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Does Japan Need Assistance?

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Japan is known not only for its experience of devastating disasters, but also for innovations in disaster risk reduction. Back in 1990, when the United Nations started its first International Decade of Natural Disaster Reduction (1990-1999), Japan was one of the strongest supporters.

In 1994, Japan hosted the first World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Yokohama, which gave a strong boost to the decade-long activities of disaster risk reduction. In the following year, in 1995, Japan experienced one of the major urban disasters in recent times: the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, causing more than \$100 billion of direct losses. Over a number of years, the city of Kobe and the prefecture of Hyogo struggled to recover from the physical, social, economic and psychological aspects of the disaster. The recovery lessons were widely utilized in other countries.

In the year following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, Japan hosted the second World Conference on Disaster Reduction, which coincided with the 10th anniversary of the Kobe earthquake. This was the year when the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) was adopted by United Nations member states as the basic agreed outline for disaster risk-reduction activities. This is considered the most important recent policy contribution from Japan to the world in disaster studies.

Now that Japan is trying to cope with the devastating earthquake, tsunami and radiation leakage, the question is whether Japan can manage this disaster by itself or needs external support. There are several discussions and on-line forums which argue that Japan is a developed country that has its own resources to support the recovery process. I don't agree with this argument. I call it a misconception that has arisen from a lack of appropriate information. The recovery does not depend on financial resources only. It needs intellectual resources, plans, policies, strategies and innovative solutions. No country is independent and self-reliant when it comes to its resources. Japan is no exception.

The 2001 Gujarat Earthquake in India also initially threatened the recovery process due to the scale of the destruction it caused. The total length of the devastated area was more than 600 kilometers. Unlike tsunami damage, which is mostly concentrated in coastal areas (more specifically, in a zone within 2-3 kilometers of the coast), the damage caused by the Gujarat Earthquake was spread over a vast area.

The key lesson from the Gujarat Earthquake is the necessity for coordination and proper management from the initial post-disaster phase. The coordination should not be limited to government departments.

It needs to include non-governmental organizations and other relief-based organizations. At the prefectural level, a coordination center needs to be set up, which should be a "one-stop shop" for information. This coordination center should be connected horizontally with all relevant departments, as well as vertically with the national and local governments. One-point coordination is of key importance to avoid confusion and mismanagement. A sector-based approach is preferable where different sectors such as shelter, health, education and livelihoods will be handled separately, but under the same coordination unit.

In the current disaster, 54 out of the 174 coastal towns and local governments on the east coast of Japan were affected by the tsunami. A more severe impact was seen in the case of the Indian Ocean Tsunami in Sri Lanka, where 73 percent of coastal areas were affected.

Sri Lanka started a village adoption policy, where different organizations were responsible for the total recovery of a designated town or local government. A similar approach was also undertaken in Tamil Nadu state in India after the 2004 tsunami. The same village adoption principle can be applied to the current case in Japan, where governments of prefectures that have not been affected and/or non-governmental organizations can adopt a specific village or town to oversee its holistic recovery. This prefectural government or non-governmental organization would be responsible for coordination and collaboration with other entities.

The arrival time and height of the tsunami in the March 11 disaster raised serious issues with regard to hazard mapping and designated evacuation centers in the coastal areas. Thinking of the aged and vulnerable populations concentrated in the small and medium-sized cities and rural towns in Japan, there is a strong need for a "one village, one shelter policy" to be implemented rigorously in different parts of Japan, both as a recovery measure and for long-term preparedness. Bangladesh has been a model case for a coastal early warning system with shelters, volunteers and networking. A similar system is required in Japan, both in terms of short-, medium- and long-term recovery.

There are several other emerging issues that need attention in the coming days. Environmental issues, contamination of soil and water and the impact on the food chain are some of the crucial ones. After Hurricane Katrina in the United States, the New Orleans government and Environmental Protection Agency conducted a detailed environmental assessment and found serious issues with regard to industrial waste, debris management and raw sewage, among others. These lessons will be very useful to Japan in the current context.

Finally, unlike past disasters in Japan, the Tohoku Earthquake has produced more than 250,000 evacuees who need to be relocated outside their hometown or even outside their prefectures. The strong communities that existed in these rural areas are on the verge of collapse, posing a serious problem in terms of human relationships, networking and information flow. The key is how to keep these communities together. Sri Lanka has demonstrated some excellent examples of sustainable post-tsunami human resettlement, which will need to be reflected in Japan too. Different innovative approaches and lessons were found through single-village relocation or multiple-village relocation (several villages coming together as the same village in a new location), and this needs strategic planning from the inception phase.

With all these examples and justifications, Japan needs urgent assistance in different sectors, from volunteer management, to health risk reduction, to prevention of environmental degradation, mass relocation, shelter management, strategic planning and policy direction, to name but some. Japan is known for its reserved nature, dignity and modesty. Japan has been generous to support several countries in different disaster situations, mostly without drawing attention to itself. It is now time to reciprocate that support and to assist Japan in its time of crisis with non-monetary resources.

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