

Chapter 7: Japan's humanitarian assistance

Strategic framework

Indicator: Clear political directives and strategies for resilience, response and recovery

Japan remains a global leader in disaster risk reduction, with respect to advancing the international agenda and its own programmes; other donors could learn from Japan's approach in this area. Its new policy framework for humanitarian assistance covers complex crises and disasters, and complies with good practice, although this has not led to a fundamental change in how Japan approaches humanitarian aid. Policy commitments to complex crises in Africa add an extra dimension – and new challenges – to the programme. The overall budget remains substantial, although it is declining. Despite continuing good practice in disaster recovery, Japan needs more special tools to support recovery from complex crises.

A new policy, and greater awareness of the humanitarian programme

Japan has finalised a new humanitarian policy (MOFA, 2011) that covers both disaster and conflict situations and applies the Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship (GHD, 2003), implementing the 2010 peer review recommendation. This new policy, together with the traumatic 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami, have helped raise awareness of Japan's humanitarian programme across MOFA, but has not fundamentally changed the way that Japan approaches its humanitarian programme. The National Security Strategy (Japan, 2013) also makes several references to humanitarian assistance, including disaster risk reduction (7.1.3) and disaster response (7.3.2), areas where Japan builds on its domestic experiences and demonstrates strong international leadership. Moreover, Japan has made policy commitments to Africa through the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) (Chapters 1 and 2). This has led to more funding for complex crises in Africa (7.2.1), both these areas – complex crises and Africa – bringing new challenges for Japan. Partners were not consulted on the humanitarian policy.

Effective support to disaster recovery, but no special arrangements for complex crises

Japan's new policy commits it to facilitate a smooth transition, and this is certainly the case in disaster response, where it uses innovative approaches to ensure a fast start to recovery. Tools include a contingent credit line called SECURE (Standby Emergency Credit for Urgent Recovery), which gives governments immediate access to funds after a natural disaster (when liquidity constraints are usually the highest), based on pre-existing agreements. Japan also sends recovery experts with its first response teams when disasters occur (Box 7.1), which is good practice. In the case of complex crises, however, Japan would benefit from more special tools to support recovery, although earmarking only to the country (and not project) level helps some partners incorporate recovery aspects in their programmes. However, humanitarian partners report that it is difficult to engage with development funding channels inside MOFA, complicating access to longer-term recovery funding.

Global leadership and influence in disaster risk reduction

Japan makes good use of its extensive knowledge and long history of disasters, including the devastating 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami, to drive the global agenda on disaster risk reduction and comprehensively incorporate risk reduction elements across all its programming. The National Security Strategy commits Japan to international leadership on disaster management, consolidating its international commitments to human security.¹ On the global stage, Japan champions the Hyogo Framework for Action (UN, 2005) and will host the third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, where the global community will agree the post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction (Box 3.1). Risk reduction is also an important pillar of Japan's own co-operation programme. Dedicated risk reduction programmes are funded through concessional loans, grants and public private partnerships, supported by JICA technical experts, to facilitate the sharing of Japan's superior experience and knowledge in this area. Other development projects are systematically disaster proofed, using tools such as JICA's disaster risk assessment and adhering to JICA's disaster management policy (JICA, 2012), which outlines the link between resilient societies and sustainable development. Risk reduction targets all layers of society, from governments down to local authorities and communities. Japan clearly has good experience to share with other donors in this important area.

