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PRESS RELEASE

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Traditional knowledge can save lives when disaster strikes.

When the Indian Ocean Tsunami hit in December 2004, over 250,000 people were killed throughout Asia, but only seven people died out of a population of approximately 83,000 on Simeulue Island, just 40km from the epicenter of the earthquake. Nearly the entire population of the island survived thanks to the people's inherited knowledge of tsunamis handed down from each generation to the next.

Many other communities in the world are using their ancestors' knowledge to cope with and survive disasters. This knowledge has often been ignored or simply not recognized by disaster risk reduction experts due to a lack of documentation.

A sample of the enormous amount of knowledge that mostly remains in the hands of communities has been published in a good practices document called: "Indigenous knowledge for disaster risk reduction," that has been produced by the UNISDR Asia Pacific office, in cooperation with Kyoto University, with the support of the Europe Aid Cooperation Office (AIDCO) of the European Union. The content of the publication was endorsed by experts in an International Conference on Indigenous Knowledge for Disaster Risk Reduction organized in July 2008 in Kyoto, Japan.

The publication highlights 18 examples of good practices which have helped communities cope with disasters, in China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam and the Solomon Islands.

"The publication brings out the much needed documentary proof of the effectiveness of local coping practices," says Salvano Briceño, director of the ISDR in Geneva. "We need now to share it with the most vulnerable communities and use it in policy making."

"This is just the beginning of what can emerge from the undocumented but hugely valuable reserves of knowledge on DRR that resides within local communities" says Anshu Sharma of SEEDS, India.

"The publication is easily accessible for practitioners working in the field and it is very timely considering the increased risks faced by indigenous populations from environmental hazards. It successfully highlights the value of indigenous knowledge and its use for disaster risk reduction" says Jessica Mercer, from England.

The publication was launched today in Bangkok on the occasion of the "First AIDCO Consultation Meeting - Building Resilience to Tsunamis in the Indian Ocean" funded by EC/AIDCO.

Other events in the coming months will highlight the importance of utilizing indigenous knowledge to better cope with disasters. A regional conference on Indigenous Knowledge for Disaster Risk Reduction will be organized by the UNISDR, Kyoto University and UNESCO in Bangkok by the end of 2008 to promote the integration of indigenous knowledge into policy planning and the education sector. This issue will be also further discussed during the Third Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (2-4 December 2008, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia).

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