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Different Faces of Post-disaster Situations: The Case of Nuclear Crisis; Based on a Case Study of Iitate Village

Akihiko SATO

INTRODUCTION

This report is based on the fieldwork undertaken in Iitate, Fukushima, a village which is identified as the Deliberate Evacuation Area and all the villagers were ordered to evacuate due to the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant after the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011. This report gives an overview of the various problems that arose between the government and residents after the evacuation and discusses the possibility of such a situation affecting the structure of the local government.

OVERVIEW OF IITATE VILLAGE

Spanning approximately 230 km² in the hilly region of the northern part of the Abukuma range, Iitate is a rural agricultural mountain village located along the coastline area of the Fukushima Prefecture. The Village is located approximately 35–45 km from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, and its southeast area lies less than 30 km from the Plant. In 2010, the village population was 6,209 and the total number of households was 1,734. However, as of October 1, 2012, after the Deliberate Evacuation, the number of residents (evacuees) was 6,677 and the number of households was 3,117. The number of individuals in households that decided to live separately upon evacuation continues to increase today, with the number reaching approximately 1.8 times more than that before the Earthquake. Since the Earthquake, 13 people, who were unable to evacuate, and 100 elderly

home residents continue to live in the Village.

PLANNED EVACUATION AND THE LIFE OF AN EVACUEE

Facts of the Evacuation

On April 22, 2011, Iitate Village was identified as the Deliberate Evacuation Area. The evacuation policy of this area was set prior to this date, on the 11th. When announced, the village office began to hold dialogues with the villagers on the evacuation. Iitate Village mayor Kanno stated that the basic policy should include the evacuees being situated “within around one hour from the village” so that they could continue to “commute to the fields and work facilities” in the Village. These measures were taken to show the evacuees that the government was “trying to ensure the current lifestyle and livelihood as much as possible for the people.”

On May 9th, on the basis of the policies established by Mayor Kanno, the Village submitted their evacuation plan to Fukushima Prefecture. As many people had already been evacuated from the northern coastline area of the Prefecture, there appeared to be some difficulty in securing shelter. Yet the majority of residents were able to complete the evacuation by mid-August. Presently, approximately 90% of the Village residents have been evacuated to an area within one hour of the Village center.

Anxieties and Distress of the Villagers during the Evacuation

During the process of the Deliberate Evacuation,

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various types of anxiety and distress arose among the residents. These included worries over the breakup of families, anxieties over losing relationships, and those over not being able to return to their normal life. Other worries included earning a living, their children's health, the environment and nature, and relationships with neighbors. The process continued with the residents living with these anxieties and worries. However, as their new lives as evacuees began, changes were observed in the residents' thinking. Although the majority of voices until then expressed "not wanting to leave our home" and "not wanting to be far from home," especially among the elderly, there was an increase in feelings that "although I want to return home, there is no way I can live there," accompanied by an overwhelming feeling of unease and despair over potential radioactive contamination.

"DIALOGUE" AND "CONFRONTATIONS" DURING RESIDENT MEETINGS

One and a half year after the disaster, as residents became accustomed to life as evacuees, they started facing issues such as employment, livelihood, health, and the pros and cons of returning to the Village. As their anxieties deepened and multiplied, their distrust toward the government, which stressed "Emergency Procedure" and "National Policy," increased.

Residents Refusing to Participate and Engage in Dialogue

In October 2011, the Village announced a "revitalization plan" and held approximately 20 meetings to discuss the plan in various evacuated areas. Residents who attended these meetings criticized and expressed discontent about the Village mayor and members of assembly. Main issues raised

in the meetings were: (1) decontamination methods and their effects, (2) appropriation of a part of the decontamination budget amounting more than 300 billion yen for reconstruction of livelihood, and (3) prompt resettlement. The Mayor and government officials did not accept the villagers' proposals because of "the national policy."

Disappointed over not being heard and receiving a two-word response of "National Policy" to all their concerns, desires, and opinions, the number of residents attending these meetings decreased dramatically. Initially, meetings were held in large venues and drew more than 200 attendees; however, over time, attendance diminished to three to ten attendees. Their reasoning was that "the Village follows the country's orders, and doesn't care about the residents' needs and opinions" and therefore "it would be useless to participate."

Various Doubts Arising from Distrust

Various types of doubts arose as a result of the meetings and exchanges between residents and government representatives. The biggest result, however, was an increase in residents' criticism of the country: "Despite the numerous decontamination experiments and results showing a return of radiation after the model projects, they have neither investigated the cause nor considered improvement of these methods." The residents pointed out that the only thing being pushed forward in the decontamination project was the "profit of the construction companies and the related superficial appeal of economic recovery." Many residents felt that the government's methods of handling this situation was "against their will and that they were being returned by force." Reality was that the residents were deeply anxious that the current housing assistance would be cut-off within the next few years, a happening many claimed would result

in it being "...impossible to continue living in the current situation, in the evacuated site." Many stated that,

...They would like to return to their homes, but did not want to return to a contaminated area. Furthermore, there would be no way that their lifestyle before the Earthquake can even be considered while all business and commercial infrastructure was still under reorganization. Still, if they considered living expenses, they would have no choice but to return to the Village.

These remain the residents' concerns. When the Village's "present" problems are dissected, these conflicts between the residents and government become visible. As the Village's "present" problems worsen and become more serious and as the residents continue to see a response of "National Policy" from the government, it can be inferred that there remains a complex situation in the political environment that makes it virtually impossible for the Village mayor to take any decision on his own. Below, overviewing the development of Iitate Village regarding the complex situation, the paper further observes in perspective that exceeds the Village in order to view the structure of the problem.

HISTORICAL PROCESS OF CREATING A VILLAGE

Creating a Village with Resident Participation

Since a merger of two villages in 1956, confrontation between old communities had weakened the vitality of New Iitate village, and it had been worsened by large scale cold-weather damages. In 1983, when the 3rd General Plan of Iitate was developed, community

participation practice was introduced by the village.

Iitate Village appointed young residents to serve as the core group of leaders and a young officer to work collaboratively with the group. From 1983 to 1990, Iitate village made strategic efforts that were implemented and expanded to serve as stepping stones for creating a full-fledged village that would allow for resident participation in the future government. These efforts were aimed at developing and securing community leaders in the long term, which resulted in a ripple effect of participation of women in various areas (such as administration, management, and residential development), development of resident activities, and the creation of entrepreneurship. The actual implementation of resident participation in creating the Village was devised in the 4th General Plan (1994) under the category of "District Planning." This comprehensive plan gave the residents the authority to be involved in decision-making and creating budgets for all 20 districts, which led to extensive participation in the village in which they resided.

Country Policy Trends and Village Administration

However, around the year 2000, discontinuance and branching-off of the relationship between the Village residents and government occurred. Programs such as the district plans provided the opportunity for residents' participation and the expansion of community efforts in Iitate Village. While the program's target expanded to include state subsidy, the residents began to see that local issues and needs were not being properly reflected in government decision. For example, complaints—such as "The local administration gets subsidies from the state and then forces it on to the districts" and "Our local staff is useless. We, the residents, came up with great plans but they do nothing to structure

or implement them”—were made regularly by the residents. Similar sentiments were being voiced by the Village administration staff: “Since 2000, instead of acting as a bridge or a mediator between the administration and residents, it seems as if our roles were to ‘introduce a policy or a business that a government wants and to persuade the residents to accept it’.” These statements raise the question of whether, around the year 2000, there were external factors that affected Village politics. There were significant changes occurring around this time, including structural reform; the Great Merger of the Heisei; and reduction in the number of staff involved in administrative reform. Moreover, new concepts—such as “collaboration,” “partnerships,” and the “new public”—were introduced to promote the independence of the local government. It was the time when there was an overlap with the period before and after the administration of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s policies and structural reforms implemented during the Hashimoto administration. Other legal trends occurring during this period include the Decentralization Law (2000), Local Government Amendment Act (2000), Municipal Merger Law (2004), and the Decentralization Legal Enforcement Law Reform (2006).

CONSIDERATION OF ISSUES SURROUNDING THE STRUCTURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESIDENTS AND GOVERNMENT

Since 2000, under the title “administrative efficiency,” many administrative businesses in the Village were dropped to districts. There also was an extreme decrease in contribution from the “regional staff” in planning strategies for various districts, such as the

state subsidy businesses. As a result, the relationship between the community and government weakened. As residents in districts started to engage in separate business plans and their independence grew, there was less interaction between the residents and government and a definite decrease in the residents’ passion to fight for local issues that affected them. The reduction in the interaction between the residents and government also directly prevented “perspective-taking” and “self-other merging” from occurring, and this lack of communication made it more difficult for the government to understand what actually was going on at the local level. As this continued, resident issues started to become unfathomable to the local administration and it became increasingly difficult to reflect the people’s will upon policy-makers.

Analyzing the policy trends of Iitate Village since the 1980s, there was extensive resident participation because of the Village’s independent discretion up until 90’s. However, around the year 2000, there was definitely a break in this connection. Through the 80s and 90s, the clear political intentions continued for two generations of leaders and were seen through the efforts of “independence and self-reliance.” However, after the year 2000, under the regional planning by the leadership of Kanno, as seen among the previous comments from the residents and staff and/or from the country’s political tendencies, it seemed as if the Village was governed by external entities such as national institutions and laws. It even seemed as though the Village had unintentionally been shaped by the “national policy.”

SUMMARY

The “current” distrust and conflict between the residents and government can be said to be related to the political structure of “Country–Region–Residents.” In politics, it has long since been

advocated decentralization; however, looking at the earlier interaction between the government and residents which has been mentioned as “dialogues with the villagers”, it seems that even the local government was extensively restricted by national policies. Because of this, there even exists a possibility that this situation causes elimination of the “public opinion” of the party being directly involved. In the Village, where this structure cannot seem to be broken, there seems to be another big problem: The reduction and loss of “dialogue opportunities,” situations in which the residents and government officials can communicate and interact with one another. Dialogue opportunities should be a fair procedure in which two-way conversation is ensured. Even if there is criticism and frustration, loss of trust can be prevented, or at the very least, minimized through an “acceptable” explanation of both sides’ viewpoints and differences.

On the other hand, the resident meeting mentioned in Section 2 had a twofold problem: One-way communication and the loss of opportunity.

It is definitely not a simple task to solve these problems. I hope this report may provide some help in the revitalization of disaster affected region and promotion of local autonomy.