Preface

This book grew out of the idea that national researchers in Asia should be provided with an opportunity to critically examine the emergency relief humanitarian response and reconstruction efforts in their respective countries to the great Asian tsunami of 2004. A series of natural disasters have struck several countries in Asia since then – most recently an earthquake in Padang in West Sumatra in Indonesia (October 2009) as this preface is being written – highlighting the importance of developing effective strategies to cope with such disasters.

Following the tsunami, a huge, complex and region-wide aid program quickly got underway. The effort involved thousands of agencies from Asian national governments, foreign governments, multilateral donor agencies and non-governmental organizations. Before long, a vast number of reports, surveys, and evaluations were prepared. But inevitably, much of this material was prepared by international aid workers with limited local experience in the field in Asia. It seemed appropriate to invite local research workers to write about the response to the disaster from a national perspective so that international views could be supplemented by views from the region.

The resulting book draws on several aspects of the contemporary literature in the international development debate. This book is a product of joint efforts. The individual country studies were authored primarily by national researchers. The Indonesia chapter was co-authored by Suahasil Nazara and Budy P. Resosudarmo, the Sri Lanka study by Dushni Weerakoon, Sisira Jayasuriya, Nisha Arunatilake and Paul Steele, and the Thailand chapter by Bhanupong Nidhiprabha.

The issues in the book need to be considered with reference to the literature on disasters – and especially the extensive discussion that has been taking place in recent years about responses to disasters in developing countries. The Asian tsunami itself dramatically highlighted the terrible risks that megadisasters in poor countries pose to human security in the region, especially the security of people who live in poor and vulnerable communities. The disaster led to a sharp increase in awareness across Asia of the need to strengthen disaster risk reduction policies. It should be mentioned here at the outset that in carrying out research for this study we have benefited from many reports from international agencies

and researchers including the hundreds of reports of project work implemented in the field by numerous donor agencies. Many of these reports are excellent. They provide detailed accounts of the work done by thousands of workers in the field. In what follows, we have sought to draw on them and complement their analyses and findings.

The book is also a study of aid delivery. It thus draws on the international literature about aid and development. The response to the tsunami – by the Asian regional governments and communities as well as the international community – was a very large and unanticipated aid effort. Indeed, as a collective endeavour, the indications are that a national and international aid program amounting in total to perhaps US\$17 billion or more was organized to support relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction projects following the tsunami. It was widely observed that this represented one of the largest disaster response programs ever undertaken in developing countries. Many issues of aid policy and delivery arose as thousands of individual aid activities were implemented in the hope of ensuring that the US\$17 billion would be used effectively.

We should emphasize that this study has not been prepared with the aim of finding fault with the response to the 2004 tsunami. Doubtless some mistakes were made, and doubtless not every single one of the very large number of aid projects undertaken under very difficult circumstances in the field was successful. Rather, our aim has been to review the overall response following the 2004 tsunami disaster and to consider what broad lessons for policy might be drawn from the experience.

One of our main conclusions is that in the circumstances, the initial emergency relief effort can be considered a major achievement, due in large measure to the often spontaneous responses of local communities and measures taken by national governments. We also believe that the major assistance program supported by both Asian national governments and the international community was very successful in achieving the goal of providing widespread help following the 2004 tsunami. But another of our conclusions is that donor governments and aid agencies do not coordinate their activities well – with each other or with the national government – when disasters occur; in this respect, the international community should aim to do better. And perhaps the most important conclusion we reach is that much greater priority needs to be given to pre-disaster programs in developing countries in Asia; both regional governments and the international community need to give much higher priority to strengthening *local preparedness* across the region so that when disasters strike, local communities are themselves able to respond quickly to minimize the harm that is done.

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