

Forging U.S.-Japan Civil Society Cooperation Out of the 3/11 Disaster

James Gannon - Japan Center for International Exchange

As a people, Americans have never felt closer to Japan than while watching the tragic events of March 11 unfold online and on their television screens. The images of devastation after the tsunami and the suspense surrounding the lingering nuclear crisis provoked an extraordinary outpouring of support from people from all walks of life who wanted to help Japan in some way. The massive and well-coordinated response of the U.S. government, particularly the military's Operation Tomodachi, has rightly received considerable praise. Yet, while it has attracted less attention, the nongovernmental response has been similarly remarkable, both in terms of its scope and for what it says about how much closer our societies have grown in recent years.

In the United States, thousands of schools, community groups, and regular citizens found creative ways to demonstrate their sense of solidarity with the Japanese people. The country's large humanitarian relief organizations also sprang into action. Plus, there was a spontaneous groundswell of charitable giving for the disaster response. While there has not yet been any reliable tally of donations by U.S. organizations and individuals, it is likely that the total has exceeded half a billion dollars.

All together, this adds up to the most extensive attempt ever by American civil society organizations to work with and support Japanese groups. This extraordinary collective effort makes it worthwhile to review the lessons that American and Japanese groups have learned working together, and it points at things that can be done to improve their cooperation on future disasters.

The Importance of Civil Society is Growing

Civil society is playing an increasingly important role in disaster responses around the world, and not just by implementing programs on the ground. Its capacity to mobilize massive resources first became obvious with the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, when nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) raised \$5 billion worldwide. This time, the Internet, YouTube, and social media turbocharged the philanthropic response, encouraging people around the world to identify with the victims and empowering them to act immediately on their charitable impulses, giving rise to a rapid outpouring of concern and contributions that would have been unthinkable in the pre-Internet era.

Still, it bears noting that, compared with other parts of the world,¹ the nonprofit sector in Japan remains underdeveloped, hampering efforts to encourage collaboration between Japanese and overseas civil society organizations. Nonetheless, just as civil society gained impetus in Japan when many organizations sprouted up to respond to the 1995 Kobe earthquake, the 2011 disaster may go down in history as an equally significant turning point. This time, Japan's humanitarian relief organizations immediately swung into action and Japanese government agencies simply took these groups' involvement in the disaster response as a given instead of perceiving it as a challenge to their authority. In one notable move, the Diet even voted to make it easier for nonprofits to accept tax deductible contributions. And now that humanitarian relief organizations are starting to disengage

and return to their core missions of overseas emergency response, a second wave of small community-based nonprofits is being established to meet the more complex needs of the recovery.

In the long run, these developments are likely to lead to a stronger base for civil society in Japan, creating in the process more opportunities for collaboration among Japanese and American civil society organizations, particularly among humanitarian relief organizations.

But Japan Is Not Haiti....

Not everything has gone smoothly, however. International humanitarian relief organizations have become accustomed to responding to disasters in developing countries, such as Haiti, but the Tohoku disaster revealed that they still are grappling with the challenge of how to react to massive disasters in highly developed countries. A handful of U.S. NGOs immediately reached out to Japanese partners that they had worked with before and a few others took a wait-and-see approach. But many departed for Japan with virtually no knowledge of the local situation and well-intentioned but questionable strategies that implicitly assumed they could be more effective than Japanese organizations with local roots. These groups quickly floundered, in contrast to the ones that partnered with Japanese organizations and limited themselves to a supporting role.

In fact, the response to 3/11 showed just how much more complicated it can be for overseas organizations to provide disaster relief in rich countries than in poor countries. In developing countries, governments tend to be more accustomed to dealing with overseas aid organizations. Preexisting coordination mechanisms that are used for consultations among foreign aid groups can be quickly activated for the disaster, and there are typically established relationships between the major foreign humanitarian relief organizations and domestic NGOs. However, foreign organizations responding to the disaster in the Tohoku region had to think more seriously about whether they were meeting real needs or just displacing local groups that could be more effective. They have also had to work within established systems that are more resistant to external intervention. This revealed that the usual plans that U.S. humanitarian relief organizations take off the shelf when responding to emergencies in developing countries need to be rethought for contingencies in developed countries.

....And Tohoku Is Not Tokyo

Once again, the disaster demonstrated the importance of paying attention to regional and local differences. A natural first step for many U.S. organizations trying to provide disaster relief was to consult with some of Japan's better known internationally-oriented organizations—organizations that tended to be based in Tokyo. But what many came to realize only later is that the distance between Tokyo and Tohoku is more than geographic. The Tohoku region has its own unique local culture, with many people there demonstrating a certain polite wariness toward outsiders. The way that society functions in Tohoku is significantly different from Tokyo, and it has a very weak nonprofit sector, even by Japan's already low standards.

It should come as no surprise that, even early in the relief stage, a sense of resentment began to build up under the surface between organizations that considered themselves “true” Tohoku groups and those perceived as “big city” outsiders from Tokyo and elsewhere, which were collecting the lion’s share of funding and recognition. This has obligated the “Tokyo groups” to operate with an even higher degree of sensitivity to local conditions than they anticipated, and this has been doubly true for foreign organizations trying to assist the region.

