

Fieldwork Practice and Commitment within a Tsunami-hit Area:

Ochanomizu University Students in Rikuzentakata city, Iwate Prefecture, Japan*

Keichi KUMAGAI (Ochanomizu University)

Yukiko NAKAMURA (Graduate student, Ochanomizu University)

Takashi ODA (Miyagi University of Education)

*this paper was originally presented at a poster session in the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers held at Chicago, April 2015.

abstract : The Great East Japan Disaster occurred on March 11, 2011 gave tremendous damage on coastal areas in Tohoku region, Japan. Rikuzentakata-city is one of the worst, where 7 % of the population died and almost half of the houses were destroyed by tsunami. We are continuously sending undergraduate students for their fieldwork practice since September 2011. It is quite difficult to organize such course in tsunami-hit area which gave much burden to students both physically and mentally. We started the practice under the principle of “hearing without asking” as the people in the disaster area were supposed to be too sensitive to talk their experiences. After continuous visiting one particular temporary housing area we were accepted and formally requested by the residents to hear their distress. We are collecting and recording the stories as lessons for the future prevention of disasters. How the outsider can make a positive commitment to the restoration of the disaster area is quite difficult question. But we surely believe outsiders should have a fair responsibility to accompany with crucial “needs” of the people which not only fixed and provided by municipal authorities but also generated and renovated by the process of interaction between the insiders and the outsiders.

1. Background of the Fieldwork Practicum: Rikuzentakata City and its Damage by Tsunami

The Great East Japan Disaster that occurred on March 11, 2011 resulted in tremendous damage to the coastal areas of Japan's Tohoku region. Rikuzentakata was one of the most badly damaged cities in the tsunami disaster. The total death toll currently stands at 1,535 persons with 214 persons still missing. This figure represents a loss of 7.2% of the total population. 3,805 houses almost half of all houses in the city were totally destroyed.

Almost all public facilities were destroyed, including City Hall and the City gymnasium. The latter served as the first evacuation area was hit by the tsunami and totally submerged up to its ceiling resulting in more than 100 deaths with only a few survivors. The 232 km² area of Rikuzentakata consists of many different localities including Takata cho, the administrative and commercial center, and Yonesaki-cho, the agricultural areas and fishing villages. The township is situated in the flood plain of the Kesen River where the waters are clean and *ayu* (sweetfish) fishing attracts many anglers in the summer. The mineral-rich river delivers nutrition to the sea and provides for the premium quality oysters and scallops in the region. Takata-matsubara, once selected as having one of Japan's 100 most beautiful landscapes, has more than 70,000 pine trees lining its beaches and served as a popular tourist spot for sea bathing in the summer season. However, all but just one pine tree later called “the miraculous lone pine tree” and made a symbol for the city's restoration were totally wiped out by the tsunami. Loss of landscape is a serious damage to local residents although it is not measured economically.

2. Background and Practice of the Fieldwork Practicum

Since September 2011 (the 2011-2012 academic year), the Department of Global Studies for Inter-cultural Cooperation at Ochanomizu University has been fostering student fieldwork practice within areas affected by Japan's 2011 disaster through a course known as our Local Research Practicum. The core of this program includes visits to affected urban zones, holding social events, and listening to personal accounts at the temporary housing units, as well as to the city office and local reconstruction assistance NGO. We have a base established with one specific temporary housing community at the Yonesaki Elementary School. Here, we have donated a coffee maker and other materials to initiate a community café, later named “Ochakko Café”. (“Ochakko” means “tea” or “having tea together” in the local tongue).

We took special care in considering how to engage in conversation with those staying in temporary housing, each of whom had undergone extremely difficult experiences. We instructed students not to probe for information but simply listen without posing questions, so as to let people tell their own stories as they liked.

