Interview

Shape of Assistance 1

Utilizing Intermediary Support Organizations and Understanding Disaster Survivors' Needs:Towards Assistance that Connects While Eliminating Unevenness and Oversight

Tsutomu Higuchi,Kumamoto Voluntary Organization Active in Disaster (KVOAD)

Mr. Tsutomu Higuchi was involved in providing intermediary support in Kumamoto Prefecture from the immediate aftermath of the Kumamoto Earthquake throughout the reconstruction phase. We asked him about what aid providers should be like.

Bio: Born in Hita City, Oita Prefecture, Mr. Higuchi graduated from university and had been working at a construction consultant firm on environmental assessment and design projects when he joined NPO Kumamoto in 2001. As the general manager of Kumamoto City Civic Activity Support Center for two years from 2012, he developed the infrastructure for civic activities and planned and put together coordination efforts between NPOs and other sectors.

Public-Private Partnership Model Built in Kumamoto

The day after the foreshock to the Kumamoto Earthquake on April 14, 2016, Japan NPO Center, a Tokyo-based nonprofit organization, contacted us and said, "Volunteers will come to Kumamoto in droves like you have never experienced, and we'd like for you to participate in intermediary support as a local organization." That late afternoon, I met up with Mr. Tetsuya Myojo [current Executive Director of Japan Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (JVOAD)], who had been working hard to prepare the launch of JVOAD. After being explained that "Collaboration with different organizations is a must in disaster relief," we started our activities on April 19.

The Hinokuni Kaigi, a conference that began as a forum for information sharing among concerned parties, was initially facilitated by JVOAD, and attended only by local governments and NPOs from outside Kumamoto Prefecture. I felt that collaboration with the local councils of social welfare (CSWs) was necessary, so I asked them to participate while I also approached environmental NPOs in the prefecture to see if they could offer any help. Although there was a little bit of hesitation among some who felt, "Why would we need to have meetings at this time of emergency?" the locals were willing to do anything that could be of any help, so the process of establishing a solid foundation for collaboration went relatively smoothly.

At its peak, there were nearly 300 organizations involved in the Hinokuni Kaigi. People reported on the situations that changed from day to day and moment to moment, and the information gathered at this conference was more voluminous and more quickly consolidated than that of the prefectural disaster headquarters. The Cabinet Office of Japan also began to participate, and the content of the conference was reported to local governments and other organizations on the same day, resulting in speedy information sharing. However, if the agenda covered a wide range of topics, the conference would sometimes go over five hours. So, we held separate meetings for governments, CSWs, and other targeted groups simultaneously, and tried to improve the efficiency of collaboration among all parties by summarizing confusing information to some extent before presenting things to the Hinokuni Kaigi.

Since February 2020, Hinokuni Kaigi amidst the COVID-19 pandemic went hybrid, conducted both in-person and online.

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The best way to provide information to responders from outside the prefecture was to connect them with those from within the prefecture. Hinokuni Kaigi was, therefore, positioned as a space where responders could obtain information on the activities of local governments and CSWs, as well as the status of the Disaster Volunteer Centers (DVCs). This experience made us realize the importance of the role of intermediary support, and we decided to finish what we started by launching as KVOAD in October 2016 and legally incorporating in April 2017, and we have been moving forward since.

Learnings from the July 2020 Kyushu Floods: How to Provide Smooth Intermediary Support

n July 2020, four years after the Kumamoto Earthquake, the Greater Hitoyoshi Kuma region of Kumamoto Prefecture was hit by torrential rain and subsequent flooding (as part of the July 2020 Kyushu Floods). This was a time when the new coronavirus was raging. Since disaster relief during the COVID-19 pandemic required thorough infection prevention measures, the system changed to local governments being in charge of managing evacuation shelters as a general rule and asking for private civic groups to take over when support was inadequate.

In 2017, we had signed a three-party "Agreement on Non-Disaster and Disaster Time Collaboration and Cooperation with NPOs and Other Volunteer Organizations" with the prefectural government and JVOAD. During the 2020 floods, government-led evacuation shelter operation was still at the core, but when the government requested help, we could ask specific organizations with high expertise among civic aid organizations to step in and offer their assistance. To eliminate any unevenness or oversight in aid provision, we felt the need to have intermediary support organizations that could respond to rapid social change.

Although a grand total of 40,000 people from various DVCs worked together within the prefecture, it is also true that they were forced to operate while short-staffed. This would put individuals and organizations in a position where they had to provide assistance even though they were disaster survivors themselves. So, KVOAD implemented the " Kumamoto/Kuma Reconstruction Project: Connecting through Side Jobs," where we had in mind those survivors whose livelihoods had been cut off by the disaster as well as the unemployed and needy students. This project allowed for people whose incomes had decreased due to the disaster and/or the coronavirus pandemic to engage in paid reconstruction work as a side job. We also provided information on grants for organizations that were continuing their relief activities then.

