

Disaster management

Go by people's requests

The Japanese experience of reconstruction after earthquakes and tsunamis offers some useful lessons

In May last year I visited Padang, the city in this beautiful Sumatra island, to participate in the Southeast and East Asia Regional Meeting of Via Campesina. It has already been 10 months since that meeting. Who could possibly have imagined that such a tragedy as that of 26 December would happen? Please accept my sincere condolences for the people who lost their precious lives, the people who are still missing, and the people who lost their loved ones as a result of this huge earthquake and tsunami. I really appreciate that so many groups are working hard for the relief and re-construction of the tsunami victims.

As a Japanese word, 'tsunami' reminds the world that Japan has experienced a lot of tragedies from earthquakes and tsunamis. About 10 per cent of all earthquakes in the world happen around Japan. 81 years ago, the Great Kanto Earthquake hit the capital city Tokyo directly, and over 140,000 precious lives were lost. Ten years ago, 6,400 people were killed by the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake.

I am not a specialist in earthquakes and tsunamis or in agricultural civil engineering, but I have some experience and knowledge of the agriculture and fishery reconstruction policy and I would like to talk especially about the role of the Japanese government.

In the United Nations-sponsored meetings on reconstruction from disasters, held in Jakarta and Geneva in January this year, the Japanese government has promised to be the largest donor country. We believe the Japanese government should take up this responsibility not only because it is a part of Asia but also because Japan developed

by taking advantage of the other Asian countries that it invaded during World War II, and because the Japanese economy has been encroaching on the Asian economy. The problem is that developed countries have never fulfilled their pledges of donation, as Oxfam has indicated in its 7 January 2005 Briefing Note *The Asian Tsunami: The Challenge after the Jakarta Summit*. We demand that all developed countries fulfill the pledges they have promised, and we wish to monitor them, along with you.

Also, the policy of the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) is another huge problem. Just after the earthquake and tsunami happened, MAFF investigated the damage to shrimp and chickens of the affected countries like Thailand, Indonesia and India to make sure there was no negative impact on trading. This was the ministry's very first reaction. MAFF was more concerned about the traded commodities that interest Japanese transnational companies rather than focusing on how the food and livelihood needs of the affected people could be met. I felt a strong rage against MAFF.

Neglected tasks

Yet, though reconstruction in agriculture and fishery is one of the main tasks of MAFF, it has been neglected as revealed in this extract from a 28 January 2005 document, *Support for the People Affected by the Great Sumatra Earthquake and Tsunami in the Indian Ocean*: "Japan hires special private consultants in each affected country to survey the damage in agriculture and fishery, and in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, to establish reconstruction plans, and supports affected countries with the assistance of the government in each affected country, using a part of the budget prepared for the Food and

Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).”

In other words, MAFF does not want to provide a new budget for the support, and does not want to send any expert who works in MAFF. Over one-and-a-half months have passed, but there is still no move for an actual plan for reconstruction. MAFF itself is planning nothing even as we discuss here what the reconstruction plans should be.

Nonetheless, Japan has systems for reconstruction after natural disasters, using high technology and large budgets. What is needed is to use these systems effectively for the affected Asian countries.

In Japan, the government has identified 61 cases as great disasters and more than 200,000 people have lost their lives in 100 years of the 20th Century, according to the Cabinet Office’s March 2002 report, *Countermeasure against Disasters in Japan*. Each time, Japan has established systems for reconstruction and prevention of disasters. A French sociologist who visited the affected area just after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, said, “Why has this earthquake hit so hard on people in such a materialistically highly developed world? The answer is that Japan’s development has been for companies, not for people” (quoted in *Ten Years after the Great Earthquake and Islands*

of Disasters, edited by Yoshimitsu Shiozaki, January 2005.) The systems have not been developed well enough. Every time, the “voiceless voices” of the victims and grassroots people’s movements have made the government change its policies.

