

A Trip to Post-311 Tohoku: A Revelation of Reconstruction & Resilience

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In December 2018, the Japan Foundation Asia Center kindly sponsored and organized my ten-day field trip to Tohoku (Fukushima, Miyagi and Iwate prefectures). My aim was two-fold: first to learn about the recovery of that region from the March 2011 Triple Disasters of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown at Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station. Second to find out about Singapore's humanitarian assistance to three places: Soma city in Fukushima, Shichigahama town in Miyagi and Rikuzentakata in Iwate.

The trip to Tohoku was indeed an eye-opener for me. The scale, magnitude and tragedy of the tsunami's devastation were shocking and mind boggling indeed. However, the silver lining to this catastrophe is the steady and painstaking progress made in reconstruction. This regional rehabilitation has at least three dimensions: physical reconstruction of roads, bridges, railways, sea walls to mitigate future tsunami, houses, hospitals and schools, reviving local industries and commerce and rebuilding local communities.

What made an indelible mark on me is the resilience of the people in Tohoku to rebuild their local communities in the aftermath of 3.11 and the transformation of a relatively isolated region to one more open to outsiders from other areas of Japan, Asia and the world. My impression is that the Herculean efforts at reconstruction (both infrastructure hardware and community rebuilding "heartware") undoubtedly reflects the resilience of the Japanese people. But this titanic task was not shouldered alone. Indeed, many countries in the world, both rich and poor, contributed generously to the humanitarian needs and the reconstruction of Tohoku. Apparently, many Japanese were surprised by the outpouring of much concern, support, aid and encouragement from abroad. Sometimes it takes a horrific tragedy to bring humanity together.

During my trip to Tokyo and Tohoku, a former Cabinet minister of reconstruction, senior bureaucrats from Iwate and Miyagi prefectures, scholars from Iwate prefectural

university, officials from the Reconstruction Agency in Tokyo and its Iwate bureau, the mayors of Soma city, Shichigahama town and Rikuzentakata, a curator of the Rias Ark museum, an artist (spearheading a Tohoku International Arts Festival), a soya sauce merchant who rebuilt his smashed factory and business from scratch, and new and young migrants to Rikuzentakata were among those who generously and candidly shared their perspectives and insights of 3.11 to me. My conversations with these people from different walks of life reveal that even more challenging than infrastructure and economic reconstruction is the rebuilding of local communities where lives and social networks have been shattered. But they generally share a sense of hope rather than despair to rebuild a better community despite the magnitude of the task.

However, we should not sugar coat the long term problems and challenges of Tohoku. First, many residents young and old will continue bearing permanent emotional scars from their ordeal. Second, Japan and many parts of the world suffer from periodic natural disasters. It is inevitable that attention will gradually shift away from Tohoku to other needy regions in Japan, Asia and the world suffering from natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunami, typhoons, floods, landslides and volcanic eruptions. Third, Tohoku, like Japan in general, is suffering from rapid ageing and demographic decline. This will have serious consequences for its local economy and tax revenue for governance and social welfare facilities and services. Therefore, this region must be creative to attract new and younger migrants from other parts of Japan, and even foreign workers in industries like agriculture and fisheries. Fourth, is the nuclear decontamination of Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station and its immediate vicinity which may take a few decades. During my field trip, I travelled to within 1.5 kilometers of Fukushima Daiichi and also witnessed the methodical work in progress to remove contaminated topsoil.

What were the three most memorable moments of my Tohoku trip? They were: the beautiful and wondrous sighting of hundreds of forested islands that dot Matsushima Bay, a homestay with a lovely old couple in Rikuzentakata (the patriarch of the household wanted to teach me Tohoku dialect unintelligible to Japanese beyond Tohoku) and dancing with the vigorous old folks of Rikuzentakata at a multi-purpose community hall donated by Singapore. I was pleasantly surprised that my cultural

dance, Rikuzentakata style, was captured in colour by the *Iwate Nippo and Tokai Shimpo*, a local newspaper.

I hope that Singapore will strike a special relationship with the residents of Rikuzentakata, Miyako, Soma and Shichigahama --- all places where the Singapore Red Cross focused on for disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. Indeed, a silver lining of the disaster is the forging of an unlikely and unanticipated friendship between a relatively remote corner of Northeast Japan with a city-state in Southeast Asia. My hope is that this friendship forged in disaster and pain will endure and that the lessons learnt from 3.11 will not be forgotten. It should and must be shared with the rest of the world for instruction and inspiration.