

# Disaster Relief from Kobe and its Significance in the Bam, Iran Earthquake of December 26, 2003

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## Abstract

2 non-profit organizations from Kobe, in cooperation with a division of Osaka University, under the name of Message from Kobe (MFK), responded immediately after the Bam earthquake. The authors visited Bam, as well as Kerman and Tehran, twice to provide direct assistance to victims (e. g., cash donation), and to establish a long-term partnership with local Iranian NGOs. Based on our own experiences from the 1995 Kobe Earthquake, it is local NGOs in partnership with governments that will play essential roles in the long-term recovery and reconstruction of Bam. It was also anticipated that many international NGOs would finish their operations and leave the affected area in a few months. Therefore, we intended to focus on local Iranian NGOs and their networks as our partners for long-term activities from relief to reconstruction. We have shared our lessons from Kobe with 2 national networks of NGOs in Tehran, a regional network in Kerman, and a few local NGOs in Bam. Concretely, we have supported: (1) local NGOs to provide child care and job training for women in Bam, (2) Kerman NGO House to bridge its regional NGOs and those in Kobe, and (3) a new NGO network that will specialize in disaster relief. In addition, a psycho-social interchanges through paintings/sketches drawn by children in Bam and Kobe have been initiated. The present study introduces our relief activities, places it in the context of international disaster relief, and theoretically analyzes how experience and knowledge of disaster relief can be transferred to international and local agents to help victims of disasters. It reveals that the contextual background of relationships among international, national, regional, and local NGOs should be taken into account by recipients and suppliers before a disaster, that experience of previous disaster relief may reduce the number of alternatives during improvised activities, and that concern for victims is essential to overcome disaster-fragile societies.

**Key words:** disaster relief, Bam earthquake, international NGO, local NGO, Kobe earthquake

## 1. Introduction

At dawn on December 26, 2003, a devastating earthquake hit the city of Bam, an isolated desert city in the Province of Kerman in southeastern Iran. The magnitude of the earthquake was 6.5 on the Richter scale, and reportedly more than 40,000 out of 120,000 residents were killed. About 80% of the houses were destroyed due the structural weakness of the traditional method of construction, that is, adobe buildings. The Bam Citadel (Arg-e Bam), which was the world's largest mud-brick complex, was almost completely destroyed.

International NGOs responded immediately after

learning of this disaster. Japan has a system of emergency relief for natural disasters and for refugees. It is called Japan Platform consisting of NGOs, business organizations, and the national government. It dispatched Japanese NGOs including Peace Winds Japan and NICCO (Nippon International Cooperation for Community Development) within a few days after the earthquake. A Japanese research team also visited Bam to collect basic information about damage (e.g., Miyajima *et al.*, 2004).

Japanese local NGOs also responded from Kobe soon after the calamity. 2 NGOs located in Kobe have conducted international disaster relief missions after

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their initial mobilization in the 1995 Kobe Earthquake (Atsumi and Suzuki, 2003). One is Citizens towards Overseas Disaster Emergency (CODE), the other is the Nippon Volunteer Network Active in Disaster (NVNAD). These 2 NGOs, for the first time, jointly conducted relief activities in Bam in cooperation with the Center for Civil Society at the Graduate School of Human Sciences, Osaka University. The first Bam mission independently of CODE entered the devastated area a week after the earthquake. The second and third missions, jointly of CODE, NVNAD, and Osaka University, arrived 1 and 2 months later, respectively. Their mission was called "Message From Kobe (MFK)."

The MFK has provided relief and support for the reconstruction of Bam with a unique perspective based on the participating organizations' own experiences in the 1995 Kobe Earthquake. In addition, both authors participated in the second and third missions as members of Osaka University and the NVNAD (first author only). Therefore, the present study reports our activities and examines their significance for Bam. First, it serves as a quick ethnography of MFK (Message From Kobe, 2004 a, 2004 b). Second, it identifies unique characteristics of these disaster relief activities and their significance for Bam and Kobe. Finally, it explores theoretical as well as practical implications.

