

The true value of researchers is now being held accountable after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011

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The Great East Japan Earthquake took place on March 11, 2011. While I offer my deepest sympathies to those who have suffered or continue to suffer from this disaster, I pray that the day when we can see the future comes not a moment too soon. Even though I was personally not directly affected by the disaster, I harbor a huge sense of shock, even now, and I feel that the world before 3/11 was in the distant past. The earthquake has confronted me anew with the question, "What am I researching for?" How will the new knowledge gained during the last earthquake be effectively used in Japan, now said to be in a period of higher seismic activity? Amid an outlook of electricity shortages for a prolonged period, how should the electricity for research equipment be effectively used? Furthermore, how can we reform Japan in the aftermath of 3/11? We have arrived at a time when Japan's researchers are being held accountable for their true value.

The difficulty of prompt action in the early stages

On the day the big earthquake struck, I spent the entire night in a conference building, being one of those people who couldn't make it home. Information had already become chaotic, and I was overwhelmed by the massive amount of information being circulated. However, data management in times of emergencies was part of my research projects. In order to exploit research findings to fit to the emergency situation unfolding before my eyes, I went in rapid-reaction mode and started to engage in information gathering. Earthquakes, tsunamis, and then the nuclear accident: The real world was undergoing rapid changes.

In hindsight, the thing that gave me an acute sense was the fact there was no choice but to use the knowledge and tools on hand to their fullest extent during that early stage. Procuring knowledge and creating useful tools in reaction to the very real events cannot catch up on the rapid change of reality. I will summarize the lessons learned from the earthquake and its aftermath so that our knowledge and tools can be instantly deployed in times of emergencies. I believe this is what needs to be done as a precaution for the next disaster.

Let's share researchers' knowledge as we look toward recovery

The long-term recovery efforts are currently fully underway. However, there was an immense number of assorted problems created by this large-scale disaster, and there are multiple and multifaceted issues surrounding them. Researchers from numerous disciplines need to come together, leverage the expertise of their own, and share their wisdom to provide solutions. The specialized knowledge provided by only a single researcher has its limits if we look at the immense scale of the problems. We need to come up with new solutions after marshalling our efforts, based on the common objective of solving the problems.

The Great East Japan Earthquake is without a doubt a rare large-scale natural disaster in Japan's history, although there is also the aspect that numerous instances of inaction led to a great extent of the damage. I hope that this inaction is not repeated and that a large number of researchers actively strive to resolve the problems resulting from the Great East Japan Earthquake so that society's trust in research will be enhanced.