

Huddersfield's GDRC leads major international symposium

Huddersfield's Global Disaster Resilience Centre leads major international symposium on risk communication, preparedness, and early response to combat epidemics, pandemics, and other hazards.

Over 100 policy makers and scientists gathered in Colombo, Sri Lanka, to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and other communicable diseases, such as dengue and malaria. The event was also used to look at wider preparedness for multi-hazard scenarios, integrating both biological and natural hazards.

The International Symposium for Research and Innovations on dengue amidst the pandemic was held at Water's Edge in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on the 16 – 17 March 2022.



The symposium was organised by the [Global Disaster Resilience Centre \(GDRC\)](#) at the University of Huddersfield, UK in collaboration with the Ministry of Health Sri Lanka, including their National Dengue Control Unit, Anti Malaria Campaign, and Disaster Preparedness & Response Division. Local Universities, the University of Colombo, and the University of Moratuwa, as well as the National Science Foundation of Sri Lanka, co-organised the event. The organisers have been working together over the last two years as part of a Huddersfield led project consortium of the

UKRI/EPSRC funded research collaboration entitled 'Improving COVID-19 and pandemic preparedness and response through the downstream of multi-hazard early warning systems'.

Like most other countries, Sri Lanka has been tackling several waves of COVID-19 infections over the last two years. Dengue infections have also been on the rise in Sri Lanka, with the incidence of dengue increasing 20-fold from the year 2000 to 2012 and a further 3-fold from 2012 to 2019.

Informing future pandemic preparedness

Co-Chair of the event, [Professor Dilanthi Amaratunga](#) from the Global Disaster Resilience Centre at the University of Huddersfield, noted that, "There is a need for better stakeholder participation and to share research evidence, best practices, and innovations, and develop competencies among all health professionals and other key stakeholders. The Symposium is helping support the translation of research evidence into practice that can enhance preparedness and response for multi-hazard scenarios." Professor Amaratunga also added, "the outcomes of the Symposium will inform future pandemic preparedness planning in Sri Lanka through their Ministry of Health and other health actors".



Professor Dilanthi Amaratunga

The gathered health professionals and experts in disaster risk reduction discussed how recent events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have highlighted the importance of improving the performance of health systems in combination with other disaster preparedness and response mechanisms. A combination of keynote addresses, panel discussions and scientific sessions looked at how hazards are spread throughout communities, societies, and economies in complex ways, which contribute to systemic and cascading risks. They also considered how the impact of COVID-19 has also

had a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged groups, including people in poverty and those with underlying health conditions.

Professor Virginia Murray, Head of Global Disaster Risk Reduction at the UK Health Security Agency, delivered a keynote address on Health Emergency and Disaster Risk Management.

Improving multi-stakeholder approaches

The symposium was an opportunity to identify ways to increase pandemic preparedness, as well as to improve multi-stakeholder approaches to collectively examine impacts, co-ordinate health, social, and economic measures, share practices and to learn lessons. The book is available to download here: <https://www.pandemic-mhew.org/index.php/dissemination>

Professor Richard Haigh from the Global Disaster Resilience Centre at the University of Huddersfield moderated the interdisciplinary panel discussion that was held on Tackling the complexity and interdependences of systemic disaster risk. This provided an opportunity to rethink the intersectoral nature of disaster risk management and consider how multiple and cascading hazard threats can be better addressed. This panel discussion provided a rich discussion around the challenges associated with an emerging and increasingly complex disaster risk landscape. It also explored some of the experiences and approaches that can be used to strengthen disaster risk governance and tackle this complexity.



Professor Richard Haigh

The programme also included a series of pre- and post-symposium public engagement events in Jaffna and Rathnapura, Sri Lanka, incorporating citizens perspective on pandemic preparedness and response amidst a multi-hazard situation in Sri Lanka. These events helped to disseminate essential knowledge, best practices, and skills for preventing COVID-19 and current hazards; and to share community experience and practices on pandemic preparedness and response. Participants for the two public engagement events included:

Community leaders, volunteers from Sarvodaya, Red cross, village committees, Mother support groups and leaders of faith-based organisations.

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