

Rebuilding Communities Following the Great East Japan Disaster:

Restoration of Ties among the Victims

Abstract: The earthquake and tsunami that struck northeastern Japan on March 11, 2011 not only caused extensive direct damage to local residents and their property, but triggered a nuclear power plant accident bringing the terror and reality of radiation to the surrounding populace and beyond. The reconstruction of communities in Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima Prefectures has posed enormous problems. While communities affected only by the earthquake and tsunami can possibly be rebuilt physically and socially, it will be very difficult for people in the radiation-contaminated areas in Fukushima to restore.

The social bonds among both groups of sufferers have changed. Though some people have already redeveloped ties in the quake-tsunami disaster areas, others, especially those whose houses were not destroyed by the tsunami, have hesitated to communicate with less fortunate neighbors because of “survivors guilt.” In Fukushima, the additional nuclear disaster inflicted quite another kind of damage on people. It was not only physical, but mental. Many people who fled the radioactivity to evacuate to areas dispersed far and wide throughout Japan, weakening or even eliminating ties from their original communities. Further, in spite of having directly heard the concerns of the displaced, through both public meetings and surveys, central and local governments have done little or nothing to alleviate their social problems to date and the refugees are losing hope and confidence in their governments.

This paper summarizes the ongoing community consciousness of refugees based on the results of a questionnaire and interview survey of those who have been living in temporary housing both near and far from the areas. In addition to discussing these conflicts in communities arising from the disaster, the paper also explores the possibilities of rebuilding, focusing on how to cope with “social demise of communities” that local people had formed and occupied all their lives.