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## The Growing Role of NGOs in Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Assistance in East Asia

*YUKIE OSA*

OVER THE PAST three decades, East Asia has been the most disaster-prone region in the world. More than 55 percent of all people affected by disasters worldwide during the last 30 years lived in East Asia, and the region accounted for almost 42 percent of total damages and nearly 25 percent of disaster-related fatalities during that period. In order to meet the urgent humanitarian needs that arise out of these disasters, civil society organizations (CSOs), especially nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have begun playing a major role in the region in providing disaster relief. Yet they still face many challenges. To better understand them, this chapter reviews the theoretical framework of disaster relief and humanitarian assistance and then assesses the contributions of civil society in Asia by mapping out the nongovernmental initiatives that are taking place throughout the region in this field.

### NATURAL DISASTERS IN ASIA

The compound effects of climate change, environmental and ecological imbalance, growing populations and increasing population density, rapid urbanization, deforestation, and desertification are often cited as factors behind the increasing occurrence of natural disasters all over the world. In Asia in particular, increasing urbanization, the shift of populations into low-lying coastal areas, and environmental degradation seem to be making natural and manmade disasters more frequent and severe. Table 1

illustrates the heavy toll that natural disasters have taken on East Asia. These disasters clearly have had a serious impact on human security—as well as national security—in the region. In addition, they have posed a major obstacle to sustainable development in Asia’s poorer countries as tremendous efforts to spur economic growth come to naught in the end.

**Table 1. Summary of natural disasters, 1982–2011**

	Number of disasters	Deaths	People affected (millions)	Damage (US\$ billions)
Worldwide	9,622	2,354,460	5,755	2,148
East Asia (% of world)	1,985 (20.6%)	578,633 (24.6%)	3,176 (55.2%)	893 (41.6%)

SOURCE: Data from EMDAT International Disaster Database, Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, Université Catholique de Louvain, Brussels, Belgium, [www.emdat.be](http://www.emdat.be).

Efforts to strengthen disaster prevention, disaster risk management, disaster awareness, and local capacity building are vitally important in order to cope with these difficulties, but at the same time relief and reconstruction activities are especially crucial. Without effective and timely relief activities, the insecurity of individuals and communities at a time of need will be heightened, which can eventually lead to increased instability in the region. Also, without adequate outside help in the relief stage, disaster-torn societies are unlikely to recover fully and will remain vulnerable to future disasters.

NGOs have become more significant actors than ever before in disaster relief in the region. For example, after the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, nearly half of the US\$14 billion pledged in disaster funding involved programs implemented by NGOs.<sup>1</sup> There are several reasons for this. One practical reason is that, in many cases, the magnitude and frequency of disasters overwhelm governments’ capabilities. Also, there are a number of donor governments and UN agencies—such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—that regularly respond to disasters, but they need operational implementing partners. Moreover, it is no exaggeration to say that NGOs have unique capacities and functions that governments, international organizations, and businesses lack: they can mobilize volunteers and funds in ways that governments cannot, they help connect various actors to one another, and they provide specialized services that communities need to rebuild.

This is also the case for humanitarian assistance for civilians caught in conflicts and other victims of manmade disasters. Thus, discussing nongovernmental contributions to regional security in the field of disaster relief and humanitarian assistance has particular relevance for Asia.

## DISASTER RELIEF AND HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

It is useful to review precisely what disaster relief and humanitarian assistance entail. Disaster relief refers to relief operations in the case of a disaster, namely a calamitous event resulting in loss of life, great human suffering and distress, and large-scale material damage. Meanwhile humanitarian assistance involves relief operations in a time of emergency that are based upon widely accepted humanitarian principles. Both can be thought of as a single notion or set of activities. However, the two concepts have developed in a different manner, with different histories, and sometimes with different actors.

For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) play leading roles in the field of disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. However, their mandates are different and complementary. On the one hand, the ICRC was established in 1863 as an “impartial, neutral, and independent organization” with an exclusively humanitarian mission “to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other violent situations.” On the other hand, the IFRC, which was founded in 1919 and now comprises 187 national member Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, carries out relief operations to assist victims of natural disasters, “providing assistance without discrimination as to nationality, race, religious belief, class, or political opinion.” In short, the IFRC is in charge of natural disaster relief while the ICRC is in charge of humanitarian assistance for the victims of armed conflicts.

The concept of disaster relief is readily understood and quickly grasped, but the notion of humanitarian assistance was born from the ICRC and the Geneva Conventions. In its original sense, humanitarian assistance entails a relief operation based upon widely accepted humanitarian principles—humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence—which are the keys to securing access to all victims regardless of the race, creed, or nationality of the recipients. Furthermore, in many instances, donors that support disaster relief and humanitarian assistance tend to differ. The guidelines

that are accepted as covering disaster relief and humanitarian assistance also differ, largely because the neutrality of military actors involved in the relief activities tends to vary based upon their missions. Acknowledging this, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) established “Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defense Assets in Disaster Relief” (Oslo Guidelines, 1994) for disaster relief, whereas a separate set of guidelines are utilized for humanitarian assistance in complex emergencies.<sup>2</sup>

Keeping these crucial differences in mind, it still makes sense to deal with disaster relief and humanitarian assistance as one set of activities because it is the same organizations that are active on both disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, and in practical terms, the work that they do increasingly overlaps. For example, in recent years, many natural disasters have occurred in war-torn societies, which has caused or worsened complex emergency situations. This was the case in Aceh, Indonesia, at the time of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, as well as in recent disasters in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Haiti.

