

Grassroot responses to the Tohoku earthquake of 11 March 2011

Overcoming the dichotomy between victim and helper

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On 11 March 2011, an earthquake and tsunami hit Japan's Tohoku region, followed by a nuclear crisis. Many tragic – as well as heroic – stories have emerged from this triple disaster where 15,797 people died and 3,054 are still missing (as of 11 April 2012). Fundamental problems at the level of national governance have since exacerbated the dire conditions on the ground. In May, two months after the disaster, a reformist bureaucrat Shigeaki Koga published *Collapse of Japan's central administration*, a bestseller attacking the state of affairs in the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Most disturbing, he argued, was the entrenched culture of bureaucrats coordinating public projects that benefit the very companies they later join upon retirement. Anyone familiar with Japan will know that this problem, known as *amakudari*, is an entrenched issue that has characterized the decades-long rule of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Reforms have been difficult to implement and the disaster painfully illuminates an entrenched bureaucratic mindset among the political elite.

On the other hand, this crisis also shows up how resilient affected populations have been, and the enormous strength of supportive community networks. In the midst of disasters of this scale, it is difficult not to give in to despair or resignation. Fear of lingering nuclear contamination is especially great in and around Fukushima, as is the challenge for fishermen in Ishinomaki, for instance, who will not recover should Japanese people refuse to buy their fish due to radiation fears.

Inadequate national leadership has hampered recovery and reconstruction, and generally slowed down the provision of national government aid to the devastated communities of Ishinomaki, Onagawa, Kamaishi, Rikuzen-takata, Kesenuma, Iwaki in Fukushima, and other towns and cities. Over the months following the disaster, local mayors took turns to complain publicly about their exasperation. For example, on 21 June 2011, the mayor of Iitate village, Norio Kanno, forced to evacuate the city office due to radiation, pleaded on NHK, the Japanese national broadcast network, for national government to become less 'self-centred' and to pay proper attention to the suffering of local people. At a small event on 26 June 2011, organized by Machida City and Aid TAKATA (an organization set up by local people to collect funds for the reconstruction of Rikuzen-takata), the mayor, who had lost his wife as he went to the rescue of his citizens, could not control his emotions, speaking with despair of the prejudice shown by central government towards local government.

Seven months to the day since 11 March, with central government still failing to put adequate plans in place for financing reconstruction, the mayor of Minamisanriku town prepared for a final attempt to petition the new prime minister, Yoshihiko Noda, to finance local reconstruction – estimated to cost 55 times the town's annual budget – as the town was suffering from a 70% fall in tax revenues due to tax exemptions for struggling businesses. The mayor was allocated ten minutes with the prime minister, but upon arrival found that Noda was elsewhere and was left to plead with lower ranking officials, who gave the usual diplomatic answer that government would bear the cost, but with no indication as to when and how.

A historic change of government came about in 2009, partly due to promises made to break prior bureaucracy-led LDP governments. The saga surrounding the resignation of the minister for reconstruction, Ryo Matsumoto, on



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5 July 2011 on national TV (he reprimanded, and threatened to stop funding, Miyagi prefecture if its mayor did not get in line), further consolidated the conceptual and emotional gap between the political elite and the people on the ground.

Driven by overwhelming needs, local leaders have clamoured for financial help from central government. However, in pressing national politicians to act beyond their own immediate political interest, they have become a force for a radically new way of conducting political business.

Ten months after the earthquake, at a JICA/SOAS¹ sponsored event on 19 January 2012, Jin Sato from the Institute for Advanced Studies of Asia (Tokyo University) argued that recovery is measured by the extent to which victims draw on their own inherent knowledge and capacities. Generally, people prefer to see themselves as partners rather than victims, and so long as the underlying victim/helper dichotomy prevails, this natural disaster is prolonged in the form of a social disaster.

Many of the larger NGOs (non-governmental organizations) such as the Japanese Red Cross and the much smaller Peace Boat, offered much needed assistance post-disaster, as did many other self-organizing groups, smaller NGOs, and NPOs (non-profit organizations). However, in Jin Sato's view, help is not enough. He argued that the private sector often makes a professional contribution which is better suited to getting people back on their feet than volunteers and charities. While volunteer groups, such as All Hands, do much good in clearing out houses and canals – as do many self-organizing NPOs – reconstruction has to provide a sense of psychological recovery, so that local people can get involved themselves and feel empowered. When I visited an evacuation centre in Ishinomaki, I was indeed struck by the way that aid was being planned without the involvement of local people and how aid workers stood out from the 'victims' they sought to help.