A substantial but decreasing budget, with increased earmarking and less predictability

Japan's humanitarian budget comes from two sources: the regular budget, including un-earmarked funding for UN agencies and the emergency response reserve; and the supplementary budget, voted for in many cases in February and earmarked for specific "unforeseen needs", ironically including complex crises despite these crises being mostly long-term events. The overall humanitarian budget volume (regular plus supplementary) is decreasing due to the difficult domestic fiscal situation, the impact of the 2011 disaster and devaluation of the yen (Chapter 3). Indeed, many partners have seen their allocations drop by around 40% in 2013-14. Humanitarian aid also has tied components including, for example, the requirement to purchase some Japanese food commodities (Chapter 5). However, the budget remains substantial; Japan was the third largest DAC humanitarian donor in 2012, reporting commitments of USD 740 million.²

Effective programme design

Indicator: Programmes target the highest risk to life and livelihood

Overall funding criteria have shifted to mirror new policy commitments, including to Africa; however, the decision-making process – especially on what and who to fund – could benefit from greater transparency. There is a direct link between disaster early warning and early response. Japan is also working to include affected women in disaster response programming more systematically. Both these areas are less developed, however, in complex emergency situations.

National interest and policy commitments, backed up by embassy input, drive decision-making – but the process could be more transparent

Policy instruments and national interest guide Japan's humanitarian criteria. The Tokyo International Conference committed Japan to increase its focus on Africa; the Security Strategy highlights the need to address the situation in Syria as part of Middle East stability, which is necessary for energy security; and there are disaster risk reduction commitments. The humanitarian policy prioritises timely and efficient delivery through the “most appropriate” package of bilateral and multilateral contributions. In practice, input from local embassies is very important when deciding who, what and where to fund. Partners report that the number of Japanese staff in their organisation, and the number of senior-level visits to Japan, also seem to be important factors in funding negotiations. Japan must also take care that its desire to keep its citizens safe does not prohibit Japanese humanitarian professionals from working in active conflict environments. Partners agree that a more transparent funding decision process would provide greater predictability and thus improve impact on the ground.

Early warning leads to early disaster response

Japan monitors disaster early warning systems closely, and its embassies also maintain a crisis watching brief. In disaster situations this leads directly to rapid response (Box 7.1). As is the case with other donors, links to early funding for complex crises are not clear.

Learning lessons about beneficiary participation

Lessons from domestic crisis response – particularly related to the 2011 triple disaster – have shown Japan the need to include women more systematically in disaster response programming. Overall, bilateral response is good; an evaluation of Japan's Disaster Relief Teams (JDRTs) noted their close relationship with people affected by disasters and recommended that this continue (MOFA, 2012). In other situations (i.e. complex crises) Japan promotes participation by affected communities through its partners' programmes (MOFA, 2013).

Effective delivery, partnerships and instruments

Indicator: Delivery modalities and partnerships help deliver quality assistance

Japan has a highly respected disaster response system and is clearly a world leader in this area. There is close co-ordination with other donors for disaster response in Asia. Japan is also becoming a better partner to Japanese NGOs and international organisations, although there are a number of areas for improvement, especially with respect to transaction costs and the predictability and flexibility of funding. Sourcing the majority of the funds for complex crises from the supplementary budget results in tight earmarking, unpredictability and short-term timeframes – creating significant obstacles to effective funding in these difficult situations. It is clear that the increased focus on humanitarian response in Africa will require different tools and greater budget predictability.

Tight earmarking, lack of predictability and short-term timeframes are significant obstacles to effective response to complex crises

Much funding for complex crises comes from the supplementary budget, which is highly political with conditions that result in tight project earmarking, unpredictability, and short-term timeframes.³ International good practice shows that multi-annual funding works best for these long-term crisis situations. However, Japan has yet to make any multi-annual commitments. Instead there is pressure on partners to disburse their budgets by each December, a condition of the supplementary budget allocation. Conditions are strict; if projects cannot be completed within the allotted time frame, international organisations must either return funds or in some cases may ask for a grant extension. There is some core funding to United Nations agencies, but the amounts are small and declining. All this creates significant obstacles to the effective funding of complex crisis response, which is unfortunate given Japan's new policy commitments to crises in Africa. Shifting funding for these complex crises to the regular budget could be a useful next step.

