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Policy Lessons for Japanese Disaster Responses

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Mika Shimizu, Visiting Scholar at the East-West Center and Lecturer at Sophia University, argues that “The critical lesson from this disaster for Japanese policy makers is that traditional disaster management plans are not adequate to deal with the emerging complex disaster risks that Japan faces today.”

In the wake of the March 11 earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima nuclear power plant failure that devastated large parts of Northeastern Japan, Prime Minister Naoto Kan announced the formation of the Reconstruction Design Council. The aim of this committee is to bring together governors from the affected prefectures with outside experts to implement a reconstruction blueprint. The coming months will be a watershed, not only in physical reconstruction terms, but also in terms of restructuring Japan’s “resilience.” Resilience goes beyond disaster preparedness and response. It also includes the capacity to recover from disasters, while maintaining the structure and function of society by protecting people and assets with short- and long-term plans to ensure public safety and national security.

However, the foremost policy lesson from this tripartite disaster centers on “social resilience,” which is the ability of local communities to maintain social cohesion and coordinate self-help initiatives in times of great upheaval. While individuals and communities, with assistance from volunteers and grass-root groups, were resilient amidst tremendous hardship, this disaster has demonstrated the lack of consideration for social resilience within Japanese public policies. Whereas Japan is known as a country well-prepared for disasters with strict building codes and the best technologies in the world, her traditional *ad-hoc* post-disaster response and “stovepipe” approach, in this case, prevented effective disaster management. Although the Prime Minister’s office has established more than twenty new offices to respond to the disaster *since* the earthquake, a *pre-event* well-understood, resilience-based and focused coordination plan would have helped manage a more effective *post-disaster* response. The critical lesson from this disaster for Japanese policy makers is that traditional disaster management plans are not adequate to deal with the emerging complex disaster risks that Japan faces today.

The aftermath of this disaster is exceedingly complex. The significant loss of lives and property, estimated at over 15,000 dead, 7,000-plus missing, and more than 124,000 still living in evacuation shelters, is a major human tragedy in itself. Caring for the survivors, many of whom are homeless, remains the first priority. Added to this is the longer-term issue of rebuilding destroyed infrastructure, especially within extensively disrupted critical sectors such as public health, electrical power generation, agriculture, and trade. In response, the Japanese government has initiated several national recovery policies including the Guidelines for Policy Promotion which addresses economic and social reconstruction projects. During her April 17 visit to Japan, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Japanese Foreign Minister Takeaki Matsumoto agreed to a public-private partnership between Japan and the United States that will further assist with economic recovery.



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process must start with the acceptance of the need for a paradigm shift in Japanese traditional *ad-hoc* disaster policy and management response to a more coordinated and systemic approach that is based on pre-disaster risk management. Some key elements in implementing such a concept include the development of a flexible and coherent disaster response management mechanism, along with the coordination and integration of a social process that includes active stakeholder participation. However, pre-disaster management is very difficult to do in places where social resilience is not built into government public policy. Japanese disaster management policy often disregards the benefit of social resilience in public policies as the critical “first step” in reducing the impact of natural disasters.

Major specific policy and social resilience lessons to be learned from this disaster relevant to social resilience include:

Central Coordination: Japan does not have a central government agency equivalent to the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). As a result, this leaves a vital gap in coordinating immediate disaster management. One solution is to have a central government management authority that is responsible for coordinating central and local government responses, along with international assistance, into one focused disaster response. Japan needs to seriously consider a formal mechanism to coordinate operations in response to disaster risk management. This does not necessarily mean Japan needs a new agency, but rather desperately needs a *well-understood* pre-event mechanism for coordination.

Local-Central Government Communication: This crisis, where hundreds of communities have been affected, has demonstrated a critical lack of communication between local communities and the national government. One example is the case of Minami-soma city, which is close to the crippled Fukushima nuclear power plant. The mayor of Minami-soma city, Katsunobu Sakurai, noted that the city did not receive enough information directly from the central government about the deteriorating situation at the crippled power plant, and instead had to depend on media reports. This example highlights the necessity for a well-established pre-operational communication mechanism that will link the needs and requirements of local communities to relevant central government agencies that can provide the exact resources required.

Knowledge Management: In the proposed Japan-US private-public partnership, critical components will be knowledge management. At present Japan lacks a formal mechanism, such as independent think tanks, for integrating the plethora of information, data, ideas and policy proposals emerging from stakeholders, civil society organizations, and individuals. Responding to future crises requires a long-term policy commitment by independent research bodies to integrate those resources to create a more disaster-resilient social system within Japan.

US-Japan military cooperation—entitled Operation *Tomadachi*—in response to this disaster was unprecedented, and greatly appreciated by the Japanese public. However, US-Japanese military coordination regarding disaster management still does not include a pre-event mutual mechanism for coordinating operations, such as a bilateral agreement on natural disasters responses. With such a contingency plan, an even more effective response could be possible.

Thus policy issues and the critical components of social resilience in public policies must be the backbone of addressing and designing a blue print for the reconstruction plan. This requires political leaders to focus on the critical policy lessons learned from this disaster in order to formulate a more resilient social system for Japan to prepare for *any* disaster.