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Connecting Evacuees through Lunchbox Delivery Service: The Female Farmers' Power Project "Ka-Chan no Chikara Project"

Keiichi SATOH

Outline of the research

Date: September 24, 2012

Place: Fukushima City, Fukushima Prefecture

Interviewee: The Female Farmers' Power Project "Ka-Chan no Chikara Project Kyogikai (かーちゃんのカ・プロジェクト協議会)"

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EVACUEES AND PROBLEM OF COMMUNITY BUILDING

The great earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011 and the subsequent accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant caused a nationwide outbreak of as many as 325,000 evacuees. In Fukushima Prefecture, including the residents of Fukushima's evacuation zone, around 160,000 people have been forced to evacuate¹ and 99,139 people are still evacuating according to the data provided by the Reconstruction Agency as of November 1, 2012².

There are many different places where these victims were evacuated. Some people relied on their relatives, some people evacuated to public or private houses that were borrowed by the local government, and others stayed in temporary houses. Because such houses are scattered in different locations, many evacuees are forced to live in communities that are different than those they used to live in. This situation

causes stress and may even involve worse living conditions. Consequently, building a new community is becoming increasingly important for the revival of the disaster-stricken area. However, the following question arises: who takes on the leadership for building the new community? And how and through what do they make new connections between evacuees?

In this article, I will take up the case of community building by an initiative conducted by the Female Farmers' Power Project ("Ka-Chan no Chikara Project (かーちゃんのカ・プロジェクト)") that includes running a lunchbox shop. Based on an interview with the project leader Tomiko Watanabe on September 24, 2012 at their shop in Fukushima City, I will describe how the group developed their project and why this particular leader could take up the leadership role.

THE PROCESS OF PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

At Matsukawa town, approximately 8 km away from Fukushima City, a shop renovated from an old house opened as a base for the lunchbox delivery service. At the shop, named "Abukuma Chaya (あぶくま茶屋)" (Abukuma Tea Store), 11 female farmers who were evacuated from the disaster-stricken area work everyday selling lunchboxes and other processed agricultural products such as kimchi and tsukemono (pickled vegetables). After months of preparation and trial sales, the shop started to run the lunchbox

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delivery service at full scale on August 28, 2012 and now brings around 100 packs of food to evacuees' houses everyday.



Photo 1 Abukuma Chaya, the delivery shop base; on September 24, 2012, Fukushima City
Photo by Author

This project of building connections between evacuees through the lunchbox delivery service first began with the evacuees and local host residents participating in a festival. Supported by the Fukushima University and the NPO Horai (NPO 法人ほうらい), around 10 female farmers gathered for the first meeting on November 22, 2011 and decided to hold the festival, entertaining guests with local traditional rice cakes on December 17 and 18.

The female farmers who gathered for this meeting had been engaged in growing local specialties and developed processed agricultural products before the disaster. After the disaster, the farmers were deeply depressed and shocked by the stress of living under uncertain conditions and the fact that they could neither farm where they used to cultivate nor sell their products at the market due to buyer's fear of radiation. The festival was the first chance for most of the farmers to work once again after the disaster.

Motivated by the success of the festival, the female farmers began to prepare for running the lunchbox delivery service. At that time, the eating habits of those living in temporary houses were gradually becoming known, and there was a requirement

to supply a balanced diet to them. The farmers renovated an old house (mentioned above) provided by the Horai and built a kitchen. Some local residents helped by cutting trees that had been contaminated by radiation.

In May 2012, the first lunchboxes were sold at the Fukushima University; the project had begun on a trial basis. At the same time, they tried to make recipes that they could cook at their small kitchen and corresponded with the prices. In July, deliveries began on Thursdays and finally, at the end of August, the project opened full time.

THE LEADER'S PAST EXPERIENCE

The person who led this project is Tomiko Watanabe, a female farmer in her 50s. Watanabe evacuated from Iitate Village, which is located 40 km away from the Fukushima Daiichi plant and was severely affected by radiation. She was formerly a leader of a farmer's groups that engaged in studying to grow a new variety of potato Iitate Beiku (イータテベイク) and pumpkin Iitate Yukikko (いいたて雪っ娘) which were developed by Motoichi Kanno. To engage in product development using them, she also ran a shop named Madei Kobo (までい工房).

The career she developed is deeply related to the bitter reality under which the local community was placed after the disaster. Originally, the group was one of those that was supported by the village to develop into a town and had started in 2005. After three years of financial support by the village administration, each group was expected to be an independent business. Though some of the initial groups did not manage this, her group successfully moved to being a self-supporting business. She points out that the reason for their success was the unyielding spirit of her group members. At that time, the village was in

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turmoil over the issue of annexation by other local governments seeking better financing for the village administration. Because most of her group members were against the annexation, they worked harder at their project, hoping that profits from the agricultural products will help retain the village's independence. During this project, she also became acquainted to other farmers from the Abukuma region, who were also engaged in product development in their localities.

Another reason for her success, she recalls, was related to her main job, sewing. Though she cultivated her farm, she mainly made a living by sewing. As a result, she could analyze the whole process of production and was accustomed to demanding good quality products when she became involved with the sale of different agricultural products.

As she cultivated the potatoes and pumpkins that were otherwise hard to cultivate, she was reluctant to give them up even during the chaos of the disaster and evacuation when she changed her place thrice. She managed to borrow fallow fields and cultivated them almost by hand, until finally she could preserve the seeds of the potato and pumpkin for the following year.



Photo 2: Tomiko WATANABE, the leader of the Female Farmers' Power Project; on September 24, 2012, Fukushima City

Note: Photograph by the author.

After she harvested the potato and pumpkin and finished holding a private harvest festival for local host residents in October as usual, a teacher at the Fukushima University who knew Watanabe through a village development project telephoned her and told about the Female Farmers' Power Project. She started gathering people in the neighborhood, though there were many that she could not reach because their contact details were lost after the evacuation. The members that she managed to gather participated to be members of the project.

PLANNING FOR THE NEXT THREE YEARS

Set strict reference values

In every recipe used in the lunchboxes, the project intentionally uses agricultural products from the Fukushima region. Watanabe said that sometimes the Project is criticized for growing foods in Fukushima, however, she maintains, "We keep living in Fukushima. If so, we must intentionally consume it by ourselves as long as it is safe."

To continue using the food from Fukushima region she intentionally set a strict reference value for acceptability. While the Japanese government sets 100 Bq/kg for foods, the project sets 20 Bq/kg, which is two times as strict as the reference value in Ukraine. Watanabe explains the reason for this, "When I brought my pumpkin (Iitate Yukikko) to the direct sales store, I was asked whether I used the name of Iitate. I was really disappointed. But even how I confront emotionally there, consumer feels uneasy and will not want to buy (with governmental reference value). So when I was asked to set a reference value, I set it as strict as possible." To check the radiation on food, they test a 1 kg sample of food everyday, although the cost for the test is not eligible for compensation by TEPCO according to the

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explanation by the company.

Hear the voice of the evacuees

Delivering lunchboxes with local foods connects the residents of the temporary living accommodation. They meet the residents and greet them everyday. They also cooperate with the residents at the temporary housing who make glossaries, which are sent to supporters of the project. Though these activities are intended to revitalize the disaster-stricken area, Watanabe stresses the need to hear the voices of the residents in temporary houses not only for the residents' welfare but also for the success of their business through which they connect together and have a constant chance to talk each other. The project is expected to be independent of its current financial support from the Fukushima Prefecture. "We should hear the needs of the temporary houses customer there, not just delivering the lunchbox, because from these needs we can know what we can do further as a business. Otherwise, we cannot survive three years later." Today Watanabe and her project members are confronting new challenges to their success just as she once experienced in Iitate Village.

When disaster strikes, a community needs to revive psychologically as well as materially from the destruction in their daily life. The strength of resilience that has accumulated in the community before the disaster needs to be enabled to operate after the disaster. Has Japanese society sufficient accumulations of such strength? Who are the hidden agents enabling the communities' resilience? These issues are now topical in rebuilding social life after the disaster.

Further Information

The Female Farmers' Power Project:
<http://www.ka-tyan.com/index.html>

Notes

- 1 According to the report "The Present Condition of Revitalization in Fukushima Prefecture" by Reconstruction Agency published in October 2012, retrieved on December 5, 2012. (http://www.reconstruction.go.jp/topics/20121025_fukusimasaisei-2.pdf). (=復興庁「福島復興再生の現状について」2012年10月). This data does not include the number of people who evacuated to their relatives' house.
- 2 According to the report "The number of Evacuee in National Wide", published on November 7, 2012. Retrieved on December 2, 2012. (<http://www.reconstruction.go.jp/topics/post.html>) (=復興庁「全国の避難者等の数(平成24年11月7日版)」)