A highly respected disaster response system

Japan has a highly respected disaster response system and the right tools and partnerships to ensure rapid and appropriate crisis response. Funding comes from a reserve taken from the regular budget, with additional funds through JICA and the Ministry of Defence for the JDRTs,⁴ which are recognised as world class (MOFA, 2012). NGO partners access rapid response funds prepositioned with the Japan Platform umbrella body (7.3.3), with pledges possible in 72 hours – much quicker than using MOFA's standard NGO grant process. Other grants, for international organisations, are made available in response to flash appeals. Grants and loans are also provided directly to affected governments to support recovery efforts. In addition, Japan meets its humanitarian policy commitment to fund the Central Emergency Response Fund, with modest annual contributions of around USD 3 million. Finally, it manages six warehouses of in-kind relief supplies around the world. These tools were all used successfully to support the response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (Box 7.1).

Box 7.1 Japan's response to Typhoon Haiyan

Typhoon Haiyan was an exceptionally powerful tropical cyclone that devastated parts of Southeast Asia, particularly the Philippines, on 8 November 2013. Over 11 million people were affected, with many left homeless⁽¹⁾

Japan was ready to respond well before Typhoon Haiyan struck, based on information received through international early warning systems. Japanese experts (through JICA) were immediately seconded to United Nations Disaster Assessment and Co-ordination (UNDAC); they were en route to the Philippines before the typhoon made landfall. Japan then contacted operational partners; Japanese NGOs were asked to email emergency proposals through the Japan Platform umbrella body, and international agencies were offered funding support. Approval for Japanese NGO projects was provided in under three days, and USD 20 million was allocated to international partners in support of the Flash Appeal, mostly for short-term projects.

On the bilateral side, Japan offered its Search and Rescue and Medical Teams to the Philippines government. Following approval, the Medical Team, comprising volunteer hospital staff on standby around Japan, was flown to the affected area and was on the ground in less than 24 hours. Japanese staff working on development projects advised the incoming disaster teams and helped with the subsequent handover to local authorities. The Self Defense Forces also responded with aircraft and medical teams, which focused on transportation of relief goods and affected people, vaccination and other disease prevention tasks. The Ministry of Infrastructure provided telecommunications experts to restore important communications services, and the Coast Guard was dispatched to repair offshore electricity plants. A Japanese infrastructure expert was sent to advise counterparts in the Philippines government on infrastructure rehabilitation. Japan also provided stocks from its warehouse in Singapore to the Philippines government, which organised their distribution to affected communities.

(1) More information on Typhoon Haiyan is available at <http://reliefweb.int/disaster/tc-2013-000139-phl>.

Source: Peer review team discussions with Japan in Tokyo.

Japan is becoming a better partner, but there are a number of areas for improvement

Japan has made progress on the partnership front since the last peer review, but a number of areas for improvement remain. International organisations report that staff in permanent missions and MOFA are very supportive, facilitating the overall relationship. However, a number of unusual requirements lead to high transaction costs, which Japan could endeavour to reduce. These include the requests for some UN agencies to have an office in Japan, and for regular (at least annual) senior-level UN official visits to Japan, and continued pressure on agencies to hire Japanese nationals as staff. On the funding side, partners report a lack of predictability and no budget envelope indications, a drop in core funding, and pressure to disburse grants rapidly, linked to the requirements of the supplementary budget process (7.3.1). Partners are also required to submit individual project proposals in the Japanese (rather than agency) format. Earmarking has improved, however, with some earmarks now at the country rather than sector and project level. Finally, there is a high level of requests for supplementary information. MOFA says that international organisations have not raised issues concerning the administrative burden with them.

The Japanese Platform umbrella body groups Japanese humanitarian NGOs, representatives of the private sector and MOFA staff for regular dialogue and rapid response funding. This could be a model for public-private partnership in humanitarian assistance, although partners regret the limited input from the private sector on humanitarian issues.

Close donor co-ordination in Asia

The humanitarian policy states that Japan will make efforts to build a close-knit network of donors. Japan reports close co-ordination with China and Korea, and notes its special relationship with the United States for disaster relief, reconfirmed in 2013. It also regularly attends regional disaster response simulations with ASEAN countries.