Notably, NGOs are playing major roles in both disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. However, they also face special challenges that get to the heart of what comprises humanitarian assistance. After the end of the Cold War, especially after the 9/11 attacks, when the “war on terror” was launched, a variety of non-humanitarian actors started to become involved in disaster relief operations—such as military forces (often belligerent parties), political parties, other politically motivated actors, and commercial actors (i.e., private companies)—claiming that what they are doing is “humanitarian assistance.” In particular, this has been the case in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the politicization, militarization, and privatization of humanitarian assistance have taken place. At the same time, the emerging trend of linking development aid and humanitarian assistance to broader strategic objectives, as seen in US rhetoric about the three Ds of defense, diplomacy, and development, has been accelerating the “instrumentalization” of aid, threatening the so-called “humanitarian space.”<sup>3</sup>

However, in its original sense, humanitarian assistance denotes relief operations based upon the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence, all of which form the basis of the “Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief” (Code of Conduct). The code was developed and agreed upon in 1994 by the ICRC, IFRC, and six large disaster response agencies<sup>4</sup> in Kigali, Rwanda, a city that was being ravaged by genocide and an unprecedented refugee crisis. The Code of Conduct,

like most professional codes, is voluntary. It is applicable to any NGO, be it national or international, small or large. It lays down the 10 principles to which all NGOs should adhere in their disaster response activities and goes on to describe the relationships that agencies working in disasters should seek with donor governments, host governments, and the UN system. Eighteen years have passed since the Code of Conduct was created in 1994. Still today, the code remains relevant and the number of signatory NGOs from around the world has increased to 492.<sup>5</sup>

In keeping with the code's principles, humanitarian action can only serve the interests of the recipients, not political motives, religious interests, or other agendas. For NGOs that value these principles, the recent trend of humanitarian action by non-humanitarian actors who do not abide by humanitarian rules threatens the very basis of humanitarian assistance. This has the potential to give rise to a gap in perceptions between those who view NGO efforts on disaster relief and humanitarian assistance solely through the lens of regional security on the one hand and NGO leaders who understand just how important it is from a long-term perspective to place the utmost priority on operating in accordance with humanitarian principles on the other.

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### **The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief**

- 1) The humanitarian imperative comes first.
- 2) Aid is given regardless of the race, creed, or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone.
- 3) Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint.
- 4) We shall endeavor not to act as instruments of government foreign policy.
- 5) We shall respect culture and custom.
- 6) We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities.
- 7) Ways shall be found to involve program beneficiaries in the management of relief aid.
- 8) Relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster as well as meeting basic needs.
- 9) We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources.
- 10) In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognize disaster victims as dignified human beings, not hopeless objects.

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SOURCE: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

## NGO CONTRIBUTIONS TO REGIONAL SECURITY

The fundamental principles of humanitarian assistance presented in the Code of Conduct serve two essential purposes.<sup>6</sup> First, the principles serve as operational tools that help in obtaining both the consent of belligerents and the trust of recipient communities. Second, they also embody humanitarian action's single-minded purpose of alleviating suffering unconditionally and without any ulterior motive. In this sense, humanitarian NGOs strictly speaking will not operate for the purpose of contributing to regional security, or at least contributing on a hard security issue. In other words, even if NGOs' disaster relief and humanitarian assistance operations have positive or negative impacts on the hard security issues, it is not through their deliberate actions but rather as unintended acts or byproducts of those activities.

However, if we conceive of regional security from a broader human security perspective, NGOs can be said to be making significant contributions to regional security. In fact, there are a number of positive and negative impacts or byproducts produced by NGOs in the course of providing disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, some of which are outlined here.

### *Positive Impacts*

- As service providers that deliver food, non-food items, and water, and that provide medical and psycho-social services, shelter, and protection, NGOs can save lives and livelihoods, limit the physical and psychological damage of catastrophic events, and make a sustainable recovery more likely.
- NGOs can bring transparency and can propose constructive, alternative policies to the government.
- NGOs can channel information from disaster zones to the rest of the world when governments are not doing this sufficiently.
- Although no single organization is able to cover all of the needs of the affected communities, the NGO community as a whole comprises a variety of sectors and geographical focus areas, and it thus can meet the needs of society and contribute to regional stability.
- In many cases, NGOs are the first to arrive in the affected communities, filling crucial gaps until the assistance from UN agencies or governments arrives. In some cases, NGOs can secure access to regions where, due to political situations, UN agencies or governments cannot.

- If aid is given properly and effectively to the affected populations in accordance with the Code of Conduct, it will contribute to the stability of the disaster-affected country and region.
- NGOs are sometimes trusted more than the government by minority or marginalized populations, and thus in some instances they can assess and help fulfill the needs of these populations more effectively than governments, enhancing human security and preventing societal grievances from being further exacerbated.
- Aid can build local capacity to respond to disasters by employing local staff (not just as interpreters or drivers), purchasing local materials, and trading with local companies.
- Aid can strengthen local civil society if international NGOs work through local NGOs as partners (not as subcontractors) in planning and implementation.

### *Negative Impacts*

- Even when aid is given in conformity with the Code of Conduct, if it is not well coordinated among agencies, it creates serious gaps between social groups or target communities, which can result in political and social instability.
- If the aid is not given in accordance with humanitarian principles, it will create distrust of international society and humanitarian agencies on the part of both the host government and recipient communities.
- Without sufficient coordination, an influx of NGOs can cause confusion and overwhelm government agencies and local mechanisms for dealing with disasters, sometimes making the situation worse.
- If the agencies import foreign goods without proper planning, the aid can damage the local economy and markets.
- If aid agencies hire armed guards to protect their goods from theft and their workers from harm, they will send the implicit message that security and safety are derived from weapons.
- Since NGOs are often single-issue organizations, they tend to focus exclusively on their own specialty (food, water and sanitation, health, HIV/AIDS, shelter, landmines, children, people with disabilities, etc.). This often results in a failure to consider the comprehensive human security of recipients in the field, while giving the wrong message or partial information to the donor community. This hinders donors from understanding or grasping the whole picture of a disaster.
- When government priorities differ from the humanitarian needs seen as most crucial by NGOs, tensions and conflicts between the government and certain organizations (or the entire aid community) can result.