After several continuous visits to the area, Mr. Kazuo Sato, head of the Yonesaki Elementary Temporary Housing Residents', requested that we listen to their accounts of the disaster and record their stories. We decided to conduct informal interviews with the residents while keeping the points listed below in mind (and in memo form). During interviews, we were not overly concerning with whether each was answered, or the order in which they were approached. We transcribed the audio and matched transcriptions to notes taken to form a basic record. From these, students produced a report, covering: 1) Experiences on the day of the disaster, 2) The following day/s, 3) Life at the

evacuation center, 4) Life in temporary housing, and 5) Lessons. The interviews were conducted at the meeting room of temporary housing area (picture 7) or each temporary house. Another interviews were also made in fishery cooperative association's office at Wakinosawa harbor. We made In February 2014, we published a two volume report titled A View of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami from Personal Accounts.

3. Findings and Reactions of the Students Participated in the Fieldwork

We are continuing this fieldwork course at Rikuzentakata in 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016. More than 150 students visited Rikuzentakata city since 2011 in this fieldwork course as well as private visits.

Some comments from students who participated in the practicum are as follows.

"We met many people in Rikuzentakata. What impressed me most was the strength and tenderhearted nature of each person we met. We went there to volunteer and help them but, actually, they were the ones who instilled strength and tenderness in us."

"Through this practicum I came to know of the deep pain and hurt experienced by the tsunami survivors, even just only little bit. One person lived as if time had stopped on March 11; one had a hole in their heart; one grieved for the deaths of loved ones; one blamed themselves for surviving; one was unable to accept the reality; one felt guilty for moving forward while leaving the dead behind... Each person experienced hurt and pain at a deeper level than I can imagine."

I first experienced "vital learning" after four years in university. I listened to the voices of survivors and saw their lingering hurt. I was able to hear their passion for getting back on their feet to work for restoration. I enjoy talking with women of my grandmother's generation and enjoyed playing with children so full of life... I learned in the practicum something that I call "a sense of being part of the people concerned", which is to say that I can think about things that occur in a distant place and in a community different from my own as an event that concerns me too. I don't see Rikuzentakata as a singular place that has become a tsunami-affected area, but as a place where multiple people are living.

Students noted the follows; *When listening to personal accounts, interviewers were often energized by the warmth exuded by disaster survivors. Also, we noted that many people involved in volunteer-based support activities were disaster survivors themselves an observation that underscores how, in fact, little division exists between "supporters" and "the supported".*

Future issues facing the disaster-affected areas are not limited to physical infrastructure, but also include the extremely important endeavor of creating community and communal spaces for people to gather. The key elements within human relations are those of empathy and solidarity in other words, feelings of closeness and mutuality.

At this point in time, the weighty emergence of this disaster has prompted a questioning of Japanese society itself, as well as its very ideals. As we pursue answers, the starting point must lie in the concept of a communal society. From there, we should focus on the power produced by our local communities and each individual comprising them, and continue to think about what we can do to contribute in this regard.

4. Concluding Remarks: Creating Connections

In the words of Kazuo Sato, the head of the residents' association of temporary housing area in Yonesaki primary school, "Don't just listen to our stories. Share them with numerous people after you return home. That's your homework. The ultimate achievement would be to have children hear our message, enabling them to find safety (in the event a disaster occurs)." Indeed, we should not stop with simply listening to peoples' accounts. We can and must pass along their knowledge and experiences relating to the tsunami.

Future issues facing the disaster-affected areas are not limited to physical infrastructure, but also include the extremely important endeavor of creating community and communal spaces for people to gather. The key elements within human relations are those of empathy and solidarity in other words, feelings of closeness and mutuality.

At this point in time, the weighty emergence of this disaster has prompted a questioning of Japanese society itself, as well as its very ideals. As we pursue answers, the starting point must lie in the concept of a communal society. From there, we should focus on the power produced by our local communities and each individual comprising them, and continue to think about what we can do to contribute in this regard.

The fieldwork practicum within tsunami hit areas is a difficult but stimulating task for the students as well as the academic supervisors. Our task still remains. Students' motivations are high—and their experiences great—but at times listening to the hardships of survivors grew to be a burden too large for them to bear. Another question is how we, as outsiders, can make a positive commitment to the restoration of the disaster-affected area. Indeed, this is a difficult question. But we certainly believe outside parties have a responsibility to accompany communities on their journey and attend to critical needs. These needs should not only be addressed by municipal authorities but also further attended to through processes of interaction between the community itself and outside parties.