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Sociological Documents on Transitory Networks of Assistance

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“TRANSITORINESS” AS FUTURE POSSIBILITY TO TRANSFORMATIONS

In the disaster management process, various types of transitory spaces and networks are created to access resources for setting up emergency housing, performing assistance activities, and reconstructing communities. The constellation of such spaces and networks transform as the phases of the disaster pass, and finally the process results in the construction of a new social geography (Wisner et al. ed. 1994; Hewitt 1997; Bolin 1998).

“Transitoriness” in this dynamic process of transformations essentially means that the spaces and networks do not exist permanently. At the same time, it also indicates that their future is indefinite and open to change in multiple directions.

The field of disaster studies has taken up the role of documenting the transitory spaces and networks that repeatedly appear and dissolve in changing phases. Disaster studies must also estimate their potential to create the future constellations of society.

The aim of DIS, No.5, is to present, based on the field research in the Sanriku coastal area of Iwate Prefecture, a sociological document of such spaces and networks created for assistance in the case of the 2011 East Japan Tsunami.

ROLES OF CIVILIAN GROUPS AND THEIR IMPACTS ON SOCIAL RESTRUCTURING

This research also aims to rethink the roles and functions of civilian organizations as the society makes the transition toward a population-shrinking/post-Fordist-type society (Leitner et al. ed. 2007; Mayer 2012).

The continuous shocks of economic decline and neoliberal-oriented local policies have undermined the stable structure constructed by post-war Japan to redistribute collective risk. Disruptive events in these 20 years, such as the burst of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, the Great Kobe Earthquake in 1995, the Central Niigata Earthquake in 2004, and the financial crisis in 2008, have led to heightened risk in the present precarious economic system. This is the background against which various new types of social organizations have sprung up around the country.

Disasters can be viewed as one of such “contingent factors” that has shocked the stable structure of capital accumulation and has reconstructed “spatial fix” (social geography) in today’s society (Harvey 2010a; 2010b).

Transitory spaces constructed by assistance activities are the articulating points of horizontal networks among assistance groups and the vertical relationship between the administrative governance system and civil society (Miller 2000; Martin et al.

2003).

How has the changing society influenced the development of networked assistance activities during and after the Great East Japan Tsunami, and what types of social restructuring will those experiences bring to East Japan and to Japanese society in general? This is another concern of the research.

GEOGRAPHICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

Figure 1 shows the number of events caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami that the various types of media covered for two months after the disaster. The data is based on “The Great East Japan Earthquake Chronicle” (in DIS, No.1), which picked up the events related to the 2011 disaster from 320 media organizations, including newspapers,

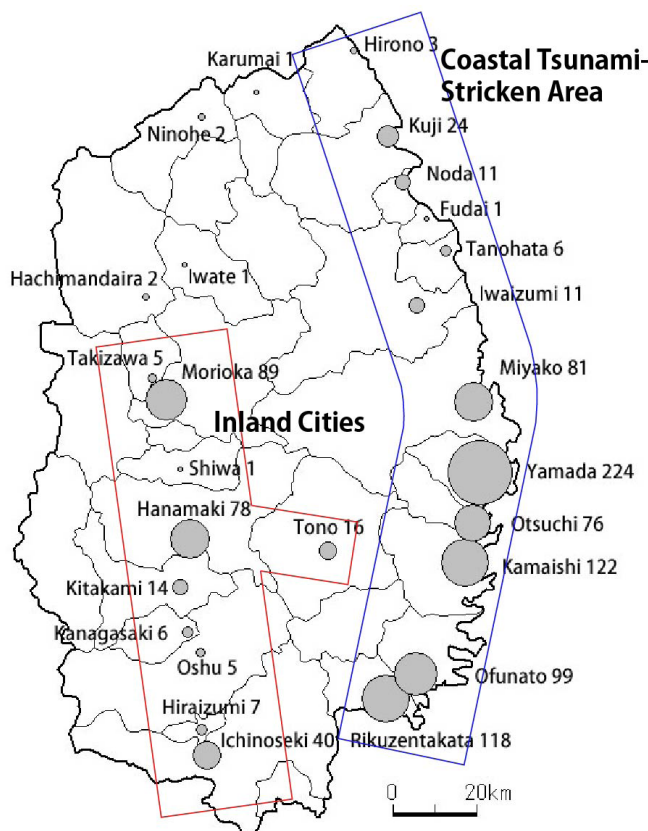


Figure 1: Number of Media-covered Events Caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami (Mar.11-May.11, 2011)
Source: The Great East Japan Earthquake Chronicle, DIS, No.1.

magazines, books, and websites of governmental agencies, professional groups, and NPO/NGOs, published until May 11, 2011 (Ueda 2011; Ueda et al. 2011).

According to figure 1, there were two “belts of events” in the Iwate prefectural area in the early stage of the disaster.

One was the coastal tsunami-stricken area. Large parts of the settlements in this area were completely washed away by the tsunami and many residents died or went missing. It was natural for the media to report such situations immediately to the entire country and abroad.

However, at the same time, another “belt of events” took place in the hinterland of the Iwate prefecture. There were major industrial cities in this belt that were starting points of supply chains in the Japanese manufacturing industry along the Tohoku highway. Shinkansen was the main traffic line linking Tohoku to the Tokyo area. These cities were also articulating points of assistance networks to the coastal tsunami-stricken area.

To what degree were the supply chains damaged? How and through which cities were manpower and relief goods mobilized into assistance activities in the coastal area? This was another concern of the media. Such a temporarily created geography indicates that the chains of events caused by the disaster were composed of multi-layered and multi-scaled networks of social activities from the local and national to the global.

To understand these multi-layered traits of the events and networks created through the East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, our research team conducted fieldwork studies primarily in two places: Ofunato City in “the first belt” of the tsunami-stricken area and the cities of Kitakami and Tono in “the second belt” of the major industrial cities, which had become bases for assistance networks.

ARTICLES

This special issue is composed of two articles.

The first one by Tadahito Yamamoto is about assistance networks and is based on the fieldwork done in Ofunato City (Yamamoto 2012a; 2012b)¹.

It places a special focus on the “in-home sufferers” problem prevalent in Ofunato from the viewpoint of “socially created displacement,” which has been adopted as an important approach in recent research in disaster studies (Oliver-Smith 2005; 2006).

The second article by Yutaka Iwadate is about the role of inland cities as the hubs of large-scale assistance networks for the coastal area. Specifically, it focuses on “Tono Union Volunteer Center” established by the community union in Kitakami City².

It throws light on the significance of “assist for assistance activities” and makes us reconsider the volunteer activities institutionalized after the Kobe earthquake. In today’s precarious society, it will also present a concrete example and a possibility of a transitory “assemblage” of social activities and material spaces/infrastructures (Graham ed. 2010; 2012; Machimura 2012).

MATERIALS

The research team has collected some valuable materials through the fieldwork and is now making archives.

This issue introduces the following items from the archives: “Tono Volunteer Diary,” which is a record of volunteer activities by the “Tono Union Volunteer Center,” and an interview video of the center’s leaders.

Notes

- 1 On reconstruction policies, see Maruyama (2012).
- 2 On the significance of fieldwork as a sociological “practice,” see Iwadate (2013).

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