Let me explain Table 1 more specifically. First, “Disaster Relief Loans for Peasants and Fisherfolk (at most 2,000,000 yen)” can cover almost all costs in reconstruction, but “Assistance for the Recovery of Victims’ Livelihoods” is too small to cover the cost of rebuilding houses. Second, the government is responsible for supporting 50-70 per cent of the farmlands. The local governments of each prefecture, city and town have their own percentages for support that is added to the national support. That means the affected people have to themselves cover 15-20 per cent of all costs for recovery, depending on the additional percentage. There is a condition that the recovery should be done in a year. The amount is not reasonable for peasants, some of whom have had to give up their farming.

Huge disaster

The recovery and reconstruction measures of the Japanese government seem to be well developed, but the system does not work enough in reality. The main reason is that the support is not for individuals. When a huge disaster strikes and destroys houses, the government

Table 1. Outline of Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction Measures in Japan (Agriculture and Fishery)

Livelihood Support for Affected People	
Disaster Relief Loans for Peasants and Fisherfolk	Low interest loans to support economy and livelihood of affected peasants and fisherfolk. (At most 2,000,000 yen /us\$19,000)
Assistance for the Recovery of Victims' Livelihoods	The affected families whose houses were destroyed completely can get financial support for their livelihood and cost to removing debris of their broken houses. (At most 3,000,000 yen /us\$29,000)
Disaster Relief Condolence Money	If the affected person lost his/her family, at most 5,000,000 yen (us\$48,000) can be paid.
Tax Reduction or Exemption	Income tax and residential tax of affected people are reduced or exempted.
Recovery of Agricultural and Fishery Facilities	
Recovery Projects for Farmland and Agricultural Facilities	The government supports financially for the recovery of damaged farlands and water facilities. The subsidy rate is: Farlands 50-70% (The rate increases, depending on the damage.) Agricultural Facilities 65-85% (Same as above)
Fishing Port Recovery Project	The government supports financially for the recovery of damaged fishing port or Coast Guard facilities.
Coast Guard Facility Recovery Project	The support is more than 65% of the total cost

From MAFF, "FAQ for Recovery and Reconstruction Measures" February, 2002

supports only the cost of removing debris from the site, and lends money for that, but does not give money to affected people to rebuild their houses. Also, in Japan, there is no recovery measure to support affected peasants or fisherfolk who lost their farm implements or fishing craft and gear, essential for their livelihoods.

The reason for the Japanese government's denial of support to individuals stems from its policy of neoliberalism, which advocates the philosophy of "protecting your own property yourself." However, this policy is seen to fail because of the rise of people's movements and changes in local governments. The following are a couple of examples:

Tottori Prefecture, next to Hyogo Prefecture, where the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake hit, decided to provide special funds to rebuild houses for the people who lost their houses due to the Tottori West Earthquake in the year 2000.

For the people affected by the Niigata Tyuetsu Earthquake in October the previous year, the government could no

longer neglect a new reconstruction policy that provided financial support for reconstruction of housing.

In the second example, the Hokkaido Southwest Earthquake in 1993 generated an over 30-m high tsunami that hit a small island Okushiri, close to my hometown. 342 houses—70 per cent of the total of 504 houses—were destroyed partially or completely, and 230 people lost their lives.

Though it was not wide-ranging in effect, I feel something in common with the earthquakes that occurred in Asia last year. Also, agriculture and fishery are the main sectors of the economy in the affected island of Okushiri, as in many Asian countries.