Jin Sato further suggested that much assistance has, in this way, focused on satisfying the feelings of the donors rather than the needs of the people receiving the aid. Many young people volunteering clearly want to help, and when I spoke to local people reconstructing their damaged houses a year after the disaster, they expressed their gratitude for the volunteers who came to clean up their homes. However, Jin Sato also stressed how difficult it is to ascertain what people need, and even more difficult to provide aid that encourages self-motivation rather than dependence. Another speaker at the JICA/SOAS event, Kan Hiroshi Sato, highlighted the importance of hope, an

Fig. 1. xxx

oft-repeated word in this crisis that, in his view, arises out of resilience, emerging when an individual uses his or her own knowledge and experience. He found that when aid agencies or volunteers do not know local governance or ways, their activities might well end up destroying local resilience rather than helping it.

Japan – a country lacking in social engagement?

Due to the scale of the devastation, few organizations were able to assist immediately. The Japanese Self Defence Forces (SDF) deployed the day after the disaster to rescue people stranded or buried, and continued to help in the months to follow. Their work was enormously appreciated. At the same time, their departure was also seen as an opportunity for communities to stand on their own feet again. Apart from this, however, the central government's disaster preparation was woefully inadequate.

Some local municipalities were wiped out, and local government often found it difficult to provide much relief for themselves. In many cases, local people had to take the initiative themselves to rescue their neighbours in the first few days or weeks and elderly people who were living alone say that it was neighbours who came to their aid, sometimes only minutes before the tsunami arrived. People also tell how they shared whatever food or other items they had, while some local supermarkets opened up spontaneously for people to help themselves to food and other items.

For most NGOs, NPOs and other groups, it took 3-4 weeks to organize assistance, although Second Harvest and Peace Boat were already active within 10-14 days. Established NGOs, especially those coming from outside the region, were handicapped by difficulties in housing their volunteers.

With the mass media largely focusing on the response of NGOs, small NPOs, and local personalities helping others, there has been little or no media coverage of some of the most effective responses in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, namely from religious organizations rooted in the communities. For example, local temples and shrines still standing were quickly converted into shelters. Religious organizations such as Tenrikyo, drawing on its long history of volunteering, as well as its more recently trained and technically-equipped volunteers who were in possession of heavy machinery to remove debris, went to the stricken areas almost immediately to help. Meanwhile, others – Shinyoen, Rissho Koseikai, and Sotozenshu – were able to send small groups of individuals by the second and third day to offer assistance. Another significant response came from organizations who opened up their local community centres to evacuees, and who had local people on the ground where no other NGO was able to operate.

The national newspaper *Asahi* (10 June) argued that three times as many people volunteered in the first three months of the Great Hanshin Earthquake in Kobe in 1995 (1,117,000 compared to the 390,000 volunteers in the Tohoku Earthquake). The Hanshin Earthquake was near a big city (Osaka) compared to the vast area of the Tohoku disasters – which, moreover, had no trains running, closed highways, insufficient petrol, and the Fukushima nuclear accident. However, this estimation of the number of volunteers did not include the local people themselves. Nor did it include responses from religious organizations.

Religious organizations and relief: Soka Gakkai

Having researched NGO responses to the crisis, Jin Sato developed a deeper interest in the question of how people survived, especially during the first crucial days and early months, when the government and many NGOs, were not yet fully active. Here, it was particularly religious organi-

zations and local NGOs that were most active early on in providing assistance at the grassroots level.

The Soka Gakkai has been the focus of my own first-hand research for some years. Soka Gakkai ('Value-creation Society') is a large lay Mahayana Buddhist organization in Japan. It has been subject to controversy and many regard it more as a 'new religion' than a Buddhist organization, especially since it was excommunicated from the priestly Nichiren Shōshū Temple in 1991 (only to continue as a lay organization). Because of its missionary zeal, Soka Gakkai has a large following in Western countries, particularly in the US. Outside observers look upon Soka Gakkai as involving a cult of personality, given its focus on Soka Gakkai International (SGI) President Ikeda, as well as the two preceding presidents (and founders) Josei Toda and Tsunesaburo Makiguchi. More controversially, in the 1960s, Soka Gakkai established a political party, Komeito or 'Clean Government Party', which focuses in particular on social welfare, and today represents the third biggest party nationally, wielding considerable political influence (see Fisker-Nielsen 2012).