## 2. Ethnography

### 2-1. Establishing Message from Kobe

When returning from a meeting in Nagoya, a representative of CODE received a call informing him of the earthquake in Iran. The news was shared immediately with the first author, the vice president of NVNAD, standing next to him in a Shinkansen train to Kobe. As soon as we shared the story, we began discussing how and when we would dispatch a delegation to Iran.

The headquarters of CODE began preparing to send staff members to Bam on January 1, 2004. Upon arrival, the delegation entered Bam and a village (i.e., Baravat) in the suburbs of the city. They reported that the survivors lived in miserable circumstances following the earthquake but international NGOs had begun providing tents, clothes, and water in cooperation with Ministry of Interior and United Nations.

Other organizations from Kobe (e.g., Disaster Reduction and Human Renovation Institution: DRI, below) also visited Bam and brought us situation reports by mid-January. All the information was shared with NVNAD and our division at Osaka University.

On the campus of Osaka University, several students and professors, including both authors, began exchanging information on the Bam earthquake through e-mail within a few days after the disaster. They met in the first week of January and decided to join the CODE-NVNAD relief mission with both academic and practical resources. For example, a professor was a board member of the Japan Platform and was happy to share information about Japanese international NGOs; a couple of students were able to speak Farsi, including the second author. Some students collected as much information as possible not only about the earthquake but also about Bam and Iran; other students made arrangements for information sharing via the Internet. Because many of us had experienced long-term recovery processes in the Kobe area, we consensually decided to make use of our own experiences and to maintain contact with CODE and NVNAD. Based on ongoing communications among these 3 organizations, we established a relief team called Message From Kobe.

### 2-2. The first mission as Message From Kobe

NVNAD made contact with a counterpart in Teheran with the help of another local NGO in Kobe. CODE shared all the information with NVNAD and Osaka University, and vice versa. The first author and the representative of CODE had a series of meetings to discuss what we could possibly provide to assist the victims. Based on these information exchanges, the MFK dispatched its first mission to Bam, where they remained from January 25 to February 5, 2004, including both authors.

The purpose of our visit was to collect as much information as possible to maximize the effectiveness of our relief activities from Kobe. Before departure, we recognized the following issues:

- (1) According to our own experiences in the 1995 Kobe Earthquake, it must be, before anything else, local NGOs in partnership with governments that play essential roles for the long-term recovery and reconstruction of Bam.

- (2) It was also predicted that many international NGOs would finish their operations and leave the affected area within a few months.
- (3) There may be some villages outside Bam to which insufficient attention was paid by international NGOs.

Hence, we intended to focus on local Iranian NGOs and their networks as our partners for long-term activities from relief to reconstruction.

We visited 2 nationwide networks of Iranian NGOs, whose headquarters were located in Tehran. They were Hamyaran NGO Resource Center and Youth National Organization (YNO). Hamyaran Iran NGO Resource Center is a volunteer, non-profit, non-political, and independent institute (Hamyaran, 2003). It provided us with a helpful overview of Iranian NGOs (Namazi, 2000). Its mission is to empower people, NGOs, and other community-based organizations, and promote national and international cooperation among those organizations. The YNO has a similar mission, but is focused more specifically on youth NGOs. Both organizations requested that we share our long-term relief experiences in Kobe. Concretely, they would like us to have a workshop to provide (young) volunteers with disaster relief information. The Hamyaran also welcomed our proposed exchange program involving pictures drawn or taken by children in Bam and Kobe. The YNO requested that we examine and provide advice on their 5-year proposal for disaster mitigation. It was obvious that there were many differences between our 2 cultures, political systems, and current situations, but we were happy to share any lessons from Kobe with them. In fact, we held a workshop at YNO (Atsumi, 2004 a) and shared our lessons on search and rescue, evacuation, refugee camp management, local community and volunteers, preparedness in the local community, and networks of NGOs.

