to assess and report of an impending tsunami,” Prof Haigh said.

“But the real challenge is getting the information into something that is usable by the Government to get out to communities. We look at ‘the last mile’ - if you can’t get the information to the people on the ground that it’s pointless having it.

“The real danger is, even with a warning system, that people begin to lose interest because there has not been a big event in a long time.”

Alerts are made available to the public through text messages, radio and television broadcasts, and sirens.

While the professors’ skills may seem suited to solving issues thousands of miles from home, there is scope to use them



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here in West Yorkshire, to tackle issues like flooding.

“The scope of our work isn’t limited to a particular hazard or disaster, our mantra is about how you cope with these expected or unexpected events,” Prof Haigh added.

Last month the professors visited Indonesia and Sri Lanka for tenth anniversary events which reflected on what had been achieved since 2004, and looked at the challenges ahead.



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“One of the major problems was that there was absolutely no warning to the countries on the coastline, even though there were several hours after the earthquake before the tsunami hit,” Prof Haigh said.

“There were signs if people had know what to look for, like when the ocean drew back. But instead of evacuating they collected the fish that had been left behind by the withdrawal of the wave. They had no idea what was happening.”

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