

Being a victim of disaster myself, I would firstly like to express my sincere gratitude for the incredible support received from all over the world when the Great East Japan Earthquake struck in March 2011.

Now, allow me to pose the following question: How would you deal with a situation in which 600 people suddenly arrive at the building where you work seeking refuge, and end up staying there for several days? This is precisely what I experienced during the 2011 earthquake disaster.

On March 11, an earthquake of magnitude 9.0 struck a vast area of eastern Japan. A great tsunami was then triggered along the coastline. In some places the *tsunami* rose to a height of over 30 meters and subsequently many residential buildings were badly damaged. It has been reported that at its peak nearly 500,000 people had to seek refuge.

Since we are a lay Buddhist organization, our centers act as venues where people in the community can gather on a daily basis to hold meetings to learn about Buddhism and encourage one another. Although our centers had been equipped with some emergency supplies in preparation for receiving refugees in times of disaster, on this particular occasion we were under pressure to provide the kind of response that far exceeded what was possible with the supplies that we had.

By that evening a total of nearly 600 people—comprising not only Soka Gakkai members but also non-Buddhists from the surrounding neighborhoods—came to seek refuge at the Tohoku Culture Center where I work. No one, however, had had any experience of managing an emergency shelter of this scale so everything had to be done through trial-and-error.

It was not until the middle of the night that we finally managed to start preparing the following morning's provisions. We called on the evacuees for help and succeeded in getting together eight rice cookers, including some that the evacuees had brought from their homes, and we made 1,000 rice balls by working through the night using our emergency power generation at full capacity.

Then, at 2 a.m., the first batch of relief supplies arrived from Soka Gakkai members

from a nearby prefecture, and this was a great source of encouragement.

In this way we were able to meet the challenge of distributing food to the evacuees the following morning without any incident.

The next day, we received vast quantities of rice balls that were sent from Soka Gakkai members living in Niigata prefecture nearly 300 kilometers away, and who had also overcome the tragedy of a great earthquake.

Moreover, these rice balls had been handmade through the sincerity of ordinary people. Had they been placed as an order through a manufacturer, each of these rice balls would have been mechanically lined up in rows in the same cases, looking identical. However, the rice balls we received were of different shapes and sizes, and the boxes in which they arrived were varied; some were boxes for casing oranges and others for casing sweets. But the one thing that was common to all these boxes was that contained in each of them were heartfelt messages that read, “Please do your best! Remember that winter always turns to spring,” or, “Now it’s our turn to pray for all of your victory.”

In light of their own experiences, the members from Niigata felt compelled to take action and they did so of their own accord in great unity. Their sincerity encouraged us to never give in, and a fire was reignited in our hearts.

Despite being disaster victims themselves, some of the evacuees expressed their desire to offer assistance in any way possible. Some helped out with the night-time security; others engaged in physical labor. Due to the cut in water supply, there were also those who kindly assisted in teaching fellow evacuees how to use the portable toilets on a round-the-clock basis.

Furthermore, several Soka Gakkai members who work as doctors and nurses rushed to our aid from both the local neighborhood, as well as other areas, to care for evacuees in poor physical condition.

We fought on in our struggle, holding fast to the message of encouragement from SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, in which he wrote that, “Nothing can destroy the ‘treasures

of the heart’.”

In the end, we managed to run the emergency shelter securely whilst we worked to prevent the outbreak of any major incident or associated death. We cooperated with the government and Self-Defense Forces whenever the need arose, but the Soka Gakkai community centers were assessed at an early stage as being run autonomously and having plentiful supplies. This then meant that the government was able to distribute extra relief supplies to other evacuation shelters. In addition we could gather information on other shelters’ situation through individual members’ commitment, and it helped local authorities’ relief activity.

Although we are in no way professionals, I believe that the following points were crucial in enabling us to strive in the way that we did and also to contribute to the government’s relief efforts:

Firstly, we had emergency evacuation shelters that were safe and stocked with relief supplies.

If the people who use such facilities on a regular basis prepare themselves by keeping in mind the possibility that the facility might need to be used as an evacuation shelter, there is no doubt that they will be able to make a significant contribution in times of an emergency.

