

Preliminary Report on Shaplaneer's Disaster Relief in Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture (Special Issue on NGO Operations in Disaster-hit Areas of Tohoku)

著者	NEJIMA Susumu, KOMATSU Toyoaki, SATO Midori
著者別名	子島 進, 小松 豊明, 佐藤 緑
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Susumu NEJIMA*, Toyoaki KOMATSU**, and Midori SATO**

Introduction

Shaplaneer is a Japanese NGO working for poverty alleviation in South Asian countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal. Origin of the NGO goes back to 1972, when the newly born Bangladesh was in the middle of confusion. Fifty young Japanese went to Bangladesh for helping people there, and they had experienced various social contradictions in the country. After coming home, some of them did not stop action for Bangladesh, and they formed an organization to sustain the activities. Now named Shaplaneer or House of Lotus in Bengali language, they have been working in Bangladesh for more than forty years. They began operations in Nepal in 1996.

On March 11, 2011, the quake and tsunami destroyed the coastal regions of Eastern Japan. To make matters worse, serious nuclear accidents followed. Facing with the great damages caused by the 311 triple disaster, Shaplaneer decided to start the first operation within their own country. They established a local office in Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture in order to support the affected people of the quake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster. This paper examines Shaplaneer's experiences from March 2011 to February 2013.

This paper is written by Nejima Susumu, Komatsu Toyoaki, and Sato Midori. Nejima has been a regular member (who pays annual member fees) of the NGO for more than twenty years. With his students at Toyo University in Tokyo, Nejima has visited Iwaki six times, and has been translating narratives from the affected people into English (Nejima 2013). Komatsu and Sato are full time staffs of Shaplaneer. They have written reports in Japanese on the Iwaki project (Komatsu 2012, Sato 2013). In addition to his own material, Nejima has integrated the information in the essays written by Komatsu and Sato in this English paper.

1. Disaster Situations in Iwaki and Futaba County

We would like to begin with two narratives from Iwaki (Nejima 2013). The first narrative from a coastal district of Iwama, Iwaki City, tells us how they survived from the tsunami. The quake and

* 東洋大学国際地域学部 : Faculty of Regional Development Studies, Toyo University

** シャプラニール = 市民による海外協力の会 : ShaplaNeer=Citizens' Committee in Japan for Overseas Support

tsunami destroyed more than 7600 houses completely, and killed 347 people (including missing persons) in the city. As a result, 6,000 Iwaki people live in the Temporary Housing Units and private apartments in the city.

The second narrative is told by a woman from Naraha Town. It gives an account of confusion and anxiety caused by the severe accidents at Fukushima No.1 nuclear power plant. Naraha, a part of Futaba County, had been no-entry zone until August 2012. Total number of evacuees from Futaba County is 92,000.

While having thousands of Iwaki evacuees within, Iwaki City has accepted more than 22,000 people from Futaba County including Naraha. Now they live in the Temporary Housing Units and private apartments in Iwaki as well.

Narrative 1. We never leave our hands¹⁾

Mr. A, 80, and his wife, 73, Iwama, Iwaki city.

Wife: After the big earth quake, firefighters were asking for evacuation. I didn't believe that tsunami would come here because my house is located near a mountain. After gathering seed potatoes, I returned to my house. Things were scattered inside, and there was no space to stand. So I started to clean the room. Suddenly I had a presentiment that something bad would happen. We finally decided to evacuate. When we went outside of the house, water had come into the rain boots. Tsunami was coming closer. Then we held our hands together and promised, "We never leave our hands."

Mr. A: We ran 40 meters to the mountain behind our house. But the secondary tsunami was coming quickly. We were engulfed in the wave. The water became so deep that we couldn't touch the ground with our feet. While swimming, I was grabbing my wife's hand firmly. Then the wave came from the east and we were carried away to the west. I tried to hold a radio tower but I couldn't. I found a tree emerging from the surface of water. It was Japanese winterberry, and somehow we managed to grab it. I saw my wife going down in water, and pulled her up. Water current was terrible, but I had never taken her hand off.

Wife: When I was carried away, when I was grabbing the tree, I was praying all the time. "The wave should go down quickly, please, please." I drank water and had difficulty in breathing, as if I were strangled to death. Still, I was conscious. If my husband let my hand go, I would not have been alive now. We managed to bear the waves. But we could not reach a road, because of debris. It was snowing and getting colder. It was very cold. I desperately climbed to the second floor of my house. My daughter's clothes were intact, so we wore the clothes as many as possible. We did not care whose clothes they were. We were so desperate, and we had never thought of the third wave. After a while, I heard someone talking outside. I called for help. A man came and saved us. He took us to a shrine in a higher place. When we arrived there, tsunami attacked our community again. I saw whole community of Iwama was under the sea.