You never know where or when a disaster will strike. Based on our experience with flood relief during the pandemic, when we think about the super-extensive and super-large-scale disasters expected in the future like the Nankai Megathrust

Earthquake or a megaquake occurring directly under the Tokyo metropolitan area, we can assume that we may not be able to rely on a lot of assistance from the outside and must build a support system within the disaster-affected area. In this sense, we feel that local-led relief provision experiences can serve as useful cases to which people can refer.

Utilizing Information Sharing Meetings to Understand the Conditions in Disaster-Affected Communities

In Japan, there is a growing awareness of the importance of collaboration and information sharing in disaster-hit areas, and a system of collaboration is being established in communities starting in non-disaster times. If you make efforts to gather information on a regular basis and build relationships with local governments, CSWs, and other organizations in the community, then you will have many more opportunities to use your strengths and expertise in the event of a disaster. Likewise, if you have established good working relationships with each other, then it will be easier to collaborate with those involved in relief in the disaster-affected prefecture, and it will be easier to obtain information given out during an emergency.

If you must go into a disaster-affected community with which you have no previous connections, and if it is difficult to collaborate with any local entity, we recommend participating in information sharing meetings there. In the aftermath of the July 2020 floods, KVOAD held hybrid meetings using both in-person and online conferencing. Some participants were able to obtain effective clues that led to actual aid provision without having to visit the disaster-affected prefecture in person.

Furthermore, it is important to learn from the most recent cases in communities that experienced disasters. You must assess not only the systems in place at the time, the actions of the national and prefectural governments, and the moves among local municipal governments and the CSWs, but also the real conditions in the community in order to act accordingly. If you misunderstand any of these, then you may end up providing “excessive assistance” that does not help the community. It is important that you communicate information about your areas of expertise, fields of activity, past aid provision experiences, and passions as an organization starting in non-disaster times, because these will help you establish good communications with others when you start providing relief. In terms of know-how accumulation, while personnel changes in local governments every few years, NPOs and individuals gain more and more experience with every response they undertake. This can lead to the individual and the NPO being able to implement more specialized response in the future.

What I Want to Convey to the Aid Providers

As time passes after the disaster, more and more organizations withdraw, and the number of outside supporters gradually decreases. If there are still needs in the community for their activities, it is the local aid providers who will take over. Therefore, please remember that one of your roles is to discuss in advance with the disaster survivors and other concerned parties when you will be withdrawing and what should be done after you leave. You should also make sure that necessary knowledge and skills are rooted in the local survivors and communities, and that your assistance helps survivors not only to survive the emergency but connects them to what they need to rebuild their lives.

Disaster survivors are not the only ones who are concerned about how long your assistance will last; those of us involved in intermediary support are just as concerned as well. In the case of a large-scale disaster, medium- to long-term aid lasting multiple years would be necessary. The best thing to do is to plan, in advance, how long you can respond, although we understand that many organizations may not have decided on that yet during the emergency phase. Therefore, if you work with a strong will to carry out your mission while you are in the disaster-affected community and collaborate with a local organization, then your activities will be better understood among the local people, and you can help provide more clues for the survivors to move forward.

Message to the Disaster Survivors Who Are Also Serving as Aid Providers

Many people will be engaged in relief and aid work in the disaster-hit communities while suffering from the disaster themselves. You will need a lot of resources including your own physical strength, staffing, and funds. In case you encounter these needs, please do not keep to yourself but call on those around you to collaborate with you. Know that like-minded people are nearby.

Hinokuni Kaigi at its inception in 2016, bringing together the Cabinet Office of Japan, Kumamoto Prefecture, and responders from within and outside the prefecture

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Interview

Shape of Assistance 2

Welfare Challenges Emerging in the Community with the Disaster: Attending to Each Individual and Rebuilding Lives with the Power of Cooperation

Kenji Ikejiri, Chief, Facility & Organization Support Department, Facility & Organization Support Division, Kumamoto Prefectural Council of Social Welfare

When a large-scale disaster strikes, Councils of Social Welfare (CSWs) set up disaster survivor support organizations according to the phase of the disaster. What did the Kumamoto Earthquake and the July 2020 Kyushu Floods teach us about the role of the CSW?

Bio: Originally from Kumamoto Prefecture, Mr. Ikejiri experienced the Kumamoto Earthquake just after joining the Kumamoto Prefectural CSW in April 2016. At the time, he supported municipal CSWs as a part of the Community Welfare Division. After the Community Support Centers (CSCs) were set up, he worked at the Kumamoto Prefectural Support Office for CSCs operated by the Prefectural CSW, where he provided training to CSW staff and assisted disaster survivors through assessing their needs and helping them become more self-reliant.