- Donors to disaster relief organizations often want to earmark their contributions for particular activities related to specific disasters, and as the number of specialized disaster relief organizations grows, earmarked funding tends to become a larger proportion of overall funds available for the disaster response. However, the inflexibility of this funding can lead to overfunding for some localities and issue areas, diverting funding from other disasters and areas where it is also needed and, ultimately, affecting overall security.

While humanitarian action itself is not a political project directly contributing to regional security, its positive and negative impacts are sometimes too serious to ignore. Therefore, NGOs are obliged to know or at least to be conscious of the serious impact that their aid can have on regional security.

To what extent, however, are NGOs actually aware of this impact? One of the indicators of its awareness is whether they have signed the Code of Conduct. If an NGO is sensitive to the political connotations or political impact of their activities, it is highly likely that it is also very much aware of humanitarian principles and has committed itself to the Code of Conduct. In fact, 492 NGOs from around the world had signed the Code of Conduct as of August 2011. Among these, the number of signatory NGOs from Europe and North America amounted to more than 75 percent of the total. By contrast, just 42 signatory NGOs are from East Asia, comprising less than 9 percent of the total. Only 27 of them hail from Northeast Asia, of which 26 are Japanese NGOs while the other is from Hong Kong. None are from Mainland China, Taiwan, or South Korea.

This trend can be explained by several factors. First, the number of NGOs working in the field of disaster relief and humanitarian assistance in East Asia is small compared with those in Europe and North America. Second, Asian NGOs in the field of disaster relief and humanitarian assistance still have a short history, and the number of NGOs that are sensitive to or aware of the global standard of disaster relief is rather small. Third, it might be the case that most of the NGOs in the region see the Code of Conduct as being exclusively the initiative of Western societies and thus not applicable to them.

In any case, in most Asian countries, it can be said that disaster relief and humanitarian assistance NGOs are not highly aware of the principles of humanitarian assistance and therefore are not particularly sensitive to the relationship between their aid and its political impact. This is in clear contrast to the more established NGOs, mainly from Europe and North



America, whose experiences have made them determined to resist the politicization of humanitarian aid.

## WHO IS ACTIVE? NONGOVERNMENTAL INITIATIVES IN EAST ASIA

In recent years, NGOs around East Asia have become much more active in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, although their level of development and operational focus vary considerably from country to country.

### *Japan*

Although the 1960s and early 1970s saw the birth of some Japanese organizations that are still active today, the first generation of major humanitarian organizations were established in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when many NGOs were created in response to the outflow of refugees from Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. The initial activities of these NGOs focused on emergency assistance, delivering food and non-food items, but they later shifted and expanded to rehabilitation, development, and advocacy.

In the 1980s, public interest in international issues increased through media reports on events such as the famine in Africa. Meanwhile, interest in global environmental problems began to grow. As a result, a second generation of Japanese organizations emerged that focused on this new set of issues. At the same time, the number of Japanese branches or partner organizations of international NGOs also began to increase.

By the late 1980s, the need to share information and experience among NGOs grew as the number of organizations increased. To meet these needs, networking NGOs were established. In the 1990s, more NGOs were created than ever in response to a series of major crises: the 1991 Gulf War, the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in the Philippines, the genocide in Rwanda, and the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. In the 1990s, the work of NGOs started to receive greater public recognition. The active contribution of NGOs in the aftermath of the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake also contributed to greater public recognition. The favorable trend resulted in the groundbreaking passage of Japan's NPO Law (Law to Promote Specified Nonprofit Activities) in 1998, which made the incorporation and operation of nonprofit organizations much easier.

From the late 1980s through the 1990s, new schemes were launched that

allowed Japanese government agencies to provide funding for NGOs. In addition to subsidies for NGO projects started by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) in 1989, the Postal Savings for Global Voluntary Aid initiative was launched by the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (currently “Japan Post”) in 1991 in order to encourage citizens with postal savings accounts to donate a portion of their interest earnings to NGOs active in overseas development. During the latter half of the 1990s, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) also started to strengthen its cooperation with NGOs.

In 2000, a novel mechanism, the Japan Platform, was created to enable Japanese NGOs to enhance their ability and capacity to respond to major natural disasters and humanitarian crises overseas. Japan Platform conducts such aid through a multisectoral cooperative system where NGOs, the business community, and the government of Japan cooperate closely as equal partners and maximize their respective sectors’ characteristics and resources. As of November 1, 2011, Japan Platform had 35 NGOs as members, including 27 Japanese NGOs and 8 Japanese affiliates of international NGOs.<sup>7</sup> Among the international NGOs with which the latter 8 are affiliated, just 1 is from elsewhere in Asia (Good Neighbors Japan, which originated in Korea in 1991), while the others are from Western countries. Incidentally, while several member NGOs had already signed the Code of Conduct even before Japan Platform was created, all NGOs are now required to sign it when they become members of Japan Platform.

Japan Platform has played a major role in the response to the massive disaster that struck Japan on March 11, 2011—a 9.0 magnitude earthquake, a 30-meter high tsunami, and the subsequent nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. It quickly mobilized to provide emergency assistance for victims in the Tohoku region and, thanks in part to its established relations with donors in the business community, was able to raise over ¥6.8 billion (approximately US\$90 million) from businesses, individual donors, and many others in the initial year after the disaster. These funds have been distributed to member NGOs as well as nonmember NGOs to be utilized for emergency assistance. In addition, Japan Platform has played an important role in coordinating among various NGOs involved in relief operations through its headquarters in Tokyo as well as its field offices in Miyagi and Iwate Prefectures.

Other Japanese NGOs played important roles in the aftermath of the 3/11 triple disasters as well. Japan has long been one of the world’s top providers of official development assistance (ODA), but since the end of the US Occupation, it has rarely had the experience of receiving aid

itself. Therefore, despite having been a long-time supporter of the UN system for disaster relief, the Japanese government was not accustomed to being on the receiving end and was therefore not set up to utilize that assistance itself. Also, the ODA and overseas disaster relief expertise and knowledge that MOFA and JICA have accumulated over the years could not be effectively utilized in response to the 3/11 disaster because the government organization at the center of the 3/11 relief activities was, by necessity, the Cabinet Office. The role of MOFA was limited to serving as a liaison for the influx of international foreign aid. As a result, a huge gap emerged between Japanese disaster relief efforts and international standards, and it has been NGOs that have filled that gap by trying to apply such international guidelines and approaches as the so-called Sphere Standards (Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response), rights-based approaches, gender-sensitive disaster management approaches, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Japan Platform was also able to facilitate this process through its close relationship with UN agencies such as the UNHCR and WFP. Thus, Japanese NGOs played broader roles than simply providing services.

However, due to several challenges that the Japanese NGO community faces, this latent strength has not been fully utilized yet. First, Japan Platform members and many of the other major Japanese NGOs involved in post-3/11 disaster relief are primarily internationally focused organizations, so their missions, structures, and staffing are not geared toward a domestic emergency response. Furthermore, just like the UN representative offices in Japan, many of the Japanese affiliates of international NGOs were established simply for fund-raising purposes. Therefore, many of the internationally known NGOs with Japanese affiliates were not able to play the same role they have in response to other catastrophic natural disasters.

Second, since NGOs are not sufficiently acknowledged and accepted as major relief actors by those in the Cabinet Office, by municipal and local governments, or by beneficiaries, they have often been treated as “volunteers” rather than professional relief organizations. Precious time was lost on NGOs introducing themselves and on initial coordination.

The third challenge has been the nuclear issue. The number of NGOs working in Fukushima, where the nuclear meltdown occurred, is much smaller compared with those active in Miyagi and Iwate Prefectures. During the initial emergency phase, the small number of NGOs working in Fukushima Prefecture<sup>8</sup> concentrated on deliveries of emergency kits including food and other supplies, but uncertainties about how the

rebuilding and resettlement of local populations would proceed made it very difficult for them to set up programs geared toward the recovery stage. This is completely new and unknown territory for Japanese NGOs. The experience and lessons learned in Fukushima should be passed along and shared with the broader international aid community.

## *China*

The Chinese NGO sector has grown a great deal, with recent disasters—notably, the 2008 Sichuan and 2010 Yushu earthquakes—stimulating not only an increase in the number of NGOs and NGO programs dedicated to disaster relief but also an increase in NGO networks dedicated to supporting the organizations themselves. However, it can be pointed out that this trend is only true for disaster relief, not the field of humanitarian assistance. Therefore, it should be no surprise that there are no signatories to the Code of Conduct from Mainland China.

Many new NGOs emerged after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, and many humanitarian nonprofits active in the Sichuan region or at the national level redirected their efforts toward disaster relief. NGOs that became active in disaster relief after the Sichuan earthquake included groups such as the Development Organization of Rural Sichuan, Surmang Foundation, Sichuan Quake Relief, AIDS Prevention Education Project for Chinese Youth, Li Ka Shing Foundation, as well as the Red Cross Society of China.

Notably, many of the nonprofit initiatives in China related to disaster relief focus on NGO support and civil society capacity building as opposed to direct aid work within affected communities. They have been contributing to disaster relief by organizing efficient responses and disseminating information to build resilience to disasters.

In contrast to the mainland, Hong Kong boasts a vibrant nonprofit sector with a long and unique history. Philanthropy is deeply rooted in the city, drawing on both Chinese and British traditions, and as a result, the participation of Hong Kong NGOs in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance tends to be largely through philanthropic activities, often through business-related organizations and other groups that focus on a broad range of social issues. In fact, Hong Kong ranked highest in the world in terms of per capita donations in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.<sup>9</sup> The emphasis on philanthropic engagement rather than direct relief may help account for the fact that only one Hong Kong NGO, Oxfam Hong Kong, is a signatory to the Code of Conduct.

Most of the major NGOs in Hong Kong that focus specifically on overseas aid are branches of international NGOs, such as Save the Children Hong Kong and World Vision Hong Kong, although there are a handful of nonprofit initiatives with local roots—such as the Crossroads Foundation’s Global Hand program—that aim to coordinate relief activities by promoting Internet-based networking and providing online disaster relief tools.

### *Taiwan*

Meanwhile, many of the Taiwanese NGOs involved with disaster relief and humanitarian assistance began by providing aid in response to disasters at home, although some have expanded to overseas aid. In general, their assistance is not confined to Asia but goes to countries around the world. For example, a number of NGOs such as the Taiwan Red Cross Society and Taiwan Root Medical Peace Corps dispatched teams to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, and the Eden Social Welfare Foundation, a national organization for the disabled, has been providing aid to victims of disasters and conflicts in places such as El Salvador and Afghanistan. Historically, Taiwan’s efforts to provide disaster relief have, in many cases, been colored by cross-straits politics and Taipei’s desire to pursue “disaster diplomacy.” This has been particularly true of Taiwan’s aid for natural disasters in Mainland China.

### *Korea*

Unlike Chinese NGOs, Korean NGOs have been active in both disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. Korean NGOs began large-scale efforts at overseas relief work by fundraising and dispatching medical relief teams to Rwanda in response to the 1994 genocide. Since then, the number of NGOs working in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance has multiplied dramatically, going from virtual nonexistence to comprising a vibrant sector of Korean civil society today. Prominent service providers for disaster relief include NGOs such as Good Neighbors, Community Chest of Korea, Korea Food for the Hungry International, World Vision Korea, and Global Civic Sharing.

The efforts of Korea’s NGOs are visible around the globe, and the government allocates millions in US dollars to NGO efforts in addition to financing its own official aid. Korean nonprofit initiatives in disaster

relief are very internationally focused, covering crises in Latin America, Africa, and Europe, as well as in Asia. However, not a single organization has yet signed the Code of Conduct. This shows that the community is still young in terms of international standards of disaster relief and humanitarian assistance.

One notable incident involving a Korean humanitarian group highlights the grave risks that NGOs, even ones that are not dispatching professional aid workers, can face when their work becomes entangled with security issues. In July 2007, a group of 23 South Korean aid workers mainly from a Christian organization were kidnapped in Afghanistan. After 43 days of negotiations, 21 were released but 2 were killed. In the end, the South Korean government agreed to withdraw troops and missionaries from Afghanistan in exchange for the release of these captives.

### *Thailand*

Thai NGOs involved in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance tend to be domestic in scope. Nevertheless, four are signatories of the Code of Conduct, namely Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) Thailand, Catholic Office for Emergency Relief & Refugees, Human Development Forum Foundation, and Thailand Burma Border Consortium.<sup>10</sup>

Prior to the 2004 tsunami, emergency relief in Thailand tended to deal more with manmade disasters such as the influx of Cambodian refugees across the Thailand-Cambodia border and refugees from inside Myanmar (Burma) at the Thailand-Myanmar border. These initiatives have been conducted mainly by international NGOs that have affiliates operating in Thailand, although there are a number of groups formed by local citizens and refugees.

Many of the organizations active now in disaster relief were created after the 2004 tsunami. The general pattern has been that they begin with emergency disaster relief and then continue with longer-term efforts to rebuild the affected communities.<sup>11</sup> The majority of the nonprofit organizations that emerged in direct response to the tsunami tend to focus on specific local communities and regions rather than operating at the national level. Interestingly, however, many of the tsunami survivors who started these highly localized and community-based nonprofit initiatives were in fact foreign nationals.

## *Philippines*

The Philippines is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, and its civil society sector is one of the most vibrant in Asia. Therefore it is no surprise that there are many Filipino NGOs involved in responding to the frequent typhoons, floods, landslides, and other natural disasters that strike the country. They perform a wide range of functions, serving as grassroots-level service providers, raising funds, and disseminating community-based disaster management techniques. A number of organizations are also involved in humanitarian assistance in response to longstanding conflicts in Mindanao and elsewhere.

However, Filipino NGOs engaged in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance tend to be strictly domestic in focus. Very few indigenous organizations are active internationally, and those that respond to overseas disasters and crises typically have limited themselves to collecting and disbursing funds. Accordingly, just four Filipino organizations have signed the Code of Conduct, and two of them are affiliates of overseas NGOs.

## *Indonesia*

In the immediate aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami, a wide range of local and overseas NGOs sprang into action to provide disaster relief in Aceh and elsewhere. In fact, a year after the disaster, a study by Indonesia's Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency found that the staff of 430 local NGOs and 123 international NGOs were still active in the disaster zone.<sup>12</sup> The number of NGOs engaged in the disaster response can be seen as a product of both the magnitude of the disaster and the growing role of civil society organizations in Indonesia, as it has gone through a democratic transition in recent years. Since the 1997 financial crisis and the subsequent fall of the Soeharto regime, the number of NGOs has expanded rapidly, and they have become active on a wide range of issues.

Now, the spectrum of NGOs involved in disaster relief in Indonesia runs from large-scale service providers like the Indonesian Red Cross and Muhammadiyah (the 30-million-member-strong Muslim social welfare organization), to local-level organizations that work in different communities in Aceh and elsewhere to promote economic development and long-term recovery, build disaster resilience, and help people escape aid dependency. A number of organizations such as the Indonesian Society for Disaster Management are involved in government advocacy on disaster

preparedness, others promote information sharing on technical issues related to disaster risk reduction, and major policy institutes such as the Centre for Strategic and International Studies Jakarta sponsor policy dialogues on disaster-related issues.

Indonesian NGOs are still not highly active in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance overseas, although some that gained experience with the Aceh disaster have begun to operate small programs in other countries. One indigenous NGO—Amwin Al-Muayyad Windan—and two Indonesian affiliates of overseas NGOs—Al-Imdaad Foundation (Indonesia) and HOPE Worldwide Indonesia—are signatories to the Code of Conduct.

### *Malaysia*

As with Indonesia, civil society has been expanding rapidly in Malaysia as NGOs become more active in a broad range of fields. However, there are notable differences in terms of the activities of NGOs involved in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. Most of the Malaysian NGOs in the field have tended to focus almost solely on service provision. Also, many of the most prominent NGOs involved in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance have become engaged by responding to international crises rather than to domestic disasters. In many instances, these have been humanitarian crises that involved Muslim populations, for example the 1998–1999 Kosovo War, instability in Afghanistan from 2001 on, Iraq after the US invasion, floods in Pakistan, and deprivation in the Gaza Strip. While some Malaysian NGOs have been active in providing disaster relief in East Asia—for example, the Malaysian Red Crescent Society and Mercy Malaysia raised funds for the 2011 Japan earthquake response—the main focus continues to be on Muslim countries. Mercy Malaysia is the only Malaysian NGO to sign the Code of Conduct so far.

### *Singapore*

Singapore's civil society sector has long tended to focus more on service provision than advocacy or other overtly political activities due to the city-state's governance and unique history, and this seems to have carried over into Singaporean NGOs' involvement in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. As a result, there are a significant number of Singaporean NGOs



working in a sophisticated manner in responding to overseas crises, and their activities primarily consist of raising funds, helping to provide aid and rebuild facilities, and dispatching volunteer teams to aid with disaster relief and rebuilding. The majority of the NGOs engaged in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance focus their activities on South and East Asia, and large-scale initiatives have been launched to assist in Indonesia and Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami, in China after the Sichuan earthquake, in Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis, and in Japan after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. However, to date, no Singaporean NGOs have signed the Code of Conduct.

### *Myanmar*

One legacy of authoritarianism in Myanmar has been the stunted state of the country's civil society. Still, there are an estimated 214,000 community-based organizations in the country,<sup>13</sup> and many observers note a new vibrancy in the sector since 2008, when community groups were forced to respond to Cyclone Nargis. Some organizations in Myanmar are officially registered, and as of 2011, there were also some 65 overseas NGOs working in the country.<sup>14</sup> Historically, these organizations have had to comport themselves in such a way as to maintain government permission to conduct their activities. Meanwhile, the majority of organizations operate without official government approval, including a handful of humanitarian assistance organizations that move back and forth across the borders into ethnic areas that are outside of government control.

Many of the NGOs that now carry out disaster-related activities either were general social welfare organizations that became involved in disaster relief during Cyclone Nargis or were launched in response to the cyclone. The disaster relief operations of Myanmar's NGOs are almost without exception domestically oriented, although two NGOs are signatories to the Code of Conduct—one indigenous organization, the Metta Development Foundation, and one affiliate of an overseas NGO, ADRA Myanmar.

## REGIONAL INITIATIVES, NETWORKS, AND COOPERATION

A great deal of coordination and cooperation has been undertaken at the global level on issues related to disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. The Code of Conduct is just one example. In 1997, based upon

the principles of the Code of Conduct as well as international humanitarian, human rights, and refugee laws, the Sphere Project was launched by a group of humanitarian NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement to establish minimum standards for disaster relief. These were spelled out in a set of guidelines called the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, commonly referred to as the Sphere Handbook.

The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) was also established in 1997, in the wake of the Rwanda genocide. Members include donors, NGOs, UN agencies, academics, and independent experts. ALNAP describes itself as “a collective response by the humanitarian sector, dedicated to improving humanitarian performance through increased learning and accountability.”

In February 2005, following the December 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunamis, the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) was established to derive lessons from the international response to the tsunami and improve accountability to donors and to the affected populations.

At the UN level, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee was established in June 1992 in response to a UN General Assembly resolution on strengthening humanitarian assistance. The role of this interagency committee is coordination and policy development. To that end, it “develops humanitarian policies, agrees on a clear division of responsibility for the various aspects of humanitarian assistance, identifies and addresses gaps in response, and advocates for effective application of humanitarian principles.” In addition to the full members (UN agencies including the Food and Agriculture Organization, OCHA, UN Development Programme, UN Population Fund, UN-Habitat, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, and World Health Organization), standing invitees include international organizations (the ICRC, IFRC, and the International Organization for Migration) and three NGO networks (the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, American Council for Voluntary International Action, and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response).

Similar initiatives have been underway at the regional level in Asia involving civil society, although these tend to be limited in nature. The sponsors of these initiatives are primarily governments or regional organizations like ASEAN, but given that the contributions from civil society for disaster relief and humanitarian assistance have grown to a level that governments cannot ignore, they are increasingly involving NGOs in their disaster response efforts. In fact, things have evolved to the point

where designing any initiatives without consultation with the relevant civil society organizations can degrade or undermine the legitimacy of the initiative itself. For example, after the 2004 tsunami, ASEAN undertook a concerted effort to start building partnerships on disaster relief with civil society organizations throughout the region. It has been involving organizations like the Red Cross in disaster response exercises and is now working with several NGOs on issues related to disaster preparedness.

There are also a number of important initiatives that are firmly based in civil society. For example, the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center works with government agencies and NGOs throughout Asia to develop disaster risk management, train disaster responders, and help establish and disseminate disaster preparedness and response guidelines for governments, international organizations, and NGOs. A nonprofit organization based in Thailand that operates with ODA funding from various countries, the center is the primary resource in the region on disaster preparedness.

Also, the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network, a network of 36 NGOs from 16 countries, was launched in 2002 by the Asian Disaster Reduction Center in Kobe. The network convenes workshops on disaster management for member NGOs and organizes a number of joint disaster education and relief programs that bring together NGOs, governmental agencies, and international organizations. It is a unique initiative in the sense that most of the members are indigenous Asian NGOs rather than affiliates of Western organizations.

Overall, although there are signs that things are starting to change, cooperation on disaster relief in Asia is still not well developed when compared with other regions. However, the 3/11 Japanese triple disasters may accelerate the trend toward regional cooperation since Japanese NGOs as well as the government and business community noticed the importance of sharing the lessons learned from this experience with their respective Asian partners. In September 2011, for example, a Japanese NGO called Civic Force, a member of Japan Platform, organized a one-day symposium called the Asia Pacific Relief Summit. The meeting brought together representatives from NGOs, businesses, and governments from around the region to explore the idea of expanding the Japan Platform model of resource pooling and NGO coordination to the regional level.

