



The role of disaster experience in disaster response

Prior experience of disasters can mean that the impact causes less overall damage to people: “Dangers that would cause less experienced individuals and groups considerable trauma, tend to be taken in stride. Humans seem to prefer familiar dangers to those unknown”. The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami has shown how a disaster culture taught some among the Moken coastal communities in Myanmar and Thailand, as well as the residents of Simeulue island, Indonesia, to run to higher ground when the sea drastically recedes, thus preventing loss of life in their communities. The traditionally nomadic Moken people, who still rely heavily on the sea, inhabit hundreds of islands in Myanmar and Thailand. Following the Tsunami in 2004 in the region, relatively fewer people died among some of their coastal settlements. Witness accounts indicate that their disproportionate survival is likely to be attributed to collective knowledge from previous tsunamis, passed down through oral traditions, which encouraged them to move to higher ground. There are around 78, 000 residents on Simeulue Island, Indonesia, but only seven people died as a result of the tsunami in 2004. Research among survivors again shows that it was oral history of previous tsunami experiences that empowered local people to evacuate to higher ground. One personal account described how a man’s grandmother had died in a previous tsunami in 1907. He attributed his survival to his grandfather and others, who had shared the unfolding of events in 1907, which meant he understood the early warning signs and could, in turn, warn others. There was a similar finding in Chile, following the 2010 earthquake, when people evacuated to higher ground. However, visitors to the coast were less likely to survive the tsunami because “they were not part of the culture that had enabled the coastal communities to read and respond to their environment”.

Note: See source document for full reference.

Applicable to:

Stakeholders: [Individual/collective memory](#), [Local knowledge](#)

Disaster Phases: [Preparedness](#), [Response](#)

Types of Actors Concerned: [Non-active citizens](#), [Active citizens](#)

Hazards: [Natural hazards](#)

Recommendations:

- [Use local knowledge, collective memory and shared cultural values to improve disaster preparedness, response and recovery](#)

Source

[Deliverable D7.3 "Report on cultural factors and citizen empowerment" \(page 58\)](#)

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