Narrative 2. An experience of easygoing person²⁾

Shioi Sachiko, 36, a company employee, Naraha town.

On that day, Japan was destroyed. Holding a pillar of office, I felt fear of death for the first time in my life. Book shelves were shaken, lamps fell down, and a copy machine slid over the floor. While the quake was lasting, I was thinking about my children, my house, and many things. “God, it’s enough. Please stop it.” I could not accept reality. I was making wry smile in the unbelievable situation.

I came across the word “unprecedented” for the first time. They say it was the earthquake which occurs “once in a thousand years.” Then, my life is too short to understand it. When we escaped from Naraha, heavy traffic jam had occurred.

It was just like “Independence Day.” After that we had spent days with fear of invisible enemies. It was as if we had been on board a spaceship with “Aliens.” Everything was in confusion. On TV, a NHK announcer was almost crying, and a commentator was in a rage. The official evacuation order of “Escape to the south” was just too simple. No kidding! It must be a joke! But it was true, and Naraha people were dispersed all too soon.



Photo 1. A distant view of Naraha

2. Early Operations

2.1 Decision Making

Situations caused by the triple disaster of 311 were as stated above in Iwaki and neighboring Futaba County. Meanwhile Shaplaneer in Tokyo had to make a definite decision immediately. Shaplaneer has 16 paid staffs at the main office in Waseda, Tokyo. When the quake occurred, several staffs including Mr. Tsutsui Tetsuro (secretary-general) were in Bangladesh. Those who were in Tokyo began donation campaign on 13 March, two days after the unprecedented disaster. On 15, Tsutsui and others returned to Japan. On 16 March, they held a staff meeting. They were concerned with a lack of human and financial resources. Shaplaneer's main projects were ongoing in Bangladesh and Nepal, and they did not have enough money to start a new operation in Japan. Still, all the staff knew that it was the time for direct action. Each and every staff regarded that just collecting donation was not enough. They supported the idea of starting relief operation in the affected areas. Mr. Komatsu Toyoaki (one of the authors of this paper) and Ms. Uchida Tomoko were selected for the relief operation since they had experienced emergency aid in South Asia.

2.2 To Kita-Ibaraki and Iwaki

First of all, they had to select the area. Though the death toll was increasing day by day, the scale of the disaster had not been clear yet. Many other NGOs had already begun the operations mainly in Iwate and Miyagi Prefectures. After getting information from these NGOs, Shaplaneer decided to go to Kita-Ibaraki City, Ibaraki Prefecture. 5 to 6 m high tsunami destroyed hundreds of houses there. They identified a NPO called “We Love Kita-Ibaraki (henceforth WLK)” as a local partner through the civil society network. Most NGOs rushed to coastal regions of Iwate and Miyagi in which the destruction was thorough. As a result, much less attention was paid to Ibaraki Prefecture. That is the main reason that Shaplaneer selected Kita-Ibaraki. Also, the city is located only 150 km from Tokyo, and the access was much easier than remote areas of Iwate and Miyagi. Setting out emergency aid for the first time in Japan, it was a proper location for Shaplaneer.

As distribution system was not functioning well, supermarkets did not have bottled water or retort food packs. It was extremely difficult to arrange transportation, food, and other required materials in Tokyo at that time. All the staff visited as many shops and companies as possible. On 19 March, with two cars full of relief materials, Komatsu and Uchida departed for Kita-Ibaraki. WLK had already opened the office as a depot. They unloaded half of the material from Tokyo at the WLK office. A lot of relief materials from all over Japan were arriving there. On the same day, they proceeded to Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture to deliver the half. Unlike Kita-Ibaraki, they found almost nothing in a depot in Iwaki. Due to severe accidents in Fukushima No.1 nuclear power plant (F1), many Iwaki people (it can be as many as 150,000) evacuated from the city, and most transport companies refused to enter the city. Within the three days, situation in Kita-Ibaraki became better with enough relief material. Therefore, they decided to work in Iwaki City.



