



Diet-NGO Leaders Delegation to the United States: Enhancing US-Japan Cooperation on Humanitarian Responses

Program Report & Recommendations | January 2016

In autumn 2015, a unique delegation of Japanese Diet members and NGO leaders visited Washington DC to exchange views with US government officials, Congressional members, NGO leaders, policy experts, and aid workers about how Japan and the United States can partner more effectively in responding to humanitarian crises. The institutional capacity of Japanese NGOs was identified as one obstacle to promoting US-Japan partnerships that take full advantage of the assets of each country, so special focus was placed on discussing how NGOs have developed into partners for the US government, what lessons can be taken to improve government-NGO coordination in humanitarian and development assistance in Japan, and how Japanese and US NGOs can be better integrated into bilateral initiatives. This program, which was held from September 28 to October 2, was co-organized by Mercy Corps and the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE).

Key findings

Over the past several decades, US NGOs have grown to be major players in humanitarian and development assistance.

For instance, last year Mercy Corps had \$307 million in revenue and employed 4,000 staff, Save the Children USA raised \$689 million, and World Vision had more than \$1 billion in income along with 46,000 staff worldwide.

Different branches of the US government—from the White House to the State Department and USAID—consider NGOs to be strategic partners.

Government officials acknowledge that there are many programs that the US government and UN agencies cannot carry out as effectively as NGOs. They also tend to rely heavily on NGOs to provide up-to-date information on what is happening on the ground in affected communities, some which are beyond the reach of the US government. As a result, they feel that US interests are better served by ensuring that NGOs remain autonomous and are treated as equal partners, even when their views may not fully align with the government policy of the day.

Delegation members

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Hiroaki Ishii,
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Keiko Kiyama,
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Masahiko Shibayama,
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The US government undertook a strategic initiative to build up the institutional capacity of humanitarian groups in the 1970s and 1980s that helped them grow into the major actors they are today. USAID began making grants designed, in part, to allow NGOs to expand their capabilities, gradually increasing the size of these grants as the NGOs grew. Now, the US government funds a number of narrowly targeted capacity-building initiatives, for example, supporting efforts to improve NGO security practices in conflict zones and other dangerous environments.

As their institutional capacity expanded with government support, US NGOs could appeal to a wider range of donors, diversifying their funding.

For instance, in the early 1990s, after benefiting from USAID support for capacity building, Save the Children USA was receiving roughly 75 percent of its income from the US Government, but now most of its support comes from private donations and only 30 percent from the US government.

Unlike the Japanese government, the US government provides its full share of support for indirect costs in all of its funding for humanitarian and development assistance. This practice is designed to ensure that NGOs can operate government-funded programs in as safe and sustainable of a manner as possible, without needing additional outside funding. Plus, US leaders see a strategic value in keeping NGOs strong so they can be utilized to implement a wide range of programs. These indirect costs cover headquarter expenses, salaries of managerial staff, and other administrative costs that cannot be counted as direct costs for individual programs. Each NGO negotiates its indirect cost rates separately depending on its circumstances, and these tend to vary widely for major humanitarian organizations, with some receiving indirect costs calculated at roughly 10 percent of total direct costs and others receiving nearly 30 percent.

Two decades ago, there was little trust between US NGOs and the military, but NGO-military coordination has expanded dramatically.

Now, NGOs participate in joint exercises and have regular consultations with military officers about how to cooperate on humanitarian responses when the military is not in a combatant role. US military officials feel that cooperation with NGOs has improved the speed and efficacy of US disaster assistance. Coordination between Japanese NGOs and the SDF is still highly limited, but some US experts argue it will be helpful to include Japanese NGOs in regional exercises that already include the US and Japanese militaries and American NGOs.

There is a clear need for greater funding of humanitarian responses, but there are also strong hopes among US and Japanese leaders that Japan will continue to contribute more proactively and in a more direct manner on many of the key challenges of the day, rather than falling back on “checkbook diplomacy.” For example, instead of just providing funds for initiatives to deal with refugee crises, it would have a large symbolic impact overseas if Japan were also to find a way to welcome some refugees to be resettled into Japan, even if it is a small number.

US leaders have high hopes for stronger US-Japan partnership on humanitarian assistance, development, and other global issues. In addition to greater coordination on humanitarian assistance, areas where US experts feel that Japanese and American NGOs and government agencies might be able to work together effectively include the promotion of disaster risk reduction (DRR) in smaller Asia Pacific nations, the advancement of health security, and economic and political development in Myanmar and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

The delegation spoke with representatives of the following organizations:

US government: US Congress, White House/National Security Council, State Department & USAID

Think tanks: Council on Foreign Relations, Center for Strategic & International Studies, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, US Institute of Peace, etc.

NGOs and support groups:

InterAction, Save the Children USA, International Medical Corps, Global Giving, World Vision, etc.

Specific Recommendations

Target	Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Political leaders• Japanese government	1. The Japanese government could benefit by taking a more strategic approach to building up the capacity of its NGO sector to contribute to humanitarian and development programs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Political leaders	2. Politicians have a special role to play in helping to create an environment in which NGOs can truly become strategic partners of the government in providing humanitarian and development assistance.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• US & Japanese governments• NGOs	3. Both the United States and Japan would benefit from greater bilateral dialogue on humanitarian and development issues. There are useful discussions already underway between the two governments, and it will help to engage NGOs in these dialogues given the increasingly important role that NGOs play in operating programs in these fields.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• US & Japanese governments• NGOs	4. Japanese and American NGOs should explore ways to strengthen their institutional linkages including by cooperating on joint projects in the field when each side has some comparative advantage. The two countries' governments are also likely to benefit from greater collaboration between NGOs, which is likely to help advance their overall foreign policy aims.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• US & Japanese governments	5. There is considerable US interest in greater coordination on the humanitarian and development agenda in the G7 and in other international forums, especially since Japan holds the presidency of the G7 in 2016.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Japanese government	6. If the Japanese government wants NGOs to be effective partners, it is critical to begin covering indirect costs when funding projects. This would also make US-Japan NGO partnerships more appealing—currently American NGOs are hesitant to partner with Japanese groups because they cannot be reimbursed for the indirect expenses that go into these partnerships.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Japanese government• Political leaders	7. The implementation of regulations on how NGOs spend and report on Japanese government funding for humanitarian and development assistance should be made less stringent. An overly strict interpretation of reporting requirements places an inordinate administrative burden on both government officials and NGO staff, and the extraordinary amount of time and energy they are forced to spend collecting large amounts of detailed information diverts them from achieving their broader missions. To ensure the proper use of taxpayer money, it may be useful to simultaneously increase the penalties for the misuse of government funds.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• NGOs	8. Japanese NGOs should jointly develop security standards to guide how they can operate safely in insecure environments. It would be most effective to draw on the US model, under which NGOs are self-regulating but can rely on support from an NGO association to disseminate information on best practices and to provide training on security issues.