To understand the potential for greater regional cooperation, it is useful to examine the civil society response to Japan's March 2011 disasters using the case of the international response as seen through the lens of donations to the Japanese Red Cross Society. This is not only because the Red Cross has been the major recipient of funds raised from the public in

Japan.<sup>15</sup> It is rather because donating funds to national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to help the victims of overseas disasters is one of the major ways—and sometimes the only way—in which people can express their sympathy for victims. While the level of support given for and the status accorded to the national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies differ from country to country, their relative predominance in terms of public recognition and global scale makes this a valid example and helps us to grasp some general international trends.

In the first year following the 3/11 disaster, the Japanese Red Cross received pledges for a total of ¥56.3 billion (approximately us\$690 million) from 96 of its sister national societies all over the world that had raised money from the public, corporations, and governments in their countries (see table 2).<sup>16</sup> Notably, the Red Cross Societies in Taiwan and Korea rank

**Table 2. Assistance to Japan from Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies**

Rank	Society name	Yen amount	%
1	American Red Cross	22,911,136,000	41.7
2	Taiwan Red Cross Organization	6,173,984,000	11.2
3	Canadian Red Cross	3,635,740,000	6.6
4	German Red Cross	3,251,292,190	5.9
5	Republic of Korea National Red Cross	2,976,995,694	5.4
6	Red Cross Society of China	2,546,045,415	4.6
7	Australian Red Cross	2,175,995,664	4.0
8	French Red Cross	1,850,669,146	3.4
9	British Red Cross	1,819,526,780	3.3
10	Swiss Red Cross	1,602,093,624	2.9
11	Thai Red Cross Society	748,362,342	1.4
12	Netherlands Red Cross	745,298,645	1.4
13	Singapore Red Cross	652,033,000	1.2
14	Red Cross of Viet Nam	608,584,747	1.1
15	Austrian Red Cross	486,967,819	0.9
16	Spanish Red Cross	404,746,365	0.7
17	Italian Red Cross	340,400,295	0.6
18	Red Cross of Serbia	191,253,450	0.3
19	Malaysian Red Crescent	169,976,541	0.3
20	Philippine Red Cross	167,000,000	0.3

SOURCE: Compiled by the author using data from *Japan Red Cross Society 12-Month Report*.

NOTE: Figures as of April 26, 2012. Societies located in Asia are highlighted.

among the top 5 Red Cross donors to Japan, and 8 Asian societies are in the top 20 worldwide. Of course, the assistance from the United States was overwhelming, but this is understandable given the country's strong tradition of individual and corporate philanthropy.

Thirteen of the 95 national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies that raised funds for Japan are located in East Asia.<sup>17</sup> The top three of these are from Northeast Asia, and their total giving amounts to 82.7 percent of all Red Cross donations from East Asia. This shows a strong connection between South Korea, China, Taiwan, and Japan. At the same time, the high level of giving through the national Red Cross Societies in East Asia despite the region's limited level of international philanthropy shows the strength of the relationships among private citizens in the region. This growing affinity among private citizens in the region indicates that there is considerable potential for greater regional cooperation among NGOs and other organizations.

## CONCLUSION

Although there is a long history of local, community-based responses, civil society involvement in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance in East Asia has traditionally been dominated by Western NGOs and their affiliate organizations as well as by the region's Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. However, research shows that many new CSOs have been created in response to recent major natural disasters, especially the December 2004 tsunami, the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Cyclone Nargis in 2008, and the 2011 Japan earthquake and tsunami. It also reveals that many of these organizations are so new that they are not ready to work in accordance with international standards or principles, nor are they fully aware of the potential impact of their aid on regional security.

All the same, these limitations are to be expected among young civil society organizations. It seems clear that sooner or later the NGO community in the region will develop to a point where it plays a much broader and more important role in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance operations. One reason is that, unfortunately, the region seems destined to repeatedly face severe natural disasters and NGOs have a unique capacity to respond to them and are likely to be the only organizations able to specialize in disaster relief. In fact, it is hard to envision how the region can endure the heavy burden associated with the increasing number of

natural disasters unless local civil society plays a more meaningful role in disaster relief.

Still, if Asian NGOs are going to play a more meaningful role, they have a number of challenges to overcome. They need to strengthen their institutional capacity, especially by pursuing ways to increase the level of professionalization of their staff. It is crucial for NGOs, regional governments, and other key actors to search for ways to promote a greater societal acceptance of NGOs and to encourage more meaningful partnerships between NGOs and other sectors of society. One thing that would help is a greater awareness among NGOs of the importance of demonstrating their commitment to the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence, and to the avoidance of any appearance of the politicization of their activities. It is also important for NGOs to develop a stronger financial base for their operations, and steps need to be taken to increase charitable giving in the region and make it easier for NGOs to support themselves. The Japan Platform initiative provides one model of an innovative collaboration with a national government, the business community, and other sectors that can be emulated around the region to mobilize financial resources.

And finally, methods to promote better coordination among NGOs—within countries, across borders, and at the regional level—are indispensable. Even though every society in the region has its own unique characteristics and history, NGOs in each country have much to learn from one another. There is an important role for regional cooperation in enabling them to share lessons and best practices and in assisting one another with capacity building. In particular, greater and more focused networking among NGOs in the region that specialize in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance will allow them to learn from one another's experiences more quickly and efficiently. Meanwhile, regional forums such as ASEAN and the East Asia Summit can help by further stressing the importance of engaging with civil society and encouraging NGOs to expand their ties to one another. Concerted efforts to encourage greater interaction among NGOs in the region can thus play a crucial role in encouraging the development of civil society's capacity to contribute more effectively to East Asia's response to natural disasters and humanitarian crises.

## NOTES

1. Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, "Funding the Tsunami Response," (July 2006), [https://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/tsunami/TEC-Funding\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/tsunami/TEC-Funding_Report.pdf).
2. The guidelines utilized for humanitarian assistance include "Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defense Assets to Support United Nations Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies" (UN MCDA Guidelines, 2003) and "Civil-Military Relationship in Complex Emergencies—An IASC Reference Paper" (June 28, 2004).
3. The term "humanitarian space" was first introduced by the former president of Médecins Sans Frontières, Rony Brauman, who described it as "a space of freedom in which we humanitarian organizations are free to evaluate needs, free to monitor the distribution and use of relief goods, and free to have a dialogue with the people." As quoted in Johanna G. Wagner, "An IHL/ICRC Perspective on 'Humanitarian Space,'" *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine* no. 32 (December 2005), Humanitarian Practice Network Website. Therefore, it includes not only physical areas at the operational level but also normative, intangible aspects such as *respect* and *compliance* with the humanitarian rules and principles among all concerned parties.
4. The six NGOs include Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services, International Save the Children Alliance, Lutheran World Federation, Oxfam, and the World Council of Churches.
5. As of August 2011. The list of signatories to the Code of Conduct is available on the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies website at <http://www.ifrc.org/en/publications-and-reports/code-of-conduct/signatories-of-the-code-of-conduct-/>. The breakdown in this report was calculated by the author based upon this list.
6. Nicolas de Torrente, "Humanitarian Action Under Attack: Reflections on the Iraq War," *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 17 (2004): 5.
7. Among the 35 current member NGOs, those active in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance include Association for Aid and Relief Japan, Adventist Development and Relief Agency Japan (ADRA Japan), BHN Association, Care International Japan, HOPE International Development Agency Japan, the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) Japan, JEN, NICCO, Peace Winds Japan, Save the Children Japan, Shanti Volunteer Association, and World Vision Japan. The affiliates of international NGOs include ADRA Japan, Care International Japan, Habitat for Humanity International Japan, Good Neighbors Japan, HOPE International Development Agency Japan, Save the Children Japan, Plan Japan, and World Vision Japan.
8. According to the Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation (JANIC), the number of NGOs working in Fukushima Prefecture by providing emergency relief in the early stages of the disaster was 17, whereas the number in Miyagi was 40 and in Iwate 33. The contrast is clearer in the number of projects carried out by NGOs during March to June 2011. In Miyagi prefecture, 292 projects were conducted and in Iwate 179 projects were conducted, while in Fukushima it was only 60. The organizations working in Fukushima include Association for Aid and Relief Japan, ADRA Japan, ICA, Peace Builders, and SHAPLA NEER.
9. "Non-Profit Organisations," InvestHK (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) website, [http://www.investhk.gov.hk/resources/resources/tc\\_sector\\_bps\\_ngo.pdf](http://www.investhk.gov.hk/resources/resources/tc_sector_bps_ngo.pdf).

10. Thailand Burma Border Consortium is a consortium of 12 international NGOs from 10 countries that provide food, shelter, and non-food items to refugees and displaced people from Myanmar. Programs are implemented in the field through refugees, community-based organizations, and local partners. The current 12 members are as follows: act for peace–NCCA (Australia), Caritas (Switzerland), Christian Aid (UK and Ireland), Church World Service, International Rescue Committee (USA), DanChurchAid (Denmark), Diakonia (Sweden), Gandhiji Cultural (Birmanian por la Paz) (Spain), Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation & ZOA Refugee Care (Netherlands), Norwegian Church Aid (Norway), and Trocaire (Ireland).
11. Some examples of NGOs that emerged in direct response to the tsunami are Happy Hearts Fund, the SripHong Phukaoluan Foundation (Krabi Relief Fund), After the Wave Foundation, the Tsunami Volunteer Center, North Andaman Tsunami Relief, the Ecotourism Training Center, and D-TRAC (Disaster Tracking Recovery Assistance Center).
12. Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency for Aceh-Nias, “Aceh and Nias One Year After the Tsunami: The Recovery Effort and Way Forward,” December 2005, [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEASTASIAPACIFIC/Resources/1YR\\_exec\\_sum\\_english.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEASTASIAPACIFIC/Resources/1YR_exec_sum_english.pdf).
13. David Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 126.
14. Soubhik Ronnie Sana, “Working through Ambiguity: International NGOs in Myanmar” (September 2011), <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/hauser/engage/humanitarianorganizations/research/assets/Myanmar%20Report%20Final%20Version%209-8-11.pdf>.
15. The Japanese Red Cross Society received more than ¥315 billion (US\$3.9 billion). Japanese Red Cross Society, *12-Month Report Glide* no. EQ-2011-000028-JPN (April 27, 2012).
16. *Ibid.* According to the Japanese Red Cross Society, the government of Japan encouraged other governments to provide their monetary support toward disaster relief through their national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.
17. These 13 East Asian Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies include the Cambodian Red Cross Society, Red Cross Society of China, Indonesian Red Cross Society, Republic of Korea National Red Cross, Red Cross Society of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Lao Red Cross, Malaysian Red Crescent, Mongolian Red Cross, Philippine Red Cross, Singapore Red Cross, Taiwan Red Cross Organization, Thai Red Cross Society, and Red Cross of Viet Nam.