

Common Cause

For you, with you

Mumbaikars set up a forum to deal with disasters

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Mumbaikars have at last decided to stand up and lend a helping hand to themselves. The idea is not to be caught unaware next time a tragedy strikes the metropolis. In a first-of-its-kind move in disaster management, the city has gifted itself mumbaiVOICES, an initiative that aims to capture the voices of Mumbai's survivors on 7/11 blasts in the hope that their own stories — of successes and limitations in the city's response to the disaster — will influence future policies and protocols. Through a website, SMSes and letters, citizens can now have their say in protecting their beloved city.

Conceptualised by Mum-baikars at home and abroad, mumbaiVOICES is a joint venture with many institutes like the National Knowledge Commission, All India Disaster Mitigation Institute, Department of Economics at Mumbai University, Janshetji Tata Centre for Disaster Management (Tata Institute of Social Sciences), Ambulance Access for All and Harvard Humanitarian Initiative committing to provide a platform to allow a people-centric, rigorous, in-depth analysis of the city's response to the tragedy of July 11, 2006.

Public health professionals, physicians and disaster management professionals have volunteered their time to prepare comprehensive templates that will help respondents provide information relevant to the city's coping strategies. The website, www.mumbaivoices.com, will allow citizens to view posted responses or choose from a series of respondent categories to post their own suggestions. Mumbaikars without access to the Internet can send in their responses to a PO Box. Respondents can also send their feedback via SMSes to 9820200180.

The research team will provide, over time, a comprehensive analysis of the collected responses to qualitatively influence the city's plans for risk reduction and disaster response. All studies will be made public and reports will be presented to the state and Central governments to bolster their disaster management plans.

The initiative has also launched a campaign titled, 'Were You There?' and 'How did you react'. Done mostly in the vernacular language, it will encourage illiterates who cannot send their responses to mumbaivoices.com, mail their replies to the PO box, or send SMS to the central databank. The collaborating research institutions will call the respondents and follow up with a screening questionnaire.

Between the website, the PO box and the text messages, the team hopes to capture data sufficient to influence the city's urban policy-making processes. Says Shaffi Mather, director, Ambulance Access for All: "We hope to build on this platform to provide a permanent and timely resource for citizens for times to come. We thank, in anticipation, the citizens of Mumbai who will take time out to share their experiences, stories of grief and resilience, successes and disappointments so that many across the globe can learn from them."