

2nd Global Field Visit

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Abstract

The 2nd Global Field Visit consisted of two main groups of activities. The first group was the activity at the UN conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in both Sendai city and at Tohoku University. This event which occurs every five year includes a series of governmental meetings, ministerial roundtable meetings, multi-sector dialogues, public forums and a number of side-events. I attended several activities, which were directly related to my field of study in social recovery from radiation disaster and disaster migration. The second group of activities included attending lectures at Yamagata University about the support given to Fukushima evacuees offered by the city of Yonezawa, and a visit to the Evacuees support Center. These activities were very informative and useful for my current research in the Phoenix program.

Goal of Activity

I am a student of the Radioactivity Social Recovery Course. Attending the UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, I expect to gain information and knowledge about the risk perception of people towards nuclear energy after the Fukushima nuclear accident. Understanding public perception and attitude post disaster is important for policy making during social recovery. In addition, as my research focuses on nuclear disaster migration, the information about the present status of evacuation from Fukushima in Yamagata Prefecture is insightful. Furthermore, understanding the living conditions and factors influencing people's decisions surrounding evacuation are main objectives of my research.

1. Attending the Exhibition and public forum on Human mobility and disaster resilience organized by the International Organization of Migration (UN conference)

Migration has existed as a societal phenomenon throughout human history. It is recognized as a common response to hardships. The recent decades have witnessed an increase of migration due to both disasters and conflicts. Migrants have been recognized as most vulnerable to hunger, to discrimination, and to health issues. They have a lack of financial capacity, social capital and in many cases even physical strength. Migrating to other places, migrants fleeing a crisis normally face cultural differences, a lack of job opportunities, community sanitation, and permanent settlement options. Supporting migrants is a real need and goal for nations, international agencies such as the International Organization of Migration, certain NGOs and also particular areas of the private sector. In order to effectively support this group of the population, it is important to be well prepared, and where possible, this preparation should ideally be institutionalized. By doing so, the response to crises and support for migrants could be carried out both more effectively and in a timelier manner. Additionally, support for migrants can be most effective if information about their situation and their needs is clearly known. It is also important to allow relocated peoples access to accurate relief information, guidance during disasters, and during the subsequent recovery phases. The most common approach to supporting migrants is to strengthen the resilience of individuals and their communities prior to and during disasters. Awareness raising, knowledge sharing, and the engagement of local peoples' participation in disaster preparedness are potential ways to achieve this.

Specific to the migration caused by the nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daiichi NPPs, about a hundred thousand people were either forced or voluntarily chose to move from their original homes. There are a

number of lessons to be learnt from this mass evacuation. On the one hand, the evacuation was neither well-prepared nor well-organized. The results of a survey asking about “peoples’ preparedness for evacuation in the case of a nuclear accident” indicated that only a small proportion of the population surrounding the NPPs had received information and guidance about evacuation procedures prior to the accident. Most people indicated that no emergency drills had been conducted. In addition, poor crisis communication contributed to a deterioration of the situation as it increased both anxiety and disorder among the affected population involved in the evacuation. Information about radiation levels had not been clearly or regularly disseminated to the public. The loss of electricity due to earthquake caused damage amplified the lack of reliable information sources. Furthermore, evacuation orders did not remain consistent and changed regularly. This unreliability made people question what the real radiation level was, and worry about its possible adverse health effects.

However, on an important positive note, both the Japanese government and society have shown a sincere and inspiring effort to help the evacuees settle into their new environment and stabilize their lives. In order to meet the settlement needs of evacuees, especially given the winter season, evacuation centers were prepared and opened very quickly and thousands of temporary houses were built in a relatively short period. A variety of support has been made available to the relocated people. This includes health and psychological consultation, financial support, job opportunities, and schooling for children of all ages. The participation of such a wide range of actors from across the country has shown the solidarity of the Japanese people. As a result of this broad-ranging cooperation and support, the evacuees have been safely relocated and settled into their life. Four years following the accident revitalization programs are now fully underway in affected areas. The commitment to the policy of “bring back better” has helped to rebuild and regain the trust of the people and to encourage them to return to the Fukushima area in order to rebuild their homeland.

2. Attending the Public Health preparedness for large scale disaster (UN conference)

The public forum began with a panel discussion that raised the question of “Why concern for health during an emergency or disaster is increasingly important”. There are several reasons for its importance. First, there seems to be an increasing, world-wide trend in the frequency and intensity of disasters. Typhoons, hurricanes, floods, heat-waves, droughts appear to be occurring with higher frequency. More severe typhoons have also been observed in both Southeast Asia and South Asia. In fact a tropical cyclone hit the island of Vanuatu during this UN conference. Extreme weather phenomena occur on all continents. Catastrophic hurricanes that recently occurred in America, Central America, and Myanmar caused substantial damages. The negative impact could be seen not only in the physical damage and economic loss, but also in peoples’ health. Second, an increase in damages caused by disasters can be explained by the population increase in areas where the threat of disaster is high. People tend to live more densely along the coasts and floodplains where their exposure to natural disasters is highest. Third, in many nations, certain communities, such as rural centers, are more vulnerable to disasters. These communities show an increased vulnerability due to a lack of preparedness, lack of immediate access to resources, and inefficient emergency response procedures. Additionally, the poor and the most vulnerable of a society are typically hardest hit by a disaster.

The 2010 Ebola outbreak in Uganda has been used to illustrate the necessary elements of an emergency medical system. First, it clearly identified human resources as the most important factor in a medical emergency. Experience from this developing country, where donor countries supported recovery by donating a wide range of advanced medical equipment, the lack of expertise to properly utilize these machines was a critical challenge. Moreover, efficient use of both equipment and facilities relies on people with a clear understanding of protocols and emergency response. Medical professionals are only able to use the facilities and interpret the data as far as their own personal experience and understanding of location and culture will

allow them. Second, for a timely response and effective control of the spread of disease, an early warning and surveillance system are required. Early intervention and accurate public communication can reduce the severe consequences of a passive response. In addition, continued surveillance and reporting can contribute to controlling the spread of the disease. Finally, engaging the local communities, and ensuring their trust in the medical system and its health workers are defined as vital factors for a successful medical response to any epidemic.

To best cope with potential negative health impacts in a large-scale disaster a number of factors need to be considered. At the beginning of the disaster, communication plays a crucial role. It is important to inform the public about what is happening and what they can do to prevent adverse health effects. Information needs to be delivered consistently and regularly to avoid increasing the anxiety of the local populace. Following public messaging are security and protection. In a crisis, filled with fear, misinformation and a lack of essentials, society can become highly disordered. Maintaining security and protecting people from potential crimes are therefore one of the priorities. Thus, maintaining functional information and transportation logistics is necessary during emergencies. Given a disaster situation, the need for health care normally increases. However, the capacity of the medical system within the affected areas remains the same and will therefore not be sufficient to meet demand. The supply of medical equipment, medicine, and medical professionals must be increased to meet the growing demand. A final required factor is raising people's awareness about how best to protect themselves in a crisis. In order to achieve these objectives, all potential stakeholders must be identified, consulted, and educated.

Apart from attending the UN conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, having a thorough understanding of how the Fukushima evacuees are currently living is of vital importance. Attending lectures at Yamagata University that dealt with the support activities for the evacuees, and personally visiting the Evacuees Support Center in Yonezawa city have helped me to more clearly and fully understand the real story of the evacuees.

3. Visit to Yamagata University and attending a lecture by Professor Makato Ayabe

Professor Makoto Ayabe gave a lecture entitled "The importance of Support Network in Natural Disasters-an example of volunteer activities in the Great East Japan Earthquake's aftermath". It was filled with information about the life of the evacuees in other prefectures, as well as the importance of a functional, viable support network for the disaster victims. As Yamagata is one of Fukushima's neighboring prefectures, it attracted 15,000 evacuees from affected areas. As of November 2011, about 4,000 evacuees came specifically to Yonezawa. The geographical location of this city is one of the main reasons it was attractive to people. Although it is only 100km from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, the 2000 meter high mountain range lying between the two prefectures has kept Yonezawa free from the effects of radiation. The first group of evacuees, roughly 650 people, came to the city in the winter. Providing shelter for them was the priority at that time. A large number of apartments, hotels, and inns were arranged for evacuees for the beginning of their stay. This showed effective organization by the local Yonezawa government, and the participation of a wider variety of stakeholders in the city. However, despite this the government still faced the challenge of limited resources for supporting the evacuees long-term. In fact Professor Ayabe's lecture highlighted and elucidated this as well as several other important weaknesses of the current government system in place for dealing with emergency situations. As presented in the lecture, governmental bodies are designed to perform best given stable social environments. Unfortunately, they are not adequately flexible to cope with highly stressed, unstable circumstances. Due to the fixed system, rigid regulation, and the top-down decision making process their interventions are neither flexible nor timely - Two primary requirements in an emergency! This is where the roles of non-government organizations (NGO) play very important role. Cooperation and coordination between NGOs and government can yield better outcomes.