Many Soka Gakkai members who themselves fell victim to the earthquake and tsunami, turned 'volunteer' to offer assistance to others during those first crucial days and weeks. Official Soka Gakkai membership in Japan numbers ten million, of which maybe about 3 million are very active members, another 3 million active on a less regular basis, and the rest either active irregularly, or members in name only. Soka Gakkai takes the Buddhist philosophy and practice of the 13th century priest Nichiren (1222-1282) as its basis. Outsiders often assume a top-down structure, but according to its adherents, its success comes from its focus on inner change (known as *human revolution*) and on social engagement, which has fostered many self-motivated individuals. It has long advocated the abolition of nuclear power and environmental protection, and has also engaged in cultural exchanges and development. Individual members commonly take initiatives in their chosen area of work.

Whatever the controversies over its status, its organizational strength and its stronghold within the community mean that, along with other religious organizations, it is sometimes among the first to deliver emergency supplies and help people who, in the first few days, have to rely on themselves and neighbourhood relations (e.g. in Rikuzentakata or Ishinomaki). With the exception of Soka Gakkai's own newspapers, its efficacy on this front has not generally been recognized in the mass media, even though it took most NGOs at least two weeks to facilitate effective relief. Of course, religious organizations can be controversial, particularly if they are seen to engage in the relief effort as a means to religious proselytizing. However, a taboo on publishing about religious organizations rooted in 20th century Japanese history, helps to obscure the issue of local assistance during national disasters of this kind (see Hardacre 2003).

Although Japan is often seen as having a weak civil society with strong state 'managed' groups (Garon 1997), earthquakes seem to have contributed to altering this situation to some degree. Pekkanan (2000) for instance, notes how the Hanshin Earthquake generated a proliferation of charities and NGOs in Japan. Similarly, Soka Gakkai's preparedness for dealing with natural disasters improved after the earthquake in Kobe in 1995. At the time of the Hanshin Earthquake, Soka Gakkai also found itself participating in rescue, relief and recovery. These activities were based on its existing grassroots network and organizational capacity. Since then, it has created more solid contingency plans such as stocking up on emergency supplies in Tokyo and Osaka, having a satellite phone system with

priority telephone lines, and private power generation systems that would enable communication should power fail.

Estimated to have reached a '9' on the Richter Scale, the earthquake in Tohoku hit at 14:46: by 16:15 a central emergency communication centre had been organized at the Soka Gakkai headquarters in Tokyo, which communicated with the main Soka Gakkai Tohoku Centre in Sendai, the nearest big city to the epicentre. Meanwhile other Soka Gakkai groups – members in Hokkaido, Niigata and Kobe who had all experienced big earthquakes and tsunami in recent years – immediately put together emergency supplies and prepared to dispatch them to Iwate, one of the affected prefectures. They then reported to the headquarters in Tokyo. Without waiting for instructions from the national organization and without knowing if roads would be open, trucks loaded with emergency goods headed for Tohoku that same evening. Thus, rather than waiting for a centralized command, the initiative for action came swiftly from the local level, which continues to be the case today.

Many Soka Gakkai centres were turned into evacuation shelters. Forty-two such centres exist in Tohoku. One was a pre-designated government emergency facility, but the rest opened up to everyone, irrespective of whether they were Soka Gakkai. At the peak, just after the disaster, there were 5000 evacuees at these centres around Tohoku. Local Soka Gakkai leaders were also checking on people affected in the neighbourhoods and delivering supplies where they could, to those still in their homes. This involved addressing a number of logistical challenges, such as the provision of water, toilets and the preparation of 15,000 meals a day. Shinichiro Miyachi, a journalist from the Soka Gakkai daily newspaper describes the situation in the Tohoku main Soka Gakkai centre:

'I was interviewing a person in Sendai when the earthquake happened. The transportation and mobile phones stopped, the city was in chaos, the shops closed, and I think even most of the police boxes (*kōban*) closed. We could not ascertain what kind of disaster had happened. It was impossible to return to Tokyo, so I decided to go to the Soka Gakkai Tohoku Cultural Centre.' (interview with author, 16 June 2011).

