"I learned to juggle two mindsets: to reduce the risks of disasters and to react to their impact," shares former UN Volunteer

In Colombo, Sri Lanka, UN Volunteer Alex Suwitra acted to anchor the engagements of UN agencies, international partners, NGOs and government and safeguard the immediate and longer term disaster response to the needs of communities in distress.

The unique geography of the country that makes it more susceptible to the effects of climate change creates a very contrasting situation – floods and landslides in the southwest parts and drought in Sri Lanka’s north and east regions.

In his role of Emergency Response Coordination Assistant, Alex supported the UN and Sri Lanka’s Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) in the implementation of their disaster mitigation plans and the coordination of collective humanitarian response.

With an educational background in the field of international studies, Alex acted as a bridging-unit to facilitate the delivery of aid and as the liaison between assisting parties to make sure development and humanitarian
efforts are systematic.

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The nature of disaster response is that things happen very quickly, and I’ve learned that you need to be ready to adapt to rapidly changing situations. On the other hand, disaster risk reduction considerations are also vital before a disaster strikes. I learned to juggle the two mindsets, to reduce the risks of disasters and to react to their impact. --Alex Suwitra, UN Volunteer Emergency Response Coordination Assistant in Sri Lanka

A significant part of coordination work is information sharing, helping humanitarian organizations to be prepared to respond to a disaster or reduce its risks. Alex gathered information from various sources – the Disaster Management Centre of Sri Lanka, national and international media, reports and agency publications – to analyze natural and human-induced risks and expected impacts and document the success of interventions related to disaster management and mitigation.

Information from humanitarian agencies is managed through a '3W' approach, or 'Who does What and Where' – a visual and very easy-to-use reporting system.

Alex provided information in real-time regarding ongoing humanitarian operations and location covered by aid-workers and thus helps organizations effectively coordinate their humanitarian responses. The system is the Office of the Resident Coordinator’s main tool used to record the operational presence of agencies and strengthen response coordination.

Alex also passed some of his experience to young volunteer members of UNV Sri Lanka’s V-Force, by helping to facilitate the Active Citizens for DRR programme with fellow UN Volunteers and the British Council.

The programme explored how sustainable development, including the Sustainable Development Goals, apply to the environment from the
perspective of disaster risk reduction. The participants were put through the stages in a disaster response roleplay simulation which tested their leadership and communications skills.

Moratuwa, a coastal town in the Southwest of Sri Lanka, was severely affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. ©UN Photo/Evan Schneider, 2004

As per Alex's own account, his volunteer experience was enriching as he received the opportunity to expand his knowledge on international humanitarian coordination architecture and the UN's humanitarian system.

Through the support of colleagues and partners in the UN, other humanitarian organizations and the government, Alex witnessed how strong partnerships can result in the achievement of development goals. He was able to grow as a professional in the field of humanitarian response, while also developing his leadership skills.

Since completing his assignment, Alex has returned to Australia to complete a postgraduate degree in the field of humanitarian coordination. He hopes to use the experience and knowledge gained from this assignment during his studies, and to continue his career in the humanitarian and development space.
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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure, SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals