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Media release

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Tsunami sea level rise alert

Billions of dollars worth of aid to rebuild infrastructure devastated by the Boxing Day tsunami could be wasted unless the impacts of rising sea levels due to climate change are taken into account, according to a new paper by the Australia Institute.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has estimated that by the end of the century sea levels will rise by up to 0.9 metres and much of the low-lying land in the north-eastern Indian Ocean will be subject to inundation.

Globally, 100 million people live within about one metre of the present day sea level, so the potential human impacts of sea level rise are enormous.

“The recent tsunami in the Indian Ocean has cleared much of the infrastructure from regions threatened by future sea level rise”, said Institute Executive Director Dr Clive Hamilton.

“The temptation will be to rebuild on the same sites in the hope that a warning system will prevent another disaster if a tsunami of a similar magnitude occurs in the same region within the next few decades.

“But it’s vital that adequate zones of protection are provided between any new structures and the shoreline.”

Some countries, and some Australian states, are already preparing for sea level rise with policies to establish set-backs and no-build zones.

“Concerns about their survival expressed by small island states assume a new urgency after the tsunami, so it’s gratifying to see the Australian Government making long-term commitments to assisting reconstruction of devastated coastal regions”, said Dr Hamilton.

“The tragic events of the past week offer the opportunity for long stretches of the Indian Ocean coastline to be redeveloped in a way that affords appropriate protection from rising sea levels expected over the coming century.”

The paper may be read under What’s New on the Australia Institute’s website.

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