Photo 2. Loading of relief material at Shaplaneer office in Tokyo

Komatsu and Uchiyama entered Iwaki again on 22 March. When they visited the disaster countermeasures headquarters, city officers were literally running. It was a tense critical situation. After getting some information, they went to a depot set by Utsukushima NPO Network, another local NPO. The first work in Iwaki was to help bringing in and out relief materials in the depot. Now, after ten days from the quake, a huge amount of materials were coming in. Shaplaneer assisted many private companies to deliver materials

to Iwaki through its own network. They coordinated volunteers from Tokyo as well. Komatsu and Uchiyama worked and slept in the depot up to 25 March. Then, they went back to Tokyo in order to discuss future works.

On 27 March, Shaplaneer went to Iwaki again. They visited Iwaki City Office and Social Welfare Council (SWC). With this visit, they came to know that a local NPO was going to establish a Disaster Volunteer Center (DVC). They also met Ms. Yoshida Masako and her husband Yoshida Takaharu, who had been regular members of the NGO for a long time. Being residents of Iwaki, they were very helpful for Shaplaneer for obtaining local information.

2.3 Establishment of DVCs

A DVC functions as a coordinator office for volunteers coming from all over Japan. After Niigata-Chuetsu quake in 2004, National Council of SWC made a system for establishing DVC. Therefore, it is usually local SWCs that establish DVCs in the affected areas. However, Iwaki is one of the biggest cities in Japan in terms of area. And in a confused situation with nuclear disasters, Iwaki SWC could not cover all the affected areas. Therefore, in Nakoso, which is far away from the administrative center of Iwaki City, a local NPO was going to establish a DVC. This NPO is called Nakoso Community Planning Center. Ube City in Yamaguchi Prefecture was going to send an officer specialized in disaster countermeasure to help them. Likewise, Shaplaneer decided to help management and give financial support to the new DVC.

On 2 April, Nakoso Community Planning Center invited residents and held a meeting. Komatsu attended the meeting. He recalls that some residents were skeptical about volunteers. For most locals, NGOs and volunteers were strange and unaccountable. In the end, they approved the idea. The Nakoso DVC officially started the operation on 9 April, and ended on 20 May. During Golden Week holidays in early May, as many as 300 volunteers came to Nakoso every day. Likewise, A NPO called The People established the Onahama DVC on 19 April. Shaplaneer had been active in supporting this DVC as well. From 22 May, Shaplaneer sent a staff to Iwaki DVC managed by Iwaki SWC for three months.

While working with Iwaki City and Social Welfare Council, Shaplaneer could not make equal partnership with them. At the first stage, Shaplaneer had been treated as outsiders. Prior to the quake, local NPOs were merely outsourcing contractors for Iwaki City and SWC. They had not experienced equal partnership with local NPOs. Moreover, most people in Iwaki did not have a clear idea about international NGOs. They must have been afraid that the interventions of unknown outsiders make the problems more complicated. Having mainly engaged with overseas operations, Shaplaneer had to



Photo 3. Cleaning of a devastated house

suffer from the low name recognition. In fact, many NGOs operating in the affected areas experienced the same as Shaplaneer.

Komatsu says that Shaplaneer learned many lessons from the Iwaki operation. In south Asia, many things remain invisible due to language and cultural barriers. In Japan, on the contrary, they can understand how local people criticize and misunderstand them in details. Now they are more sensitive to anxiety, suspicion and expectation which outsiders may provoke.

3. Support for Everyday Life

Given a great number of evacuees caused by the triple disaster, a full supply of Temporary Housing Units (kasetsu jutaku in Japanese) was impossible. Iwaki City decided to offer vacant rooms of public and private apartments for the affected people. They began to move the houses in the end of April. Japan Red Cross distributed home electric appliances (a TV, a refrigerator, a microwave oven, and so on.) for each one of disaster stricken households. Iwaki City provided food and bedclothes. Now, support operation has moved to the next stage.

3.1 Life Support Project

After several discussions with Iwaki Disaster Countermeasures Office, Shaplaneer decided to distribute a set of kitchen utensils for free. 950 people applied for the set. To avoid harmful influence for local economy, Shaplaneer sought to enhance local procurement ratio. In collaboration with local companies, they could collect required quantities.



Photo 4. A set of kitchen utensils

In order to deliver the kitchen set, they visited affected people one by one³⁾. Unlike affected people in Temporary Housing Units, people in public and private apartments were scattered in many places, and isolated. They wanted to talk about problems they were facing, and Shaplaneer staff paid attention for what they told. Soon, following problems came up through hearings.