This diversity extends to other aspects of the disaster, too, further complicating an already complex situation. The tsunami devastated a swath of coastline nearly 400 miles in length, and the impact has differed markedly from prefecture to prefecture and town to town. Some seaside hamlets were shielded from the full force of the tsunami wave, while the waters travelled miles inland in nearby areas. Even inside of hard hit towns, there are stark differences between the neighborhoods that were severely damaged and those on higher ground that were untouched by the wave but are suffering due to the impact on the broader community and economy. Meanwhile, the nuclear meltdown in Fukushima Prefecture has created an additional, entirely different crisis, emptying towns that visibly seemed to be unaffected by the disaster. These factors have combined to make it even more challenging to assess how to best utilize overseas assistance, especially in the recovery stage, presenting overseas donors and responders with the challenge of figuring out how to incorporate the hopes and desires of local residents whom they can usually only contact in a superficial manner.

Preexisting Relationships Are Critical

The attempts of U.S. organizations to navigate the complexities of the 3/11 disaster also highlight the importance of preexisting relationships between local and overseas organizations. A crisis is not the right time to learn about one another, but that is largely what happened for American and Japanese groups. Operating in a situation in which they did not have the expertise and local knowledge needed to be effective, U.S. NGOs and funders had to move quickly to link up with Japanese groups, whether as local partners in implementation or, more commonly, as funding recipients. Fortunately, there were a handful of established relationships that a few U.S. organizations could draw upon. For example, the American NGO coalition InterAction and its Japanese equivalent, JANIC, had worked together before; Peace Winds Japan had many connections in the United States; the United Way had forged a relationship with the Central Community Chest of Japan; and, of course, the Red Cross system bridged both countries.

In most cases, though, U.S. and Japanese organizations had to take a leap of faith in working with one another. This meant that, when faced with practices that were not intuitive in the U.S. system, American groups had no choice but to trust their Japanese counterparts, even though their relationships had been too brief to allow this trust to grow naturally. The end result has been much more work and worrying on both sides than perhaps is warranted. Another result has been that U.S. donations, which account for an outsized portion of all funds going to Japanese nonprofits, have tended to flow to a small number of Tokyo-based organizations, especially in the immediate relief stage. This has exacerbated imbalances between a handful of well known Japanese groups and other capable ones with less charismatic leadership, as well as between the large Tokyo-based organizations and smaller, local groups.

Capacity, Capacity, Capacity....

One of the biggest challenges for those trying to support the disaster response has been the limited capacity of Japan's nonprofit sector. Japanese nonprofits tend to have a weak financial base and a small number of staff, who typically are highly dedicated but overstretched. This has given rise to a mismatch in expectations between Japanese groups on the ground and American funders. Things that U.S. organizations take for granted—such as sufficient staff time to draft strategic plans and grant proposals, familiarity with accounting and budgets, and having the foreign language skills to create documents in English—often require a special effort for Japan's smaller nonprofits, many of which were newly created in response to the disaster.

However, Japanese nonprofits are not the only ones with capacity limitations. Three types of U.S. organizations have played roles in fundraising for the disaster: humanitarian relief organizations; organizations dedicated to U.S.-Japan relations, such as Japan-America societies; and ones that specialize in facilitating philanthropy. However, each of these groups lacks critical expertise in certain areas. The humanitarian relief organizations typically know little about Japan's nonprofit sector, most U.S.-Japan organizations have no experience in professional grant-making or disaster responses, and the philanthropic facilitation organizations have done little work in Japan. These gaps only started to be overcome half a year into the disaster response.

Coordination is Key

Coordination among nonprofit organizations—both on the funding and implementation sides—is critical in any humanitarian emergency and has proven to be especially important in the 3/11 disaster, where there are so many new actors involved. One reason it is needed is because the challenges that have to be overcome for a sustainable recovery are so deeply interconnected. For example, mental health problems, including suicide, have become a growing issue in Tohoku communities, but these are inevitably linked to the issue of unemployment. Meanwhile, it is difficult to restore jobs by reopening small stores and restaurants while aid groups are handing out food and supplies for free. This has made the success of organizations working on mental health issues dependent on the track record of groups engaged in economic revitalization, economic revitalization initiatives are dependent on food distribution strategies, and so on.

Another reason that coordination is crucial is that the nature of this disaster has led to imbalances in the response. Access to the disaster zone has varied greatly, particularly in the early days when a large city such as Sendai could be easily reached, yet remote areas where roads, trains, and ports were decimated were largely cut off from the outside world. There has also been a large variation in the extent of damage, both to the physical infrastructure and to human resources, leading, for instance, to gaps between towns where the local leadership survived intact and places where key local government officials and societal leaders were killed. This has made it tempting for NGOs from outside the region to set up in easily accessible locations or in places where strong local leadership gave their programs a greater chance of succeeding, making it important for them to discuss strategies for avoiding overconcentrations of activities.

While there have been various attempts to coordinate responses among domestic Japanese organizations, especially among the professional humanitarian relief organizations during the initial rescue and relief stages, there is still limited coordination between Japanese and overseas organizations, whether among groups working on particular issue areas or among those active in specific localities. This has continued to feed a degree of confusion over which organizations are doing what, and it has further fed imbalances in the response.

