



# Institutional Coordination in Disaster Management in the Asia Pacific

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Papers in the special collection on Institutional Coordination in Disaster Management in the Asia Pacific are available at [https://ascelibrary.org/nhrefo/disaster\\_management\\_asia\\_pacific](https://ascelibrary.org/nhrefo/disaster_management_asia_pacific)

## Introduction

According to the United Nations, between 1970 and 2016, natural disasters in East Asia have killed an average of 43,000 people per year (ESCAP 2018). This special collection, “Institutional Coordination in Disaster Management in the Asia Pacific,” focuses on organizational responses to the frequent earthquakes, tsunamis, flooding, and landslides that have affected millions of people in Asia. Affected governments have established national departments responsible for crisis response and regional organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have developed various multilateral bodies to facilitate disaster preparedness.

This collection examines the problems that organizations face in transitioning from emergency response to resilience and reconstruction programming. While many countries have developed response mechanisms that deal with the immediate impact of a crisis, few governments have established mechanisms to guide organizations as they transition from providing emergency response services to implementing long-term reconstruction and preparedness programming. Organizations that provide aid across the different phases of disaster response must coordinate and integrate their strategies and technologies to ensure a sustained and effective response. In this process, organizations face unanticipated obstacles, demands, and changes in available partners, resources, and technologies. Additionally, private sector, military, nongovernmental, and governmental agencies have different standard operating procedures, disparate resource capacities, and varying types of technical, issue-area, and logistical expertise.

## Puzzle and Development of the Papers

Generally, scholars and practitioners consider disaster response effective based on whether crisis-affected populations can easily access necessary aid and services, the timeliness with which these services are provided after disaster onset, the appropriateness of services provided, whether the intervening organizations have helped protect the rights of those affected by the crisis, and the extent to which response meets pre-established objectives (ALNAP 2015). Scholars and practitioners agree that actors involved in disaster management can

maximize the effectiveness of response and recovery-based efforts by placing responsibility in a single authority, assigning tasks and responsibilities to organizations participating in disaster response planning and programming by constructing nested, hierarchical relationships with and bolstering horizontal coordination between involved stakeholders (Aggarwal 1985, 1998). Establishing a single authority in the wake of a natural disaster can facilitate clear communication and quick decision-making (Coppola 2006; Chen et al. 2006; Farazmand 2001; Altay and Green 2006).

However, methodological and theoretical limitations prevent existing scholarship from providing insight into the factors that bolster or stymie effective service provision as organizations transition from one phase of disaster response to another. First, there is no clear consensus on what constitutes effective disaster management. Not only are there a variety of confounding factors that complicate the relationship between aid provided, development indicators, and effectiveness (Bourguignon and Sundberg 2007), but different stakeholders also measure the effectiveness of their response in substantially different ways. Humanitarian organizations and policy stakeholders often use measures of material service provision as proxies for effectiveness (United Nations 2010). We define disaster response as effective when a majority of the crisis-affected population receives the services and aid necessary to return them to pre-crisis living standards.

Second, while scholars have focused on identifying ways to boost disaster response effectiveness, few have identified factors that prevent and disincentivize organizations from effectively coordinating service provision and aid distribution. Existing literature has yet to examine how organizations coordinate service provision during the transition from one phase of disaster management to another and how factors at one phase of disaster management influence and constrain the effectiveness of service provision at others.

Our special issue highlights the work of public policy, political science, and humanitarian experts who have focused on various aspects of service provision after crisis onset to identify obstacles present at each phase of disaster management. The obstacles include organizational characteristics, clear and consistent channels of communication between relevant stakeholders, crisis-affected populations’ perceptions of service providers and the aid that is being delivered, and actors’ perceptions of costly investment in disaster preparedness and resilience programming.

## Preview of the Papers

The special issue consists of two kinds of papers—thematic issues and country-specific papers that explore national responses to disasters. With respect to thematic papers, Melissa Carlson and Vinod Aggarwal’s paper “Military Forces, Coercive Signals, and Disaster Response Effectiveness” examines the critical puzzle of why governments deploy their armed forces to respond to only certain foreign natural disasters. Focusing on the international political dynamics of disaster relief, they argue that when relief-sending countries deploy their military forces to respond to natural disasters abroad, they can signal their hard power capabilities to the crisis-affected and foreign governments involved in disaster response.

These strategic considerations constrain on-the-ground coordination between foreign and national militaries involved in the disaster response. Unfortunately, this politicization of disaster relief can prevent or stall the provision of critical aid to crisis-affected individuals (Carlson and Aggarwal 2020).