Organisation fit for purpose

Indicator: Systems, structures, processes and people work together effectively and efficiently

Whole-of-government systems appear to function adequately, and civil-military co-ordination appears to conform to international good practice despite a lack of active safeguards. Partners consider staff to have an appropriate understanding of humanitarian issues, but would prefer lower staff turnover rates to avoid the need to regularly rebuild relationships.

MOFA is the lead government actor

In Tokyo, MOFA takes the lead in humanitarian assistance, centralising and sharing information and requesting support from other government departments. In the field, the ODA Task Force (Chapter 1) does not play a role in emergency response but will help with priority-setting for post-disaster recovery.

No concerns exist about civil-military co-ordination

The 2010 peer review recommended that Japan promote dialogue between humanitarian and defence actors to uphold the impartiality of Japanese humanitarian assistance. Although there has not been any active dialogue, the new humanitarian policy recognises international good practice in civil-military co-ordination (IASC, 2008; OCHA, 2007), and commits Japan to participate in international dialogue and joint training. Japan also insists that all deployments of the Self Defence Forces are made following a request from MOFA and are under civilian command. Thus, although there are no systematic safeguards in place, no concerns were raised during this peer review about the principled nature of Japan's civil military response system.

Some concerns related to staff turnover

Humanitarian staff include the secretariat of the Japanese Disaster Relief team, housed at JICA, a core team of 16 staff at MOFA, and staff who liaise with international organisations, seconded from the Ministry of Justice to Permanent Missions. Some training is available, mostly in disaster response. Partners are satisfied that staff understand humanitarian issues but are concerned at the frequent turnover, which requires regular rebuilding of relationships, including the understanding of individual agencies' processes and mandates.

Results, learning and accountability

Indicator: Results are measured and communicated, and lessons learnt

Monitoring partner results and its own performance as a good humanitarian donor are not high priorities for Japan. Instead, monitoring focuses heavily on bilateral responses and on partner disbursement rates, driven in turn by the conditions of the supplementary budget. There are clear commitments to transparency of the programme, but more could be done to share results with the public and other key stakeholders.

No plans to monitor performance as a donor

The Japanese Disaster Relief Team's performance was evaluated in 2012 (MOFA, 2012) and the recommendations are currently being implemented. The peer review team was also made aware of discussions on a proposed evaluation of Japan as a humanitarian donor in 2014. A first step to support such an evaluation in the future would be the identification of verifiable indicators for its humanitarian objectives and strategies in a similar fashion as described in Chapter 6.

Monitoring focuses more on disbursements than results

There is a significant administrative burden on partners, which are required to submit individual project reports and provide regular updates on their disbursement rates. It appears that Japan monitors disbursements more closely than actual results achieved through its humanitarian funding. Partners are also required to provide photographs of Japanese funded projects. Japan could usefully recalibrate its monitoring to focus more clearly on results and less on disbursements.

Committed to transparency, Japan could be more proactive in sharing results

The humanitarian policy commits Japan to make humanitarian assistance more transparent and to be fully accountable to the public, including through sharing the results of programme monitoring and making other relevant information available. MOFA publishes the results of evaluations on its websites and holds regular seminars on humanitarian assistance with international organisations, JICA and NGOs (MOFA, 2013). The humanitarian policy and details of recent grant decisions are available on the ministry's website, but MOFA could be more proactive about sharing the results of its humanitarian programme.

Notes

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1. Refer to UN General Assembly resolution A/66/L.55/Rev.1.
 2. Figure reported as commitments in USD current prices.
 3. The supplementary budget is proposed in December, approved in February, and must be fully disbursed by December of the same year.
 4. There are four teams able to meet requests from disaster affected countries: (i) the Search and Rescue Team, with International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) heavy classification; (ii) the Medical Team; (iii) the Expert Team, which provides technical advice or guidance on emergency response measures and post-disaster recovery; and (iv) the Self Defence Force Unit. The teams are managed by JICA. More information is available at www.jica.go.jp/english/our_work/types_of_assistance/emergency.html.

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