

IN FOCUS

Lessons from Fukushima:

An Unconventional Role for Philanthropy

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Four months have passed since the catastrophic earthquake that claimed tens of thousands of lives in Japan. Like other disasters of such scale, it is still hard to imagine in human terms the disruption and longevity of the impact. What made the Japanese case different, though, was the added risk of a nuclear disaster. A massive tsunami had damaged the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant along the coast. Within hours it was clear that the multiple reactors there were in real trouble.



Fukushima: Courtesy of Ploughshares Fund

Ploughshares Fund and many of the groups they fund became extremely busy in the weeks between mid-March and late April, when media attention to the nuclear disaster was intense and sustained. Ploughshares Fund -- a U.S. based foundation dedicated exclusively to security and peace funding and working to change nuclear weapons technology -- took part in scores of media interviews and discussions, from television to radio to print outlets. Why did we bother? What purpose did it all serve? Is there a lesson for philanthropy and ways in which the broader human rights and peace and security funding community can provide value in this type of response in the future?

Immediate Response – Urgent But Difficult

Early on in the crisis, there was little to do other than provide an urgent, immediate humanitarian response. The International Red Cross established donation sites and provided assistance to earthquake victims. Various humanitarian and disaster response organizations reached out for resources and attempted to help with rescue, medical assistance, and locating people. Even Google established a search site where you could type the name of someone in Japan and find out if there was any information about that person's fate. As with any event of this scale -- such as the Haiti earthquake, Hurricane Katrina, and the 2004 tsunami -- there is not much one individual or organization can do other than apply existing capacities to the best of its ability.

However, as the *nuclear* aspect of the earthquake and tsunami unfolded, a different kind of need emerged. Ploughshares Fund became concerned that the media frenzy around the unfolding nuclear disaster at the Fukushima power plant was counterproductive. So little information about what was happening was available, and the mystique surrounding radiation and nuclear technology was so strong, that media reports quickly became provocative, misleading, inaccurate, and, in some cases, simply fabricated. Ploughshares believed that we and the nuclear NGO community could play a constructive, corrective role by providing unbiased, accurate, and timely information that was accessible to the

public. We were confident that our expertise on nuclear weapons and production was readily transferable to the field of nuclear energy.

The Nuclear Knowledge Deficit

Joe Cirincione, the President of Ploughshares, and I made multiple television, radio, and print appearances between early March and late April to discuss how nuclear power works, what the implications of a meltdown might be, whether Fukushima was “like Three Mile Island or more like Chernobyl,” and whether Americans should be taking iodine tablets. Our appearances ranged from the U.S. television network evening news, to Fox News, to *Al Jazeera English*, *The Weather Channel*, and several local network affiliates. We also wrote a piece for the *Huffington Post* entitled “Hiroshima to Fukushima: The Illusion of Control” that pointed out that “things nuclear” are inherently dangerous. Whether a power plant or a warhead, we have to do better with our safety and security regulations and behavior.

We were hardly alone. Organizations such as Physicians for Social Responsibility, Union of Concerned Scientists, Monterey Institute for International Studies, and Natural Resources Defense Council responded quickly to a multitude of media requests. Experts from these groups helped educate about the fundamentals of nuclear power plants, what was happening at Fukushima, and what *could happen*, equipping the public with knowledge they could use to make their own conclusions.

The presence of NGO experts helped clarify the issues around Fukushima and provided education for the public. It stemmed the fear-mongering by some and unfounded optimism by others. It also raised the profile of nuclear technology and its inherent risks. This is relevant to funders and civil society groups that work on energy, environmental, and security issues. Lastly, NGO experts raised the profile and credibility of key individuals and groups working on the issue of nuclear technology, which is always useful to organizations working to make a case.

Lessons for Philanthropy

The role that the Ploughshares Fund played during the Fukushima crisis did not directly address the immediate and immense disaster in Japan. It did nothing to help with earthquake recovery. It did nothing to directly resolve the nuclear disaster. Instead of doing what was instinctive, it revealed instead the value of credible technical expertise during events that are complicated and frightening. Without clear “translators,” media narrative can go wild. When government or industry fails to provide full and understandable information – which did occur in this case – civil society must step in and play that role. Going forward, a key lesson for philanthropy is that grantmakers can provide a valuable service by ensuring there is sound technical and scientific expertise that is available to the public on issues that affect us. The lesson is not new: for years, human rights funders have supported field research and experts that compile data on weapons, abuse, and corruption. Fukushima serves as a critical reminder of how vital this role is, and that funders themselves, who often have capacity and expertise, can participate directly.

Resources for Funders

- 1) Visit the website of the Ploughshares Fund for news, video clips, and updates on Fukushima: <http://www.ploughshares.org/news-analysis/news/ploughshares-grantees-respond-nuclear-crisis-japan>.

- 2) Read the Huffington Post article contributed by Joe Cirincione, "Hiroshima to Fukushima: The Illusion of Control" - http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joe-cirincione/hiroshima-to-fukushima-th_b_840753.html.
- 3) See item on the Moore Foundation in the "In the News" section of this edition of IHRFG's e-newsletter. [Click here](http://philanthropy.com/article/A-Foundation-s-Fast-Action/128004/): <http://philanthropy.com/article/A-Foundation-s-Fast-Action/128004/>.
- 4) Contact Paul Carroll, Program Director, Ploughshares Fund at pcarroll@ploughshares.org.