Reconstruction funds

The local government of Okushiri got approximately 19 bn yen (US\$1.8 bn) as donation collected from all over Japan, and used the money to provide funds for reconstruction of houses (7,000,000 yen/US\$67,000 per house), condolence money for the victim's family (3,000,000 yen/US\$29,000 per victim), and compensation money for houses destroyed (4,000,000 yen/US\$38,000 per house). The rest of the

Table 2. The Reconstruction and Relief Project in Agriculture and Fishery in Okushiri Island, Hokkaido (For Individual)

Support Project for Reconstruction of Agricultural Facilities	Financial support for affected peasants to repair or purchase agricultural machinery and facilities.
	Support 50% of all cost, at most 5,000,000 yen / us\$48,000
Special Support Project for Agricultural Reconstruction	Financial support for peasants with difficulties in agricultural reconstruction to maintain agricultural machinery and inputs.
	Support 67% of all cost, at most 5,000,000 yen / us\$48,000
Support Project for Purchase of Common-Use Fishing Boats of Affected Fisherfolk	Financial support for affected fisherfolk to purchase used fishing boats to be used in common.
	Support 67% of all cost
Support for Purchase of Fishing Gear	Financial support for fisherfolk to purchase gear for large-scale fishery
	Support 50% of all cost, at most 5,000,000 yen / us\$48,000
Project for Input of Engine for Small Fishing Boats	Financial support for input of a removable engine in small fishing boats.
	Support 83% of all cost

Source: Form official documents published by the town centre of Okushiri

money went towards the disaster recovery fund.

The financial resources for these projects are donations from the Japanese people. These are limited in many ways because they do not form part of the “public spending” of the national and local governments. However, while the government focus on neoliberalism denies individual support, the town decided on spending money for reconstruction in agriculture and fishery, based on people’s goodwill. Although some people said the town was going to become extinct after the earthquake and tsunami hit, through the support projects, Okushiri has recovered from the disaster.

In conclusion, I would like to talk about some news from Indonesia that I have heard of in Japan. Apparently, the government ordered the people living in Lampoo, a village in Aceh, 2 km from the shoreline, to evacuate, but they are resisting the order because they believe that they cannot recover their livelihoods if they evacuate the area.

In this case, the Okushiri experience can prove useful. The town centre of Okushiri first planned to move people from the lowland area. However, urged by the people’s will, the centre then decided to purchase land and sell it to the affected people at the same price after the

reconstruction phase, which focused on prevention from disasters.

Another news that I heard is that Indian fisherfolk whose fishing boats were destroyed by the tsunami said that if they have Rs 70,000 (around US\$1555), they can repair their boats and restart fishing. To help them reach a solution too, I believe that the reconstruction experience of Okushiri can be useful.

In its July 2004 report, *Development of Japan’s Social Security System: An Evaluation and Implications for Developing Countries*, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) says that the Japanese experience on welfare is worthwhile as a unique model for developing countries trying to develop their social security systems. Pushing the Japanese social security system as the model for Asian countries may be arrogant, but it can be useful in the case of reconstruction, and I believe that some parts of the system can be applied.

Grassroots

If there is something useful for reconstruction from the Japanese systems that have been developed by grassroots people’s movements, people should use it. Also, governments should support it. I believe that this is a responsibility that Japan has to play, being a part of the world where disasters hit most frequently.

According to a note prepared by the Cabinet Office of Japan, 36 per cent of all natural disasters in the world have happened in Asia, and 44 per cent of total victims and 91 per cent of the total number of people affected by natural disasters are in Asia.

Of course, we should never co-operate with reconstruction projects prepared by the international institutions and transnational companies that promote neoliberalism. We should work on reconstruction based on the requests coming from grassroots people's movements. In some countries, development plans to protect the benefits of transnational companies in the construction industry are being used to force people to move away. In order to stop this forced eviction, all people in the world should unite and fight together. If all peasants, fisherfolk and people in the world are united, we will never be defeated. ♪

This article by Yoshitaka Mashima, Vice Chairperson of NOUMINREN (National Confederation of Farmers Movements in Japan), is based on a lecture at the Regional Conference on Re-construction and Development of Peasants' and Fisherfolks' Livelihoods after the Earthquake and Tsunami, Medan, Indonesia, 18 February 2005