

Post-disaster recovery and support in Japan

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On 11th March 2011, eastern Japan was hit by a magnitude 9 earthquake, followed by a tsunami approximately 30 minutes later. By 22nd June, the death toll had reached over 15,000, with more than 7,000 still missing and over 110,000 living in shelters or temporary housing. Many villages and towns of the affected region had been completely destroyed. Thousands of individuals volunteered for relief activities, as did a range of groups including Soka Gakkai, a lay Buddhist movement, which immediately set up a disaster response coordination team.

The actions of the Soka Gakkai members who got involved – many of whom lived in the affected areas – were grounded in their Buddhist belief that all people possess life of equal dignity and value; members generally pray and take action for “the happiness of both oneself and others”, including by volunteering. As a locally based and faith-based organisation (FBO), there were several aspects that enabled Soka Gakkai to contribute effectively to the relief effort, responding to both physical and psychological needs.

First and foremost, Soka Gakkai’s network of community centres provided evacuees with shelters and relief supplies. Some members’ homes were also used to accommodate local evacuees and as relay points for distributing relief supplies. Secondly, volunteers delivered relief supplies to general evacuation shelters and also, through our community-based network, to others not directly hit by the disaster but severely affected by the destruction of infrastructure. Because of their networks and

knowledge of their local community, volunteer members knew the whereabouts of people in the affected areas and what supplies they might need. Thirdly, we provided memorial and prayer services for psychological support, with prayers dedicated to the swift recovery of affected areas. Finally, money was donated to various municipalities in the affected areas.

FBOs can play a unique role in providing both material and psychological support. However, FBOs based in Japan need to more effectively coordinate with public sector bodies such as the national government and local municipalities. Akihiko Morishima, then leader of Soka Gakkai in Miyagi Prefecture (which took the brunt of the tsunami), stated in an interview: “We have carried out our relief activities focusing first on the individual in need just in front of us. ...The public administration, however, may not necessarily take the same approach. They usually prioritise efficiency and equal access to relief.” Both approaches have their own strengths that should complement each other. In emergency situations, FBOs need to work in solidarity beyond differences in their religious traditions. In this regard, it was significant that in April 2011 a network was launched (called the Japan Religion Coordinating Project for Disaster Relief¹) for the purpose of coordinating disaster relief by faith-based organisations.

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1. <https://sites.google.com/site/syuenrenindex/> (Japanese only)