

Local and Global Lessons from 3.11

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Ten years ago, I sat in shock with colleagues and students watching livestreaming coverage of the unprecedented disaster unfolding in Japan. On that awful Friday, we only knew of the double disaster—a magnitude 9.1 earthquake and an “unimaginable” tsunami along the Sanriku coast of northern Japan. We heard initial reports of 1,000 people missing. Over the next weeks, along with people the world over, we learned that nearly 20,000 lives were lost. We learned that the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Power plant had melted down, making March 11 a triple disaster. We learned that well over 160 thousand people had to evacuate their homes to escape the threat of radiation.

Eleven thousand kilometers from Japan, students, staff and faculty at the Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies at Harvard started raising money for disaster relief and holding events to explain the disaster to large audiences. We also decided to create the Japan Disasters Digital Archive (JDA). We recognized that the record and the memory of this event, like any huge event in today’s world, would in large measure exist in born-digital materials that had to be preserved for posterity. Within weeks, we learned of similar efforts underway in Japan. Over the past decade, we have forged many valuable partnerships with archives in Japan, beginning with Tohoku University. Our project connects users to a wide range of separate projects to promote understanding of the March 11 tragedy long into the future.

One decade later, what lessons have people in Japan or elsewhere learned from the disaster? Have any of us, anywhere, become more resilient? What remains to be done?

The lessons of 3.11 are complicated. The first thing to note is that Japan was *already* a disaster resilient society, but there was more that could have been done and remains to be done. Since 1960, Japan has held an annual Disaster Prevention Day on September 1, the anniversary of the Great Kantō earthquake of 1923. After the 1995 Hanshin-Awaji earthquake, the government designated January 17 as Disaster Response Volunteers Day. Schools regularly conduct earthquake and tsunami drills. Residents in tsunami-prone coastal areas know of well-marked escape routes. The nation even before 3.11 boasted multiple research and policy centers for disaster science.

Without this long history of disaster awareness, far more lives would have been lost. Using data from mobile phones, an NHK report by Abe Hirofumi found that on March 11 at 14:26, roughly 700,000 people were located in the areas that would soon be inundated by the tsunami. A simple ratio of lives lost compared to this number indicates about 97 percent of the people in the inundated area survived.

At the same time, this report brought to light important problems that prevented others from surviving, ranging from traffic jams to understandable but tragic decisions to first stop by one’s home to meet family before escaping. Will lessons from these experiences be learned and remembered to save more lives, and in other locations as well? It is impossible to say. Sustained, and broadened, disaster education and training is a crucial task for the future.

Another important aspect of the domestic response to 3.11 is that not all solutions are generated and bestowed by Kasumigaseki. In some cases, creative local initiatives promise to preserve views and access to the sea, while relocating residents to safer ground. Other cities are building back as before, with even more massive seawalls. A variety of top-down projects, local initiatives and small-scale innovations offers a sort of natural experience, where the wisdom of different responses will be proven over a longer span than even one decade.

One of the notable aspects of the response to 3.11 is that not only in Japan, as we might expect, but all around the world, people have been seeking to learn lessons—both to better understand how Japanese society is changing and to help their own societies. Building on his earlier work on translocal ties, the MIT political scientist Richard Samuels showed in *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan* that municipal and prefectural governments in the disaster area forged win-win partnerships with localities around the nation. Partner governments sent staff to help in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. They brought valuable knowledge home.

Officials in the Kumamoto prefectural office, for example, report they put their experience gained from assistance in Tohoku to good use in constructing temporary housing after the widespread flooding in 2012 and in the wake of the 2016 earthquake. Their watchwords were “warmth” and “connection.”. In practical terms this meant use of wood to construct housing and setting up meeting spaces for residents to interact.

The importance of such efforts to sustain social ties has been reinforced by the work of another American political scientist, Daniel Aldrich. He argues for the important role that social networks play, both to enable life-saving evacuations and promote long-term recovery. His work places the 3.11 experience in dialogue with disasters and recovery around the world, offering valuable lessons for policy makers both in Japan and elsewhere.

The global response to 3.11 has not been limited to established scholars and policy experts. Numerous US-based graduate students redirected their research plans to focus on a range of 3.11-inspired topics: post-Fukushima food security and safety; mental health in the disaster region; women’s decisions in Iwate and Fukushima to have children; the impact of living in the shadow of radiation; the role of memorials and commemoration in keeping memory alive. A new generation of scholars will be focused on lessons of the disaster for many decades to come.

New generations of students around the world are also learning from Japan’s experience. The JDA project has been holding user workshops (with support from the Center for Global Partnership of the Japan Foundation) to bring the experience of 3.11 into American classrooms. From Alaska to Texas to Maine, teachers joined us from high schools and small colleges who teach subjects from literature to geography to physics. They devised lesson plans that allow their students, who in many cases have recently lived through floods or tornadoes, to understand that the faraway Japanese experience of 3.11 was profoundly relevant to their lives.

One of the most important decisions made immediately after the disaster came from two historians, Iokibe Makoto and Mikuriya Takashi, the chairman and vice-chairman of the

government's Reconstruction Design Council. The wise first priority of the Council's seven basic principles was a commitment to "record the disaster for eternity". TEPCO, regrettably, limits access to its massive new archive to its employees, for use in training. But the superb project of the National Diet Library preserves over 90 freely available digital archives, large and small. Our own project seeks to amplify this effort by enabling users to contribute their own materials and reports.

These efforts are important, but the temptations to forget are great. One of the most impressive presentations I have heard concerning lessons from the disaster came in 2015 from students at the Fukushima College middle school. They compared photographs of a region that was devastated by the 1933 Sanriku tsunami taken soon after that disaster to photographs taken many decades later. For a time, people remembered the experience and did not rebuild homes or businesses rebuilt in the inundation zone. But memories faded. Over time, people again chose to live in this dangerous area, only to suffer disaster once more. Sustained efforts to preserve and transmit memories and records are crucial.