

Like many disaster risk reduction-based programs, SlopeWatch was born out of necessity. Hit by an early morning landslide in 2008 that destroyed 14 houses and claimed five lives, the residents of Bukit Antarabangsa—a populated suburb just 20 minutes away from downtown Kuala Lumpur—faced a dilemma. After the end of the search-and-rescue operation, the compensation awarded to victims, and the commencement of rehabilitation works for the failed slope, the residents still suffered lingering fear and anxiety that their communities on the same mountain range could be the next victim of another landslide.

Thus SlopeWatch, a community-based organization comprising members from a coalition of eight communities, was born. Faced with the specter of evacuated residents who never returned, the sight of ‘For Sale’ signs appearing on housing lots, sudden difficulties in securing housing loans, bad press and an unenviable reputation as a ‘dangerous place to live’, the residents of Bukit Antarabangsa decided to work with the local authorities and technical agencies by taking a more proactive approach to slope safety.

Realizing that landslides often show signs before failing, SlopeWatch worked with Public Works Department and the local authority to create a training kit to teach residents how to detect signs of landslides and how to report them to the local authorities before disasters strike. In essence it taught people to become the “eyes and ears” for the local authorities who couldn’t be everywhere all the time to catch the signs.

Over time the SlopeWatch program became an outreach and monitoring program that targeted people from all walks of life within the Klang Valley—from residents in at-risk communities to schoolchildren to the general public. SlopeWatch was featured on television talk shows, special segments, in newspaper articles, talks at schools, and property fairs.

Working mostly on volunteer basis with a modest yearly stipend from the local authority, it engages in several activities comprising outreach and awareness, capacity building to residents, case management of reports by the residents, and advocacy to strengthen the institutional and policy framework of the slope industry.

The results and impact of SlopeWatch’s efforts have been significant. Since its inception, there has been no major landslide incidents in Bukit Antarabangsa while other parts of Kuala Lumpur, where slope monitoring has not been institutionalized, continue to suffer landslides. SlopeWatch’s biggest contribution has been to mainstream slope safety as part of sustainable urban development.