

# Analyzing Disaster Response in Korea: Lessons From Strengths and Limitations

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## Background

Korea has experienced diverse and serious disasters that have tested its emergency response systems at all levels of government.

International observers have often focused primarily on Korea's successes — particularly its COVID-19 pandemic response. However, examining both strengths and limitations offers a more complete, actionable picture.

Core research question:  
How can Korea's experiences — both what worked and what fell short — inform better disaster management worldwide?

## Cases Examined

**2015 MERS Outbreak**  
Infectious Disease · 186 cases · 38 deaths

**2017 Pohang Earthquake**  
Natural Hazard · M5.4 · 135 injured

**2018 Miryang Fire**  
Urban Fire · 37 deaths · care facility

**2020 COVID-19**  
Pandemic · 302 deaths · no lockdown

**2022 Itaewon Crowd Crush**  
Mass Casualty · 159 deaths · Seoul

## Research Approach

Qualitative research design using Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014)

Data sources:  
· Government official reports  
· Media coverage & archives  
· Policy documents

Analysis focused on:  
· Decision-making processes  
· Resource mobilization  
· Inter-organizational cooperation

Process:  
Open coding  
→ Axial coding  
→ Core categories  
→ Theory building

## Findings

*Korea's disaster response reveals both remarkable strengths and persistent structural gaps.*

### ✓ Strengths

#### ⚡ Rapid Resource Deployment

Korea demonstrated consistent capacity to mobilize personnel, equipment, and medical supplies quickly across multiple disaster events.

Inter-agency logistics coordination enabled rapid deployment at scale — a critical factor in minimizing casualties and accelerating recovery in complex emergencies.

Observed across: MERS 2015, Pohang EQ 2017, COVID-19 2020

#### 🔗 Effective Coordination

Inter-agency coordination mechanisms enabled timely, organized responses. Multiple government organizations — health authorities, military, local government, private sector — worked in concert during major disasters.

This whole-of-government approach reduced duplication and improved resource allocation.

Strongest in: COVID-19 pandemic response 2020

### ⚠️ Limitations

#### 🔒 Restricted Information Sharing

Information flow between government agencies and to the public was sometimes constrained during crises. Delayed or fragmented communication reduced both response speed and public cooperation.

This gap was especially evident in early stages of novel disaster events where established protocols were insufficient.

Evident in: Early MERS 2015, Itaewon 2022

#### 👥 Limited Community Engagement

Local communities were not consistently included in disaster decision-making processes. This top-down approach limited the use of local knowledge, informal networks, and community resources.

Research globally shows that community-integrated disaster management significantly improves outcomes in all phases — preparedness, response, and recovery.

Needs improvement in: All cases examined

## Grounded Theory Process



## Discussion

The coexistence of strengths and limitations reflects a system still evolving.

Rapid deployment and coordination are genuine achievements, built through institutional reform following major disasters.

Yet gaps in information sharing and community engagement show that technical capacity alone is not sufficient.

## Applications

### 1 Strengthen Information-Sharing Protocols

Governments should establish clear legal and operational frameworks for sharing disaster-related information across all agencies and with the public in real time.

Timely, transparent communication builds public trust and improves response quality. Korea's experience shows both its power when present and the cost when absent.

### 2 Develop Structured Community Engagement

Disaster preparedness and response must incorporate sustained, structured channels for community participation at every stage — before, during, and after disasters.

Local knowledge, social networks, and community organizations are essential assets that formal top-down systems consistently underutilize.

### 3 Apply Korea as an Adaptive Learning Case

Korea's documented experience — both achievements and gaps — provides a rich, evidence-based reference for policymakers and emergency managers worldwide.

This case demonstrates that disaster management excellence requires not only strong institutions but also continuous reflection, reform, and community integration.

## Conclusions

Disaster management systems must continuously learn and adapt.

Korea's experiences offer both models for success and clear warnings about structural gaps that any nation can encounter.

By situating these findings in an international context, this research contributes to global efforts to strengthen disaster response systems for all communities.

The lesson is not simply what Korea did — it is how any nation can build, sustain, and improve its capacity to protect lives.