The second point is regular interactions within the network of people rooted in the community. As a Buddhist organization, we host various events on a daily basis and have many opportunities to speak with people about their personal situations.

As a result this helped us to cooperate smoothly and to deal decisively with the situation at the crucial moment. There were also many instances in which those who held leadership roles within the organization had been aware of specific individuals who were suffering with poor health so could deal with their individual needs promptly.

I believe that deepening personal ties within a particular organization, as well as deepening relations within communities neighboring the emergency shelters, are essential with regards to disaster risk reduction.

My third point concerns the importance of emotional encouragement. We were

overwhelmed with despair on many occasions, but what saved us were the messages of encouragement that were packaged inside the relief supplies, or had been sent via email from people living in other areas.

When ordinary citizens engage in these kinds of relief efforts in the event of an emergency, they may—at least temporarily—be able to push themselves ahead spurred on by a sense of mission, but if the situation becomes ongoing, a great burden is placed on both their mental and emotional needs. I believe this is when follow-up care becomes essential.

Moving on, I would now like to introduce some activities we have undertaken in order to help spread the lessons that have been learnt regarding engaging private citizens to DRR, and how we can enable citizens to become protagonists in this field.

We are currently in the process of making a video that can be used by our members independently to learn about DRR. We are also holding feedback sessions across more than one thousand of our community centers, in addition to consolidating our manuals.

At any rate, I fully realize that when ordinary citizens are able to run a detailed simulation of a ‘what-if scenario’ within the circumstances in which they are placed, they will respond more earnestly and be able to undertake careful preparation.

What is more, sufficiently educating the people who belong to an organization—whether it be a company or a religious entity—will, in turn, contribute greatly to society as a whole.

As with my second point, sharing experiences is an important subject, and this has also been set out in the Sendai Framework for DRR. Within our organization in Japan, representatives of the Youth Division residing in areas outside the disaster-stricken areas collected accounts from people who lived through the disaster, and these were later serially published in our organ publication.

Based on this, we were able to publish in March last year a book entitled “March 11, 2011: More Than Survival”. This book introduces accounts by various individuals and gives a solid sense of each person’s experience. We have received feedback from some of the readers, one of whom wrote, “I gained a thorough understanding of the extent to which the consequences of the disaster impacted each individual,” while another reader

wrote, “Rather than simply being a book for acquiring knowledge, there was something very moving about this book and it became a motivating factor for me to engage in DRR.”

Disaster prevention education is being actively carried out in Japan but we sometimes hear the view that it is becoming a matter of formality.

Furthermore, despite the fact that evacuation drills are well established in schools, there is a tendency for opportunities to engage in such drills to diminish drastically when they join the workforce. For this reason, it is necessary for each person to adjust their approach to DRR so as to be able to regard this issue as one that directly concerns themselves. In that sense, past personal experience can prove very effective, so it is important to provide diverse opportunities for people to gain that crucial experience.

The last point is about involving the youth. The importance of young people is also stressed in the Sendai Framework, since it is hoped that they will provide great assistance during an outbreak of a disaster. However, some existing challenges need to be tackled, such as the fact that many of the youth do not have much interaction with other citizens in their local communities, and that they are also not interested in the activities carried out by their local community associations.

Each year, we conduct an opinion survey of about 5,000 youth in the Shikoku region where a great earthquake is predicted to strike, with the aim, among other things, of increasing awareness.

It has become clear that overall the youth in that region have a strong tendency to rely on social networking service as a source of gathering information, and that they are not very familiar with the whereabouts of evacuation shelters in their local communities. We hope to share these findings with academics, as well as with the government, so that they can be used to improve awareness.

In Japan, we often use the term “self-help, mutual help and public help.” Ordinary citizens tend to rely on public help, but there is a limit to what governments can do in the event of emergency situations. There is no doubt, therefore, that the way in which each of us as citizens prepare for disasters will greatly influence the scale of the damage. We

are determined to continue our efforts in putting the lessons we have learnt to good use and heighten the resilience of ordinary citizens.