

## COVID-19 and Disaster Volunteers



**Yoshihiro Seki**

Professor, School of Sociology/ Steering Committee Member, Institute of Disaster Area Revitalization, Regrowth and Governance, Kwansei Gakuin University

In Japan, where heavy rain disasters seem to be occurring every summer in recent years, disaster volunteers have become an “essential presence” in rehabilitation and reconstruction. This has two meanings. The first is the institutional meaning in that disaster volunteers are needed as an “unpaid labor force” because the national government and other authorities alone cannot fully take care of the rapid physical restoration of disaster areas. In response to such a situation, non-governmental organizations have formed networks, aiming to rehabilitate and reconstruct things as quickly as possible for victims and disaster areas. This new disaster relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction mechanism has been created by applying the lessons learnt from disaster experience since the Hanshin and Awaji earthquake disaster.

The other meaning is supportive: following a disaster, volunteers make great efforts toward rebuilding people’s everyday lives as a whole. Those of us who have experienced a great number of disasters are well aware of the fact that an everyday life that is harmed by disaster does not recover by restoring the physical living environment alone. The ones who pick up the “voices” of disaster victims and handle them independently and humanely, in a way that the authorities and public services cannot fully cover, are disaster volunteers.

During the current heavy rain disasters in Kyushu, many volunteers were needed in both senses of the word, but due to COVID-19, their activities were limited to “residents in the prefecture.” Therefore, we often saw news reports about “not having enough volunteers.” Perhaps not a small number of people felt a certain sense of discomfort at hearing these

reports. “Volunteering is something people do on their own initiative, so saying that there aren’t enough is management-side logic,” and so on. This discomfort originates in the thought that volunteers act on a logic different from that of efficiency and should not be limited only to tasks that require efficiency, such as shoveling mud or removing disaster debris.

Being the victim of a disaster means suffering damage to things that had been “natural” in everyday life. These “natural” things are the cornerstone that gives us the confidence to lead our everyday lives. The human involvement of disaster volunteers reminds us once again of the meaning of our own existence in the form of human connections with disaster victims. It gives rise to the feeling that “it’s okay for me to be here.” That becomes the impetus for rebuilding the “natural” things that had been lost in the disaster. Confidence in the meaning of our own existence leads to the confirmation that the things that are here today will continue to be here tomorrow. This faith in temporal continuity itself becomes the foundation for what is “natural.” Therefore, the things we can do as volunteers should include activities aside from going to the concerned site immediately after a disaster and beginning relief work there.

In our connections with other people, we live with the confidence in tomorrow on the premise of the things that are “natural.” However, the COVID crisis demands that we keep our distance from other people. Nevertheless, this does not mean cutting off connections. We may be solitary right now, but we are not alone. I believe that we must understand once again the importance of connections even if we cannot go to sites, and turn this into an opportunity to think of ways to connect.

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