Before visiting Bam, we visited Kerman, the capital city of the Province where the Kerman NGO House (KNH) played a leadership role. It was newly established in 2003 to coordinate local NGOs in the Province. According to its research report (Kerman NGOs House, 2004), there are 100 NGOs in Kerman Province and their activities ranged from education and women's support, to environmental issues. The KNH attempted to coordinate local NGOs in Bam.

Concretely, any requests from NGOs in Bam are supposed to be sent to domestic as well as international NGOs through the KNH.

We stayed in a tent managed by a local NGO in Bam, and visited the sites of local NGOs and those of international NGOs with the UN (Okano and Atsumi, 2005). One of the local NGOs in Bam, Nobavaran Bam, established to promote education, facilities for children, sports, job training, housing support, publishing local newspaper, and traditional cultural events lost its office and some members were killed by the earthquake, so they were unable to provide such support to local survivors. After sharing our experiences in Bam with people at the KNH in Kerman and at YNO in Tehran, we flew back to Japan.

### **2-3. The second mission as Message From Kobe**

The Disaster Prevention and Human Renovation Institution (DRI) organized local NGOs in Kobe and other organizations concerned with the Bam earthquake into a committee, called the All-Hyogo/Kobe Committee, on February 17, 2004. Information gathered by MFK was shared at the meeting. The topics brought from MFK are listed in Table 1 as messages to Kobe from Bam.

Those attending the All-Hyogo/Kobe meeting discussed each issue and attempted to identify what they could do for the victims in Bam. With supporting national research funds, the MFK decided to focus on the following three issues:

- (1) Support children in Bam
- (2) Support industries in Bam for mid- and long-term recovery
- (3) Contribute to disaster mitigation activities covering the whole country

The second mission of MFK was dispatched on February 26 and stayed for a week. It consisted of the authors (Osaka University) and a member of CODE. We first made contact with an Iranian NGO (i. e., Anjoman-e Hemayat-e az Kudakan-e Kar: AHKK) at its headquarters in Tehran and at its field office in Bam. We contacted this NGO because we were informed before our departure that it supported children in Bam and collected pictures drawn by these children, and because pupils at a Japanese elementary school in the greater Kobe area had drawn pictures for victims in Bam and asked the NVNAD to deliver them. We agreed to maintain contact through these pictures. The AHKK also received a

Table 1. Messages to Kobe: Topics shared at the All-Hyogo/Kobe Meeting on February 17, 2004.

Category	Activities in Need
Support Local NGOs	Establish NGOs specialized in Disaster Relief
	Networking
	Workshop for Training Volunteers
Housing	Building model houses
Exchange	Pictures drawn by children
	Information Exchange between Iranian and Japanese Students
Socio-psychological support	Support for Challenged, Women, Children
Hygiene	Garbage Removal, Water, Tent
Jobs	Job Creation
	Qanat for dates
Orphanage	Re-building orphanages
Medical issues	Emergency system
	Re-building Health Houses
Research	For the next disaster

Note: Each agency requested various issues to and via Message From Kobe. The MFK submitted this table to the All-Hyogo/Kobe meeting to discuss which participating organizations could follow up one or more activities from Kobe.

cash donation from MFK to support its new tent for children and job training for women.

We also exchanged our experiences in Bam and Kobe with other Japanese missions such as JICA with its consulting team, Peace Winds Japan, JEN, and DRI at an on-site meeting in Bam. We visited temporary housing, date factories, orphanages, date farm, and another local NGO in Bam (i.e., Nobavaran Bam) to examine the current status of their activities in Bam. We were still uncertain as how to best support housing and job issues in a concrete way. Therefore, we visited KNH again to discuss the conclusions of the All-Hyogo/Kobe meeting and asked to remain current on the situation of local NGOs in Bam. We agreed to provide further support for local NGOs' activities in Bam according to updated information from KNH.