- 1) split of local communities
- 2) isolation in unknown places
- 3) lack of transportation
- 4) lack of information
- 5) lack of support for those scattered in private apartments (concentration of support for temporary housing units in which evacuees live together)
- 6) condition of being unpredictable

3.2 Establishment of Buratto

To solve the above mentioned problems, Shaplaneer opened Buratto, an exchange place for evacuees from Iwaki and Futaba County on 9 October 2011. Buratto means "visit without a certain purpose" in Japanese. The service was the first trial of its kind in the city. Conveniently enough, it is located in a corner of Latov, a large commercial complex in front of Iwaki JR station. Later in April 2012, Buratto moved to Ito Yokado, another commercial facility near the station.

Sato Midori has been in charge of Buratto since she joined Shaplaneer in April 2012. She was born in Aizuwakamatsu, Fukushima Prefecture. At the time of the 311 disaster, she had been in the United States of America. Sato wanted to support Fukushima people, and came back to Japan. From now on, description is mainly based on her report issued in February 2013.

There are always more than two staffs at Buratto. They are ready to listen to words of evacuees. They also arrange cultural programs such as handicraft, shogi (Japanese chess), and calligraphy three or four times a week. In 2012, Buratto had 1,000 visitors per month (In 2013, the number of visitors has increased up to 1,200 per month). Gradually, visitors of Buratto began group activities voluntarily. They arrange lecturer, and set an order and time for planned events by themselves.

Shaplaneer has been sharing information and experiences of Buratto as well. Gradually, people come to know about the operation. Other organizations ask for information about operating method. Shaplaneer has been supporting Nakoso Exchange Space, operated by Nakoso Revival Project. Tomioka Town of Futaba County has begun Iwaki Taira Exchange Salon. Now an ex-Buratto volunteer works there as a staff.



Photo 5. Buratto

While taking care of visitors facing many problems, Shaplaneer staffs had engaged with two other operations. They began door-to-door visit for aged, handicapped, and solitary households. They were people who could not visit Buratto. Though the addresses of the evacuees were confidential and not available from Iwaki City, Shaplaneer had obtained information on evacuees' addresses through Life Support Project. They selected 200 households for door-to-door visit.

Network construction among local government, SWC, and local NPOs is vital for more efficient operations. With sharing information and experiences, they can help each other, and avoid duplication of services. In September 2012, more than 20 NPO/NGOs got together and established Minpuku Net. Shaplaneer has been an active member of Minpuku Net for promoting local network.

4. Public Relations

After the triple disaster, tens of millions of Japanese, especially those in Eastern Japan, had experienced extraordinary state of life for several months. Now, memories of the 311 are quickly wearing thin, while affected people have been facing many problems. The gap between Tohoku and other parts of Japan has widened. As a Tokyo-based NGO, Shaplaneer can work in order to fill the gap. For this purpose, Shaplaneer has held several report meetings in Tokyo. They have arranged three tours for Iwaki as well.

5. Concluding Remarks

In the end, we can summarize the experiences of Shaplaneer in Iwaki in the three points.

Before 311, Shaplaneer did not have any particular relationship in Iwaki City (or, most Japanese NGOs did not have affiliation with any local government). As a result, Shaplaneer could not make equal partnership with Iwaki City and Social Welfare Council. Without recognition of a local government, NGOs cannot work efficiently in affected areas in Japan. Strengthening the relations with local governments and SWC is required for future cooperation.

Still, persevering efforts has produced a positive result. Shaplaneer has established Buratto, an exchange place for evacuees in October 2011. They arrange cultural programs regularly, and have more than 1,000 visitors per month. Gradually, visitors of Buratto began group activities voluntarily. Shaplaneer has been sharing the experiences of Buratto with other organizations.

Shaplaneer will close Buratto by the end of March 2014. This does not mean the end of the commitment. Shaplaneer can support local initiatives by promoting capacity building and networking of local NPOs in Iwaki City.

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Footnotes

- 1) “We never leave our hands” was translated by Kurokawa Chihiro, a Toyo University student.
- 2) “An experience of easygoing person” was translated by Fujii Kaede, a Toyo University student.
- 3) When he visited an affected people, Komatsu met a man from Nakoso. He was skeptical about volunteers at the meeting. Komatsu was impressed with his words. “I am sorry for saying something negative at that time. Indeed, so many volunteers helped us. Thank you very much.”