

The Roles of International NGOs toward Post-Disaster

Reconstruction Process of Tohoku Region

-Disaster response of Habitat for Humanity Japan in Iwate and Miyagi Prefecture-

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1. Background:

The Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, one of the most devastating natural disasters to strike Japan in modern times, caused more than 23,000 casualties, and a huge impact with the loss of the built environment: 118,640 homes destroyed and 183,033 homes damaged. This unprecedented scenario engaged diverse national and international actors willing to support the recovery process. In this study, the interventions of International Humanitarian Organizations are the main concern, which addressed affected areas with different capacities, expertise and orientations for their activities.

This thesis presents Habitat for Humanity Japan (HFHJ) as a study case. Through the understanding and analysis of its operation process, focused on projects leading to recovery of the built-environment, crucial issues for International NGOs are identified. The following questions will be explored: What are the obstacles to adaptation to the local environment?, What factors influence operational coordination?, How can we understand the organizational orientation and definition of roles for operations in Tohoku?

2. Methodology:

Three stages are defined for the understanding of local situation and evolution of the response:

- a. Internship: Field based in HFHJ local offices in Iwate and Miyagi Prefectures (October – December 2011).
- b. Literature review of government response, review of activity reports of HFHJ and other organizations working in the field.
- c. Field Work: Qualitative approached semi-structured interviews with managers of HFHJ in Tokyo and local offices, partner's staff and local coordination platform in Iwate Prefecture, local residents and former volunteers.

3. Major findings:

Three major issues were identified as influencing the success of the organization's operations:

1. Adaptation to the local environment, local social and cultural backgrounds, and regulations and established procedures.
2. Construction of operational networks in order to coordinate with governmental bodies, collaborate with local stakeholders and approach affected communities, are vital for the development of operations..
3. Building operational capacities, as a result of the establishment in target areas, definition of roles, improvement of organizational capacities and definition of term for operations.

4. Conclusions:

The major prerequisite for working in the Japanese context is the ability to work on local relationship construction prior to the development of activities, and define the unattended areas to cover the local needs.

Simultaneously, it is necessary to work on overcome cultural and language barriers in working sites, understanding local culture, that allow the access to local communities.

Finally, following the definition of approaches and roles in the local context, it is vital to work on the development of organization's capacities.