

Towards Sustainable Communities

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Ten years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake. However, we do not hear this spoken about often in disaster-stricken areas. This may be because people know it is meaningless to be astounded by how much time has passed, as it is not as easy to segmentalize their daily lives spent towards reconstruction and recovery in units of time.

People and community activities are still in the process of recovery, and challenges are becoming more prominent, especially in disaster public housing. A man (80 years old) who serves as the president of the residents' association in a collective housing project of about 60 households has actively implemented various events since moving in four years ago to try to promote connections between people. However, the number of participants did not increase despite outreach, and he says, "I gave up because I was tired." Before the new fiscal year, he asked the executive to find a new president, but was strongly requested to keep serving in the role, and reluctantly decided to do so.

Disaster public housing, in which people who do not know each other live together, has seen its share of problems such as solitary deaths, which provoked the need for support such as community formation and watching over one another. There are many examples of supporting the president, as mentioned above, on the premise of independence from external support and in favor of a resident-led group. I am also one of those who provide support, and I feel frustrated at the bleak outlook. In a survey conducted in Iwate Prefecture in November last year with disaster public housing government officials and Japan National Council of Social Welfare staff (Funato, n=150), 18% responded that the status of the residents' organization was "unchanged" after three years, whereas 63% mentioned the "lack of leaders and participants and functional decline." In other words, many forms of support are targeted at only a small number of "executives" with high levels of awareness on the issue, resulting in a lack of alternative human resources and a less sustainable residents' organization.

Many of the types of support focused on the residents' initiative, but they did little to arouse interest among those who were indifferent; in some cases, they were left to dissolve under the guise of residents' independence. The residents are getting older, and thus, the shortage of candidates is a serious matter. How can we increase self-help in the face of a prospective decrease in recovery support and public assistance?

To take the example of a small case, it has been 4.5 years since the prefecture-operated Tochigasawa Apartment (225 residents) in Rikuzentakata City advocated a "community with a total participation of residents." The term of service for the group leader responsible for activities such as collecting money was shortened from the usual 1-year term to 1 month to familiarize everyone with the role early on to foster a sense of sharing of responsibilities. I have also been involved in helping the council stimulate exchange of thoughts and ideas among residents. More than 30 members participated in the monthly council meeting, and progress is being made every year. As a new development, the presidential election was conducted by taking a vote from all households, which is unusual for disaster public housing. These forms of self-government and self-help, which were not seen before the disaster, are taking root as Tochigasawa culture.

The words "Build back better" were often heard in terms of reconstructing infrastructure, but they should also be used to discuss social infrastructure. Whatever human recovery that can be realized is only accomplished through the accumulation of small efforts rooted in life. A lesson to be learned from the Great East Japan Earthquake is, what should community support look like in the affected areas? True value as a supporter is required to form a new paradigm of sustainable communities.

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