He arrived in the evening, finding about 400 people from the neighbourhood taking refuge along with 30–40 staff, themselves also evacuees. Water and gas supplies were disrupted, and there was not enough food for that many people. The Soka Gakkai women members cooked and prepared rice balls throughout the night, using the centre's own power generator. Akihiko Morishima, the Soka Gakkai leader of Miyagi, himself an evacuee and unaware of what had happened to his own family or house, procured blankets and food from local shops. 'Here in Tokyo we wanted reports on what was going on so we could help', Hirotsugu Terasaki, the director of the Public Information Office in Tokyo says laughingly, 'but the Gakkai staff in Sendai got really upset, and told us, "we are here at the forefront of the disaster and you go on about getting these stupid reports."' But really, we wanted to know what was most needed.' (interview with author, 15 June 2011).

Although supplies were quickly on their way, the immediate challenge on the ground was to restore essential services. 'When the water stops', Miyachi explains 'it has

an immediate effect on such essentials as food and toilets. With more people streaming in by the minute, this was difficult.' They used temporary toilets, of which they had 1,000 in stock for an emergency. For the first five days, 24 hours-a-day, the young women evacuees organized themselves in teams to show people how to use these toilets. This kind of organization was not part of any contingency plan, but arose on the spot.

Soka Gakkai members are accustomed to organizing events with large groups of people, and in communicating and making comparatively quick decisions. Regular Soka Gakkai activities include participation in discussion meetings and involvement in organizing events, which means that members are generally used to speaking in front of large groups of people and playing leadership roles. The value of quick decision-making to minimize fatigue and confusion is what Jin Sato of the Institute of Advanced Studies of Asia has identified as crucial for running evacuation centres.

During my first trip to Tohoku in June 2011, three months after the disaster, I discovered how Soka Gakkai relief efforts went some way towards addressing the already mentioned victim/helper dichotomy. For example, a young man I was travelling with (one of over 1,000 Soka Gakkai staff sent to the region on ten-day shifts to help clean up) explicitly warned me to avoid making people feel 'helped'. Japanese have a strong sense of obligation, which causes them to suffer even more if they cannot return a favour done for them. I was reminded of this again during my visit in April 2012, when a Soka Gakkai member, himself interviewed several times by the mass media amidst the devastation of his house and company, also criticized the way media portrayed local people either as victims or heroes, asserting that all find themselves in the same situation together.

The day after the earthquake, with 1,000 people now present, Miyachi remembers, 'I was supposed to go to Sendai for one day, and I just had the suit I was wearing. For ten days, I slept and did relief activities in that suit. At the same time, I also tried to write articles for the newspaper. I continued writing and taking photos as I helped carrying boxes or whatever. After ten days I returned to Tokyo once, and then came back to Tohoku a few days later to continue to help.'

Rice balls made during the first few days by Soka Gakkai women in neighbouring Niigata were dispatched to six main Soka Gakkai centres in Tohoku along with thousands of other emergency supplies. Upon arrival, members would distribute essentials to other emergency shelters including government-run ones, sometimes on bicycles, sometimes by car. Within the first two days, they had created a distribution system. Making use of a professional transport company to get the goods to the main centres, Soka Gakkai sent 650,000 emergency items in the first month and a half.²

Thousands thus survived by turning to Soka Gakkai centres converted into evacuation shelters, where victims of the tsunami themselves worked as volunteers. For instance, a centre in Ishinomaki took in about 150 evacuees despite the water being knee-high on the ground

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Fig. 3. xxx



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floor. After working to provide food and relief, on the second day, Soka Gakkai leaders in Ishinomaki registered it as an evacuation centre at the municipal office, though one week went by before the first SDF personnel came to enquire what they needed. Drinking water was the most urgent requirement. By that time, they had received supplies through neighbouring Soka Gakkai groups, distributed by volunteer members, while a local member had been delivering water in a large tank to flush the toilets.

By June, most of those who had taken refuge had been relocated to public evacuation centres or temporary housing, or had returned home.

Taking leadership in the evacuation shelters

Soka Gakkai members describe their practice as ‘training in caring for others’; their default position in a situation of crisis. ‘Of course we never thought there would be such a disaster,’ one Soka Gakkai leader explains, ‘but somehow we instinctively drew on what we have learned from our daily Buddhist practice, which is based on Nichiren’s philosophy and Mr Ikeda’s encouragement to respond to any situation with courage, focusing on the person right in front of us.’

