Introduction

On December 26 2004, an earthquake measuring 9.3 on the Richter Scale triggered a powerful tsunami along coastal regions of countries bordering the Indian Ocean. This tsunami resulted in some 300,000 deaths and affected at least five million people in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Maldives, India, Thailand, Seychelles, and Myanmar. Thailand was one of the hardest hit countries. The tsunami resulted in some 5,395 deaths and affected over 60,000 Thai residents. When such catastrophic events strike, the common assumption is that they create substantial levels of posttraumatic pathology and render affected communities totally reliant on external aid. However, such assumptions may not be representative of all possible outcomes for people and communities. There exists a growing body of research that suggests that not only can communities adapt to and cope with the consequences of challenging, traumatic events using their own resources, they may also experience enduring psychological and social growth from their encounter with adversity.

While adaptive and growth outcomes have been found repeatedly in research involving Western populations, this chapter examines whether similar phenomena exist in a non-Western population. The scale of the 26th December tsunami exceeded by a considerable margin the capacity of the formal response to meet all the needs of those affected. It thus created a context in which it was possible to examine whether, and to what extent, these outcomes were realised in a sample of Thai communities. Drawing upon research conducted during the months immediately following the 2004 tsunami, this chapter first discusses how the sense of collective efficacy that people develop as a result of their cooperative and collaborative endeavours with others in their community influences their resilience in the face of the demands encountered in the aftermath of the December 26th 2004 tsunami (Paton e tal., 2007; Tang, 2007). The chapter then discusses the degree to which the tsunami acted as a catalyst for social and psychological growth.