In “Building Blocks of Coordination: The ASEAN experience,” Arnel Capili examines how the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has attempted to coordinate disaster relief. ASEAN countries are highly diverse in terms of culture and income. Geographic location has exacerbated these socioeconomic disparities, making them prone to natural hazards. As such, ASEAN has made mitigation and rapid response to natural hazards a priority. The paper explores how the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (ACCHADM) builds trust with national and local partners and argues that building such co-operation mechanisms is essential *prior* to disaster onset to ensure smooth disaster response (Capili 2021).

In “Civil-Military Coordination in Disaster Preparedness and Response,” Lloyd Michael Puckett examines the interplay among both civil organizations and militaries that operate at the regional, national, and international levels in coordinating disaster response. He shows how political constraints, trust issues, lack of formal agreements, and deficiencies in habitual relationships pre-disaster affect civil-military coordination after disaster onset. He argues that current initiatives being undertaken by the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus Experts Working Group on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), ACCHADM, and the Regional Consultative Group on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific may help address these issues (Puckett 2021).

Irving Jake Jacoby and David Greenfader’s paper, “Government and Private Sector Coordination in Disaster Response: Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico,” explores the interplay between the government and private sector by focusing on the impact of Hurricane Maria. They examine how a solar-powered generator, could be used by governments and other civil organizations involved in disaster response to mitigate the likelihood of electric grid failure, which in turn increases the effective provision of critical medical aid. This technological innovation and its successful deployment suggest a need to enhance partnerships between government and the private sector (Jacoby and Greenfader, forthcoming).

Turning to country studies, Sheuwen Chuang and Hui Yan Ho’s paper “Taiwan’s Experience in Disaster Coordination,” identifies the various natural hazards that Taiwan faces due to its location on the earthquake-prone circum-Pacific belt and seasonal typhoon impact zone. Given the distribution of its population on a small island with high urban density, disasters in Taiwan can have consequences. The paper traces the evolution of the national Disaster Prevention and Response Act (DPRA), arguing that effective response was hindered by unclear responsibilities for mobilization, lack of real time information systems, ineffective communication mechanisms, coordination problems among government agencies, and a failure to conduct sufficient planning exercises (Chuang and Ho 2021).

In “Institutional Coordination of Disaster Management: Engaging National and Local Governments in Japan,” Mikio Ishiwatari examines the respective roles of national and local governments in disaster response. While local governments have the principal responsibility for managing disasters, they are often overstretched and have limited capacity and experience in disaster management compared to national-level agencies. The paper argues that, in the Japanese context, external organizations should coordinate the provision of support directly with local government agencies in the country (Ishiwatari 2020).

Finally, Seungjoo Lee’s paper “The Evolution of Korea’s Disaster-Management Diplomacy: Disaster Management as a Nexus between ODA Policy and Middle-Power Diplomacy,” elucidates how South Korea became an emerging leader in disaster management and preparedness in the region. He demonstrates that, after Korea acceded to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) in 2010, it was able to leverage changes in international approaches to aid delivery to become more active in response to extreme events caused by natural hazards in the region. He concludes by highlighting that, while substantial progress has been made, the region faces daunting challenges in solidifying the regional cooperation for disaster management (Lee 2021).

## Conclusion

What lessons might we learn about effective disaster management from this special issue? It is hardly controversial that effective coordination would enhance the abilities of local governments, national governments, and regional and international actors to respond to disasters. While uncontroversial in theory, in practice there are many disincentives for coordination. First, countries often couch disaster management within broader state goals. These include efforts to signal military capabilities to other states or to engage in disaster response operations for diplomatic positioning. Second, regional organizations often are involved in a competitive dynamic that stymies cooperation. Third, within countries, both coordination between national and local governments, as well as state and nonstate actors who often view each other with suspicion, creates an obstacle to effective disaster response. Fourth, while there is often agreement on how to respond to the immediate needs of populations in a disaster, maintaining this consensus when moving to resilience and reconstruction programming has proven challenging.

Our findings point to the inevitable politicization of disaster response. While this may seem to be depressing conclusion, politics can also lead to decisions on a division of labor among stakeholders. Simply focusing on technical solutions that seem “obvious” to deal with natural disasters may appear to be appealing to technical experts. Yet without a better understanding of the competitive dynamics inherent in disaster management, efforts to implement effective disaster response will undoubtedly flounder. Sometimes shedding light on actors’ motivations and efforts may be the best approach to improving our understanding of the steps that need to be taken to increase our efforts to meet the needs of crisis-affected populations.

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