## Players on Stage Five "R"s through Disaster Relief

	Neighbors	Local NGOs		From Kobe	Intr'l NGOs
<b>Response</b> 救急・救命	◎				◎
<b>Relief</b> 救援					◎
<b>Recovery</b> 復旧				◎	
<b>Reconstruction</b> 復興	◎	◎		◎	
<b>Re-preparation</b> 防災	◎	◎		◎	

Fig. 1. Phases of disaster relief and key players of each stage. Each row indicates a stage of the disaster cycle, while each column represents players in disaster relief. Double circle (◎) indicates the player at that stage is active. Bold arrows show how leadership is taken over; whereas a thin arrow indicates a lack of connection.

As for contributing to mitigation activities nationwide, there was a newly established NGO (i.e., YARA; YARA, 2004), which specialized in disaster management and was based in Tehran. The members of YARA working at other NGOs reported that they were unable to contribute meaningfully to disaster relief activities, despite visiting Bam immediately after the earthquake due to a lack of knowledge and experience. Accordingly, they requested that we share lessons from Kobe.

The second mission also shared its experiences in Bam, Kerman, and Tehran with members of All-Hyogo/Kobe upon its return to Japan. The MFK and members of All-Hyogo/Kobe have sent missions back-and-forth since this mission to provide additional support. They also held an exhibition of pictures drawn by children in Bam at the museum section of the DRI in Kobe.

### 3. Significance of MFK to Bam and Kobe

The unique characteristics of the relief activities by MFK can be summarized into 2 categories: First, to help the victims in Bam through reconstruction, the MFK focused on Iranian local NGOs from the beginning. Second, it attempted to maintain people's concerns for the earthquake victims in Bam.

#### 3-1. Focus on Local NGOs

The key players in disaster relief change from

stage to stage. For instance, during the first days, survivors in the disaster area help each other and some domestic and international search and rescue teams played essential roles. However, it is the local residents and NGOs that take care of long-term reconstruction. Therefore, it is important that each organization devolves its activities to its counterpart agencies in the next stage. Figure 1 summarizes key players by each relief stage.

Based on our experiences in Kobe and through international relief activities, we realized that most international NGOs were likely to leave Bam a few weeks after the emergency response. Hence, we focused on whether international NGOs established close relationships with local NGOs before they left, and we tried to identify which local NGOs would be active and responsible for the long-term recovery in Bam. Because we discovered that few international NGOs collaborated with local NGOs or even with the network of local NGOs (i.e., Kerman NGO House), we put more emphasis on our partnership with Iranian NGOs. As a result, we continue to maintain a good relationship with NGOs working in Bam and have supported their activities such as childcare and job training, which we believe helps the long-term recovery process in Bam.

### **3-2. Maintaining Concern for the victims**

The worldwide media covers disasters almost everywhere on earth and we can immediately learn where and when a disaster occurs. However, they usually do not continue coverage for a long time because of the variety of events that become news around the world. It is, therefore, easy for us to lose interest in a particular disaster. Victims, however, would like to remain the focus of concern for a long time. In fact, a decade is apparently sufficient for most Japanese people to forget the tragedy of Kobe in 1995, but victims of the Kobe earthquake are not necessarily happy to be forgotten.

Victims and their supporters can appeal to people around the world to maintain interest in their situations; however, they do not have the resources to do so. The MFK introduced in a small way how interest from outside could be sustained. The exchange of pictures drawn by children in Bam and Kobe is a step in this direction. Currently, the drawings from Bam are exhibited at a museum section of DRI in Kobe. Many Japanese people visit the site and

collectively remember the Bam earthquake and its victims through the paintings. Although it is a small, local activity far away from Bam, the pictures help Japanese people, at least some of them, to continue thinking about the victims in Bam.

### **3-3. Significance to Kobe**

The activities of MFK may provide a new direction for international disaster relief from Kobe. Since the 1995 Kobe earthquake, many non-profit organizations have assisted victims in Kobe. They do not necessarily provide international relief activities, but have accumulated lessons and wisdom through their local relief activities. These lessons should be applied to new disasters. MFK can play a role in coordinating the lessons learned and accumulated wisdom for international relief because it consists of 2 major disaster NGOs as well as a major academic organization, all of which conduct their own relief activities in Kobe.

