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Reflection on Japan EQ/Tsunami Response
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“Is this really happening in my country of Japan?” was my initial thought. Japan is considered one of the richest nations in the world with probably the best disaster risk reduction measures in the region. And this was certainly my first time responding to an emergency in Japan as a staff member of CWS. As the extent of damage became clearer, I learned that this is actually four disasters happening at once. First a 9.0 Richter scale earthquake, then 20m+ tsunami, then nuclear power plant reactor explosion, all happening in the harsh winter weather of Tohoku region where temperatures nowadays go down below freezing point on daily basis. Can my government respond adequately? The answer, unfortunately, is no.

My recent drive from Tokyo to Miyagi Prefecture was somewhat smooth on Tohoku Motorway until where roads became bumpy and we required a special pass to go through that segment. Once I entered Tohoku region, it was snowing, freezing, and long queues were at every gas station where fuel was running out. We were lucky to be able to get a share in one of the gas stations with a 10 liter limit.



Photo: CWS March 26: Tohoku motorway in Miyagi Prefecture

The Government of Japan is eager to maintain the image that their response is properly executed, but people I met in my assessment visit tell me otherwise. Relief items are not adequately reaching them, influenza is spreading, people are waking up in the middle of the night because of body aches due to cold air, no future plan is communicated, still their loved ones are missing; truly daily survival for these people both physically and mentally. I am personally wearing 2 layers of pants as well as a sweater and down jacket. Even with these, it was freezing cold and my fingers went numb.

In coordination meetings in Tokyo, some people are asking “with Self Defense Forces being deployed and the government sending fuel tankers, aren’t the needs met?” From the affected population who are faced with daily survival at evacuation sites, such questions seem to be nonsense and pointless; a view I now share. Then what is my government doing? To give them credit, they are tasked to deal with unprecedented challenges of restoring safety at Fukushima-Daiichi Nuclear Plant, deployment of Self Defense Forces to deal with 500,000 people who are living at evacuation sites (including those who are staying at evacuation sites and people who are visiting on daily basis from their houses due to lack of utilities) and construction of temporary shelters for re-evacuation. They simply don’t have government human resources to serve the most vulnerable; people who can’t even go to these evacuation sites. Who can serve these people then?

Volunteers are the ones. Agencies are now mobilizing local volunteers, of which there are many, to help the affected population with cleaning evacuation sites of dirt/mud from the tsunami, classifying relief items at warehouses, carrying and distributing relief items, daily updates on needs at disaster volunteer centers, etc. They are not professional aid workers, but they can certainly offer human resources to labor intensive relief work, and with proper management structure by aid agencies, local volunteers will play a key role in this relief and recovery effort.

Some may question “why assist Japan which is one of the richest nations in the world?” My answer is, these people who are staying in extremely difficult conditions at the evacuation sites, they really do need everyone’s help. Their basic needs must be met, and we need to be there when they re-formulate their communities. Governments can make systems and policies and repair major infrastructure, but it’s people who make communities. As the people centered organization that we are, we can formulate people-centered assistance, which is a key aspect in this relief and recovery effort.