In Onagawa, where 70-80% of the town was destroyed, there is an evacuation centre, filled to capacity with very little personal space. While the media reports orderly queues, everyone is actually on edge, having lost family members and everything they owned. Further anxiety builds up over the lack of vision for the future and verbal fights easily break out, as one evacuee recalls. The Soka Gakkai leader of Onagawa also lives in this evacuation centre. Everyone knows him, as he offers encouragement to others whilst distributing the *Seikyo* newspaper which, though usually focusing on Soka Gakkai activities, during the disaster contained substantial information about the situation in Tohoku. In some evacuation centres, it was the only source of news for the first few weeks. If mainstream newspapers had difficulties in distribution, the local Soka Gakkai members who normally delivered *Seikyo* newspapers continued to do so. The paper carried many experiences from survivors.

Soka Gakkai regard leaders who themselves have experienced natural disasters – people from Kobe for instance – as able to offer the best kind of encouragement to those now affected. Listening to people who had lost everything themselves, sharing how they overcame the same profound suffering, was one way to offer the hope that the capacity to overcome their sufferings lay within themselves.

Buddhism and social engagement

Unlike the accounts of earthquakes in early Japanese history, in this case, there has been very little, or no, discussion of bad karma or punishment from ‘above’ by any of the Buddhist sects. In fact, this question seems to be regarded as inconsequential. Soka Gakkai experience Buddhism as a life philosophy and way of being in the

world which is in some ways closer to everyday life than the more established Japanese Buddhism which typically focuses on funeral rites. Buddhist practice here involves maintaining a constructive forward-looking attitude and trying to encourage others to do the same. This is generally regarded as involving a spiritual transformation.

Soka Gakkai members remind themselves of Nichiren and his struggles in 13th century Japan. One of his most famous writings, a text most people in Japan will have heard of, is *On establishing the correct teaching for peace of the land* (1260). Written at a time when Japan was facing a number of natural and social disasters, Nichiren proclaimed these the outcome of incorrect teachings and ways of thinking. Yet, the meaning he attached to this changed over time: from a focus on avoiding slander of the Buddhist Dharma to emphasizing opportunities for the propagation of the Dharma. ‘Dharma’, or ‘Law’ here indicates principles or values by which people try to live.

For the last few decades in particular, Daisaku Ikeda, as the long-term spiritual leader of Soka Gakkai, has emphasized that propagation of the ‘Law’ refers not simply to the narrow goal of propagating a particular sect, although that is clearly part of it, but the wider objective of cultivating societal values that correspond with the principles of human dignity and selfless care for others. Ikeda’s reading of Nichiren stresses that Nichiren admonished leaders – political and otherwise – when they were not working on behalf of the people. This is, more controversially, linked to Soka Gakkai’s support for its own political party.

At the local level in Japan, the individual is normally understood as standing in the way of collective national, political or economic interests. This is increasingly seen as political rhetoric devoid of substance which caters to elite interests. The Tohoku disaster has prompted people to ask what the ruling party did, with their majority of more than 400 lawmakers, when they could have responded with much more urgency and political will than they did. This opportunity to focus on the need for a transformation in political culture is not lost on religious organizations at the forefront of the relief efforts for this disaster, including the Soka Gakkai. They also do not hesitate to use this to score political points. However, as elsewhere, this disaster has equally highlighted a gap within Soka Gakkai itself, as there is a quiet murmuring from youth leaders that Komeito national politicians are too involved in their world of elite political diplomacy. The disaster in Japan has therefore had two major impacts: first, an impetus on the part of the government and of political parties (religious groups and NGOs were fairly well-prepared) to plan better for future disasters, and second, an impetus towards addressing the gaps between elite political interests and issues that relate to ordinary people’s lives across the spectrum of all political parties. The crescendo of voices calling for reform and improved planning is likely to prove a major challenge for Tokyo-based national political culture. ●

1. Japanese International Cooperation Agency and the School of Oriental and African Studies.

2. 60,000 portable toilets, 24,000 items of clothing, 4,700 blankets, futons and bed linen, 243,000 items of daily necessities, 296,000 food items, 40,600 medical supplies and 33,400 other commodities such as fuel, blood pressure gauges, bicycles, whiteboards, washing machines, dryers, kettles, portable cooking stoves, and gas cartridges.

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