The MFK could also contribute to stimulating interaction among local NGOs in Kobe and also governmental sectors and possibly business corporations in the future. In fact, the All-Hyogo/Kobe meeting was held for the first time based on information from MFK.

## **4. Theoretical and practical implications**

Relief activities of the MFK were based on our own experiences in Kobe. Passing on previous experiences of disaster relief at a new disaster area, in general, has theoretical implications. This section explores 2 theoretical issues of sharing experiences and draws a few practical implications.

### **4-1. Reducing the number of alternatives**

First, the MFK did not necessarily share, in needless detail, all of Kobe's experiences of response and recovery with Iranian NGOs. We summarized our experiences from the standpoint of our overall experience with disaster relief. For instance, we realized that international emergency relief organizations would leave after a short time and local Iranian NGOs were expected to assume leadership roles. This led us to establish a close relationship with Iranian NGOs and their networks from the beginning of our activities. In other words, we shared our experiences of the big picture of disaster relief, from which they could identify and select the direction of further activities.

People in the devastated area face various issues from time to time and must improvise solutions (Atsumi, 2001). In other words, they face the constant emergence of new norms (i.e., criteria to judge what is valid and what is invalid). If a mid-term perspective was available to them, it would be possible to reduce the number of diverging alternatives from which they must select their next actions. It is clear that precise prescriptions for improvisation are not, by definition, available. However, reducing the number of alternatives would improve the effectiveness of relief activities. The significance of participation by local NGOs from Kobe, which actually experienced such improvisation following a disaster, may accelerate this process.

#### 4-2. A tool for maintaining concern

Second, MFK focused on maintaining concern for victims because it realized how the loss of concern from outside discouraged victims in Kobe. It is theoretically fascinating to examine how concern can be maintained. Dialogue with victims is a promising candidate. If people talk with victims, they may be required to revise some views about the needs of those whose communities have been hard hit by a disaster. Different opinions lead them to reexamine their views and call up new interpretations that would not have been considered without facing differing opinions. This process may help maintain concern for the victims for a long time. Of course, most people do not have an opportunity to talk directly with victims, but if there is a dialogue-evoking tool, they may be willing to engage in such a dialogue. This is the process of collective remembering (e.g., Middleton and Edwards, 1990). MFK in fact indicated that pictures drawn by children in Bam would facilitate dialogues with the victims. It is also the process of collaborative remembering (Atsumi, 2004b), in that people begin speaking of the victims. It can be concluded, therefore, that such exchanges are a promising tool (i.e., pictures) to maintain concern for the victims.

#### 4-3. Practical implications

Practically, providing insights into the whole picture of disaster relief as gleaned from previous disasters could facilitate improvisation at the disaster site. MFK, had it made close contact with international NGOs before the earthquake, could have played this role more on site based on experiences in

Kobe. It could also have smoothed the process of transferring leadership roles from one organization to another as was appropriate for the relief stage. Finally, it was revealed that a picture could be a tool for provoking dialogue and accordingly maintaining concern toward the victims.

### 5. Conclusion

The present study introduces an outline of our relief activities and puts it into the context of international disaster relief, and theoretically analyzed how experiences and knowledge of disaster relief can be transferred to international and local agents for helping victims of disasters. It reveals that the contextual background about relationships among international, national, regional and local NGOs should be taken into account both at recipient and in supplier sides before a disaster, and that maintaining concern for victims is essential to motivate both victims and those concerned about them to overcome large-scale disasters.

### Acknowledgement

Without the great help of people in Iran, MFK, and All-Hyogo/Kobe, we would have been unable to conduct this research. The authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to our counterpart in Teheran, Mr. S, for his effective coordination and warm hospitality in Iran, as well as a constant e-mail communication. I gratefully acknowledge Mr. James D. Goltz for his assistance in checking the manuscript in English, a second language of the authors. This research is partly supported by the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research No. 15800013 from the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, Sports, and Technology of Japan.

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(Received February 9, 2005)

(Accepted February 21, 2005)