

Overview of the Session on Disaster and Civil Society

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Abstract

An overview of the issues discussed in the session on Disaster and Civil Society.

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The keynote lecture given by Tsujinaka centered on the impact of the triple disaster, earthquake, tsunami and as a consequence the fatal series of accidents in the Fukushima No.1 nuclear power plant of the Tokyo electric company TEPCO, that hit Northeastern Japan in March 2011 on Japanese society and the response of the civil society.

The lecture singled out the role of civil society in the aftermath of disaster as having been crucial in reducing the number of victims, in relieving their suffering and in coping with the day to day difficulties of the crisis. On the other hand, those responsible for the accident and for its early solution, i.e. the Japanese Government and the management of TEPCO, were almost totally unprepared to face the crisis.

Compared with the reactions of other populations hit by natural disasters, such as those of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, with looting, recurring violence, etc., the reaction of the Japanese people was indeed very different. According to the lecture, this difference is largely based on the role of civil society in Japan, with its “very thick and stubborn grass-roots associations.” The foremost of them is *Jichikai* (Neighbourhood associations, NHA), which through their activities constitute the essential source of social capital. The role of these organisations at the grass roots level is attributed to the long rule of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) with its strong base in rural Japan. In contrast, reformist parties did not (and do not) possess a strong base in rural Japan.

Faced with opposition to the initial implantation of nuclear power plants, the establishment preferred the soft way, by appeasing the population in the regions where power plants were built and investing enormous amounts of money, however, they did not work on the issue of improving the technical safety of the plants.

When the disaster hit, the establishment was totally unprepared; not only the ruling coalition led by the inexperienced Democratic Party, but also the LDP, all of them hesitating to face the nuclear crisis.

Paradoxically, in spite of the anti-nuclear sentiment among the general population, nuclear power has never been an election issue. As was pointed out in the lecture, “the Fukushima nuclear disaster revealed that the Japanese political system was unable to respond to the nuclear crisis squarely”.

So there is a Janus side to Japanese civil society. Being strong at the grass roots level it could provide a palliative in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. On the other hand, being decentralized, it lacked a coherent vision which could enable Japan and its people to keep the issue of nuclear energy in check.

Indeed, the points highlighted in the lecture operate even now. Due to the strong influence of the LDP the situation continues as before and local self-governing bodies have begun to approve the re-start of nuclear power plants, the first being the Sendai Nuclear power plant in Kyushu.

In his comment, Kaigo also pointed out another important aspect of the issue, i.e. that of the media, in particular the traditional media, which are limited in their freedom of reporting. The possible reasons for this being, in the author’s words: “press club gatekeeping; Fukushima Daiichi coverage (lack of free coverage); Secrecy Law (Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets (12/2014) [*Tokutei Himitsu no Hogo ni kansuru Horitsu*]); government control over television networks; problems of impartiality of Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK)” resulting in a general decline in usage of traditional media. The gap is filled by the new, internet-based media, i.e. e-mail, social media, etc.

Kaigo underlined the importance of the use of social media during the disaster of 3.11, twitter playing a crucial role in this case. Further, by using social media such as Facebook, Japanese municipalities would be able to provide vital information to citizens in the event of natural disasters, etc. Studies also show that various functions of government can elevate the civil society Facebook metrics and vice versa.

The overall conclusion would be that civil society at the grass roots level has potential for coping to a certain extent with disasters such as that of Fukushima, and new social media can provide an important venue for this. On the other hand, the continual influence of the powerful LDP hinders the autonomous development of civil society in Japan.