“Volunteer Yamagata” is a good model for a non-profit organization intending to support disaster victims. This group has three main roles which include supporting the evacuees, making policy proposals to the government, and capacity building for disaster volunteers. For supporting evacuees, the Volunteer Yamagata has called for donations and financial support from individuals, the private sector, and public organizations. They then delivered relief supplies to evacuees. They also worked with medical professionals to facilitate and provide psychological consultation and support to the evacuees who faced mental health issues. In addition, social events were held regularly to help people integrate to their new life in a new town, and to build up a mutual understanding between the local people and the evacuees. As a policy adviser, through practical experience working closely with evacuees, Volunteer Yamagata has submitted more than 30 proposals to both national and local governments. They developed support measures including assistance for neighboring prefectures, a subsidiary scheme for evacuees using major urban facilities and tourist sites, inter-prefectural cooperation to remove debris, and the long-term dispatch of technical officials. They helped foreign delegates and international students with their field visits to affected sites. They also supported and encouraged evacuees to deliver accurate information to the outside world about the real situation in Fukushima. In order to address building capacity for disasters, the group enthusiastically and successfully recruited many new members. All new volunteers are provided with communication training because the majority lack the specific skills needed during a disaster. Volunteer Yamagata leaders attended an experience exchange that involved members from other volunteer groups from around the country.

4. Visit Evacuee Support Center in Yonezawa city

Another important activity during this field visit was visiting the evacuee support center in Yonezawa city. We heard the personal testimony of Mr. Ueno, an evacuee from Odaka district who was currently a staff member at the center. We were able to gain a deeper understanding of evacuee living conditions in Yonezawa. First, many evacuees had suffered the long evacuation period, moving from one temporary places to another before finally being able to stay in Yonezawa. At its highest point, about 4,000 evacuees were in Yonezawa but by early 2015, that number had declined to roughly 1,000 people. The other 3,000 people have been allowed to return to Fukushima as more and more areas are confirmed safe. Among the 1,000 people in Yonezawa, many of them are still facing a very uncertain future and cannot return because their homes are located in one of the restriction zones. Interestingly, and perhaps a little unsettlingly, despite the restrictions being lifted in certain areas, some people do not want to return to their homes. Within this group the majority are women and children whose husbands and fathers are in Fukushima for their job. This group is also facing uncertainty about their future. This concern has become the most common source of anxiety for the evacuees. Although the decontamination work is progressing well and large areas have been confirmed safe for return, many people still remain worried about the possible negative health effects. Moreover, there is further concern about current social conditions, the social welfare system, and their livelihood even if they were to return to their homes. For people coming from the restriction zones, with little hope of returning any time soon, this worry is even more acute. Ultimately, there have been many negative psychological effects with some people even considering suicide.

In conclusion, the global field visit was very beneficial for students of the Phoenix Program, especially those of us in the Radioactivity Social Recovery Course. Attending the UN conference on Disaster Risk Reduction was a tremendous opportunity. We were able to acquire the most recent knowledge and information available about reducing the risk from disasters. The research was presented by many different stakeholders: Governmental bodies, international agencies, private sector interests, NGOs and academia. In this event, I

was able to learn from both the exhibition booths, and the forums which discussed the medical system for disaster situations and disaster migration. As an important compliment to the conference, the visit to Yamagata University and the evacuee support center in Yonezawa city, gave me a broader understanding of the current situation facing the Fukushima evacuees. This experience will be particularly useful for my studies moving forward as my area research also focuses on the factors that influence people's decision to migrate away from Fukushima due to the nuclear accident at Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant.