

Chester World Development Forum



Tuesday 8 September 2020:

Zoom session hosted by Gill Miller, chaired by Terry Green

'Twin peril of Disaster among Pandemics: - Reflections from the Global South'

*This is the note of the talk given at the Forum's Zoom session, prior to their Business Agenda. The talk was given by **Namrata Bhattacharya-Mis**, Lecturer in Human Geography & International Development at the University of Chester, and based on her current research interests*

Academic background and research interests:

- Namrata is the Programme Leader of International Development Studies and senior lecturer in Geography and International Development. Her doctoral research involved looking into different aspects of disaster management in built environments with special reference to vulnerability of business properties in response to flood risk in the UK.
- She has two Masters Degrees in Geography and Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation
- She has worked in collaboration with the Environment Agency and World Bank in disaster related projects in the UK and various non-governmental organisations abroad
- She collaborates for research with various academic institutions notably the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, Nottingham Ningbo University, China, University of South Carolina, UTS, Australia and GFZ, Potsdam – to name but a few.
- Her research interests in understanding the vulnerabilities of the dynamic interplay between different hydrological processes and socio-economic systems

Latest Research

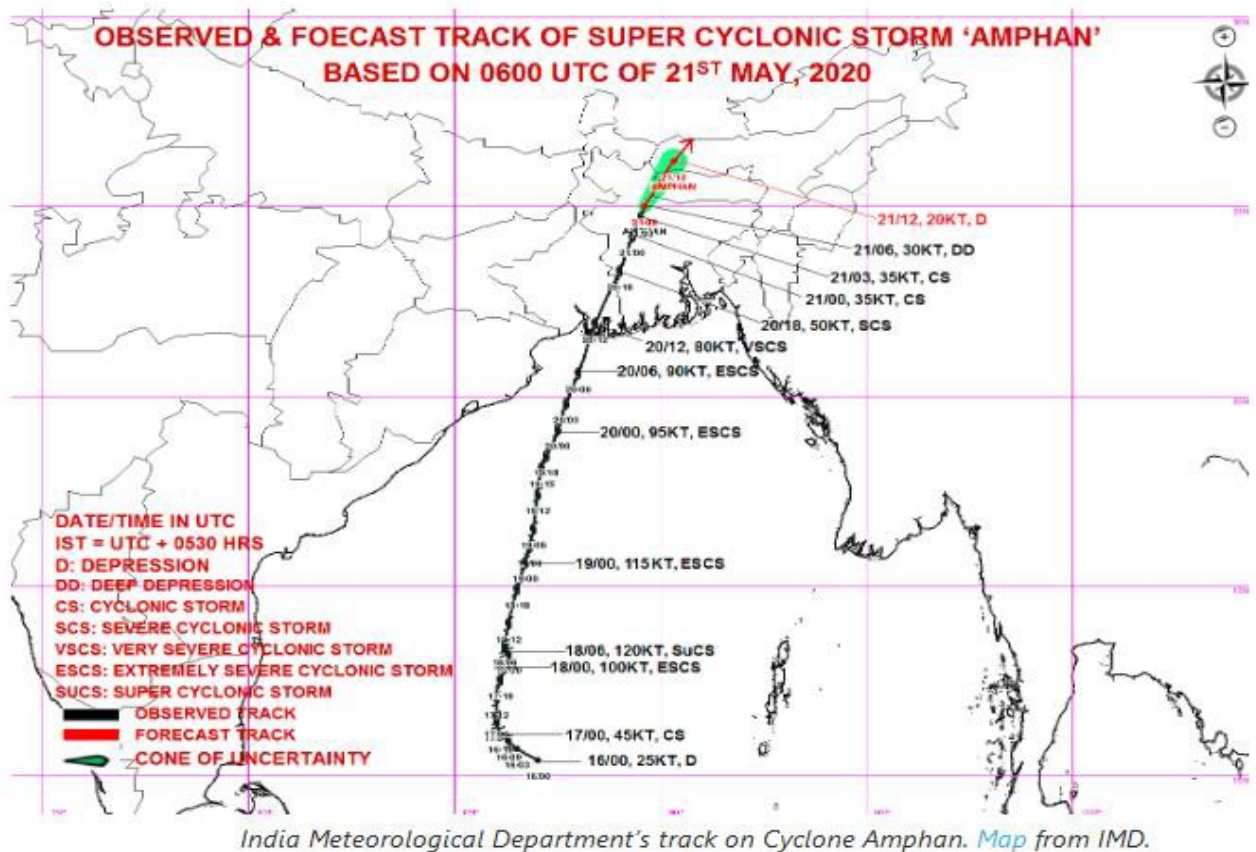
Namrata's research this summer was based on India and Bangladesh following the super cyclone which hit the area on May 20th 2020. **There are not many results as yet but Namrata presented some reflections on the research so far and wished to share with us some understanding of the complex difficulties.**

The impact of the cyclone

- The cyclone hit with wind speeds of up to 185 km/hour (approx 115 miles/hour)
- All the disaster shelters were full due to Covid-19 spread
- 2.5 million people in Bangladesh only evacuated in shelters, India evacuated 650,000 people
- Shortage of drinking water, sanitation facilities, no social distancing is maintained/impossible due to pressure of people needed evacuation
- Communication lines lock down – no electricity
- Electricity and water supply shut off for up to 5-7days in parts of Kolkata and similar situation in Bangladesh

Indirect impacts included:

- Mental trauma
- Health impact in the long run
- Food shortages and chronic poverty – crops destroyed and lockdown meant people couldn't earn any money. Covid increased food poverty
- Water contamination – dysentery and other water borne diseases
- Communicable and non-communicable disease spreading (other than Covid)
- Economic recovery
- Displacement of people – large numbers returned from working elsewhere



The countries knew that the cyclone was coming but had not expected it to be so severe and Covid clearly compounded the problems as the high Covid areas coincided with the path of the cyclone. Ecologically fragile environments were worst hit by the cyclone. Triggered by multiple aspects the infection rate certainly increased following the cyclone. The situation was very fragile and it was this that motivated Namrata to carry out this research into the twin perils of a pandemic with the deep rooted inequalities of medical care and the havoc wreaked by a super cyclone.

India and Bangladesh await surge in coronavirus infections after 'super cyclone'

Cyclone Amphan has torn through Bangladesh and east India, triggering "a bigger disaster than Covid-19"

By Susannah Savage
21 May 2020 - 6:24pm



A woman clears her house that was demolished by the cyclone Amphan in Satkhira, Bangladesh | CREDIT: Reuters

Project Planning

The research began looking at how the countries dealt with the 2 opposite physical requirements ie the need to support one another after the cyclone with the need for social distancing. How could they make themselves more resilient?

Reflections so far:

On preparedness

- over half of the population only had up to 4 days to prepare for the cyclone
- challenges in mobilising resources to address the twin perils, challenges such as lack of funds/financial strains (funds distributed to support the health services because of Covid but funds also needed to recover from the devastating effects of the cyclone), corruption, no mechanism to oversee the distribution of funds leading to unfairness and poor implementation of government policy.

On recovery

- With Covid putting huge strain on finances, the challenge of shifting resources further restricted faster recovery.

- The connection between supply chain disruption, risk communication and safety advisories were the key questions before the government, people and management authorities during the recovery phase ie how to cope with recovery in such complex situations

On supply chain disruption

- Poor access to food – lack of fresh food in the markets
- Significant price rises
- Market closed due to submergence
- Damaged roads, transport, lost connections (damaged embankments etc.)
- Impact of Covid – in some areas markets were closed for up to 2 weeks due to Covid outbreak
- People were more prepared with stored food due to lockdown measures

On containment of the spread of Covid

- Survival was most important – difficult to contain in shelters
- Social distancing not possible
- Priority had to be on saving lives from the cyclone
- Importance of helping neighbour survive cyclone

Lessons learnt from recent experiences of complex disasters

From the UNDRR (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction) – “As extreme events do not wait for pandemics..... certain recommendations on acting early and continuing the actions post recovery stage can be helpful”

- Be transparent about restrictions posed and how they can be adapted for early action
- Early evaluation of available resource such as trained personnel and equipment can be useful for support activation. For example, it was not possible to find personnel to mend electricity cables because the workers were simply not working
- Different stakeholder concerns should be taken into account for recovery activities and threshold for actions to avoid Covid-risks should be incorporated in the strategy
- Take good account of logistic and operational challenges as soon as warning is received and cooperate with other departments for better organization of the crisis recovery
- Compound risks such as this are not uncommon
- Policy action not only at preparedness stage but also at the recovery stage is important for reducing exposed population
- Cascading vulnerabilities should be reduced by venturing more into the structural causes of inequalities
- “Build back better” needs a better narrative: a more risk informed one and it has to be for everyone

Questions

Whose responsibility is it to organise recovery? Disaster management boards– but difficult to organise because different priorities from State and Federal governments.

The role of UN and other agencies? Country has to request help. Some funds given but the more pressing issue at present is Covid.

Relationships between Hindu and Muslims? Have been tensions but Covid is the main stigma now.

The situation is desperate because so many people have lost their jobs. Covid has pushed development back by 10 years.

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Terry Green thanked Namrata for her very interesting and informative talk and expressed gratitude for CWDF’s invaluable relationship with the university.