Strengthening U.S.-Japan Civil Society Cooperation

Stepping back to take a long-term perspective, it is clear that the 3/11 disaster marks a potentially transformative moment for Japanese civil society, and it is likely to open up new opportunities for cooperation among Japanese and American NGOs. The disaster has funneled an unprecedented amount of resources into Japanese nonprofits involved in the response, it seems to be inspiring a boom in the creation of new nonprofits, and it has heightened public awareness of their contributions.

Nonetheless, the capacity problems that have long bedeviled Japan's nonprofit sector leave two unanswered questions. One question is whether, considering the longstanding resistance in Japan to allowing donations to cover salaries and overhead, the Japanese humanitarian relief organizations that were flooded with money in the aftermath of the disaster will end up with stronger institutional bases once they withdraw from Tohoku or shrink back to the size they were beforehand. This has critical implications for their ability to collaborate effectively with their more fortunate American counterparts in future disaster responses elsewhere in Asia.

A second question involves the smaller, community-based nonprofits that are springing up around the Tohoku region and that should play a central role in the recovery stage. While they are likely to develop sufficient capacity to contribute to the recovery, it is unclear whether they will be able to handle the communications that are needed to maintain smooth relations with U.S. supporters and to prevent a sense of disenchantment with Japanese nonprofits in general. For example, will they be able to maintain basic functions such as providing adequate grant reports and demonstrating their programs' results in a way that is understandable to people outside of Japan?

Still, when all is said and done, it is likely that the new ties forged between American and Japanese organizations will provide a stronger foundation for joint work in the field of disaster relief, as well as on other issues. Making certain this happens, though, will require concerted efforts by nonprofit leaders on both sides of the Pacific to expand their coordination on the 3/11 response, strengthen the capacity of Japan's nonprofits, and overcome the gaps in mutual expectations. This means that there are a number of specific steps that should be considered:

1) Strengthen Japan's intermediary organizations

One step is for U.S. and Japanese funders to give a greater role to intermediary organizations in Japan in the process of facilitating and directing funding. It was challenging for U.S. organizations collecting donations for the disaster to identify who to fund in the relief stage, but this has become even more difficult in the recovery stage, which necessarily involves a wider range of new, smaller community-based organizations. American funders have been resistant to utilizing Japanese intermediaries, partly because intermediaries need to use a portion of the funds to cover the costs they accrue administering donations. However, channeling funds through intermediary organizations—both national outfits

and ones that operate on the local level such as community chests—is the only practical way to ensure that funding decisions are being based on sufficient knowledge of the local situation and that recovery projects will undergo sufficient monitoring and reporting. The capacity of Japan’s intermediary organizations also has to be upgraded for this purpose, but efforts to do this should eventually result in a stronger nonprofit sector.

2) Establish support mechanisms to bridge U.S. and Japanese responses to 3/11

A second immediate step that would greatly enhance U.S.-Japan cooperation is the creation of a facilitation mechanism by one NGO or a consortium of them to support some of the back office processes for U.S.-Japan funding and civil society cooperation. For example, this could include a network of translators who could turn out English language versions of funding proposals and grant reports. It also might involve support for proposal writing and budgeting for new Japanese nonprofits that have never done this before, especially for an overseas audience. In addition, it should include some sort of mapping and information exchange to track which Japanese nonprofits and U.S. funders are active in various geographic and issue areas.

3) Create an international coordination mechanism for disaster relief NGOs in Asia

Looking ahead to future disasters, the time is right to build a network of NGOs from different countries that are can contribute to disaster relief in Asia, with American and Japanese NGOs at the core. Humanitarian relief organizations in the United States share information through InterAction, and Japanese organizations have begun to do this through JANIC and Japan Platform, which links NGOs with businesses and the government. However, there is not yet any mechanism to link humanitarian relief organizations on the broader regional level. There have been a few initial moves to explore an “Asia Pacific Platform,” and the time is right to make this a reality. Such an initiative would lay the groundwork for a better coordinated response to future emergencies by familiarizing humanitarian relief organizations with one another, mapping out their capabilities for various contingencies, and establishing a consultative mechanism that would be fully activated for responses in the region.

Notably, these initiatives all focus on the nongovernmental side, acknowledging the growing role that civil society plays in disaster responses. Eventually, though, it will also be useful to explore ways of enabling governments, businesses, and NGOs in Japan, the United States and elsewhere around the region to share information and develop ties that can be activated in a crisis. For the time being, though, these three steps—strengthening intermediaries, facilitating communications between Japanese and American NGOs, and creating an Asia-wide consultative mechanism—should go a long way in helping to nurture stronger and more cooperative relationships between Japanese and U.S. NGOs, both in responding to the current tragedy as well as to future disasters.

Chapter Endnotes

¹ In Japan, there is a distinction between NGOs, which focus on overseas issues, and NPOs or nonprofit organizations, which are domestically oriented, but the terms “NGOs” and “nonprofit organizations” are used interchangeably in this essay following general American usage.