Response After the Kumamoto Earthquake

The day after the Kumamoto Earthquake, Prefectural CSW staff with experience in disaster relief were dispatched to the municipal CSWs (at the city, town, and village level) in communities that were affected to help assess the situation and to set up Disaster Volunteer Centers (DVCs). At the Prefectural CSW, we also set up our own DVC and readied ourselves to support other DVCs.

The main roles of the DVC are to identify the needs of disaster survivors, coordinate with volunteers and aid organizations, and to help survivors rebuild their lives. Initially, when civic aid organizations from within and outside of the prefecture came to us with inquiries, we did not know what expertise these organizations had. So, we would go to information-sharing platforms such as the Hinokuni Kaigi, a conference for response providers, to obtain information on these organizations. At the CSW, our work must be publicly inclined and must serve the public interest in the community, and we have encountered difficult cases that challenged both. In such cases, we have asked Kumamoto Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (KVOAD), a networking nonprofit organization responsible for providing prefecture-wide intermediary support to disaster relief providers, to help us connect those in need with an aid provider.

In the subsequent recovery phase, support for temporary housing began. This was at a time when Community Support Centers (CSCs) were not fully institutionalized yet, but we were consulted by the prefectural government about a month after the disaster and immediately began coordinating with them on establishing CSCs. Four months later, CSCs were set up at both the prefectural and municipal levels.

Flexible Response and Cooperation Towards Rebuilding Lives

When we found that households or individuals living in temporary housing were in need or suffering from physical or mental health issues, Livelihood Support Counselors from the CSC made home visits and continued to watch over these residents. In cases where there remained obstacles to rebuilding livelihoods, case review meetings were held to address these challenges on an individual basis as well. Sometimes it was difficult for the CSC to follow up on the residents after they moved out of temporary housing, in which case the CSC referred them to use the municipal CSW or long-term care insurance services.

Municipal governments also took initiative in offering various measures for the disaster survivors, such as allowing people to live with their pets in post-disaster public housing or to use wooden houses constructed as temporary housing as permanent residences. In this way, flexible responses based on local conditions and the disaster survivors' own voices provided a boost to the rebuilding of lives in the disaster-affected communities.

However, as more people moved out of temporary housing complexes, the community within the complex weakened. The need to watch over the remaining residents and to confirm their safety became even greater, so the CSC stepped up its efforts.

What Roles Should CSWs Play?

One day, those who worked as counselors at a municipal CSC, which was closing its doors soon, spoke of the importance of connecting disaster response to the work CSWs do during normal (non-disaster) times. They noted, "Individual home visits with residents must go on so that we can continue to protect their lives." CSW staff like them, who have gained experience in disaster-affected communities, must have surely been able to cultivate their abilities to promote community welfare.

When the July 2020 Kyushu Floods hit, DVCs and CSCs were established in municipalities within the prefecture that did not set up these centers after the Kumamoto Earthquake, so we responded by dispatching experienced staff to support these newly established DVCs and CSCs.

We find it important to strengthen cooperation with the civic sector starting in normal non-disaster times, through signing agreements with civic aid organizations on reconstruction assistance. This will allow for aid to be delivered in full cooperation between government and civic sectors in the event of a disaster. Also, there was a case in which the government did not share information with the CSC or with any other aid organization on the situations among residents who had evacuated to public-funded post-disaster rental accommodations. The reason given was that information regarding people in these accommodations are considered private and confidential. However, as a result, necessary assistance did not reach these residents. This incident made us strongly aware of the necessity to share personal information in situations where early action is needed.

Even if we want to reach out to people with welfare-related challenges in their lives, during non-disaster normal times, we cannot connect them to assistance if they do not wish to receive it. However, after a disaster, the CSW can get involved in some way via the CSC if the person is a disaster survivor. The number of people who need to be looked after increases dramatically after a disaster, and we can actually consider this to be a good opportunity to promote community welfare among those who had otherwise been left out.

A mixer gathering for residents of public-funded post-disaster rental accommodations hosted by the CSC and aid organizations.

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Interview

Shape of Assistance 3

Assistance Provision through the Voluntary Operation of Evacuation Shelters

Shizuyo Yoshimura, Mashiki Town

Shizuyo Yoshimura has been involved in community development for a long time, including the launch of a civic volunteer network. Being a survivor of the Kumamoto Earthquake herself, she worked tirelessly to manage the evacuation shelter where survivors could help each other while they lived there. Ms. Yoshimura shared with us the keys to building connections in aid provision.

Bio: Born in Mashiki Town in Kamimashiki County, Kumamoto Prefecture, Ms. Yoshimura evacuated to and lived in the Mashiki Chuo Elementary School gymnasium in her hometown of Mashiki for four months after the April 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake. During that time, she worked hard for the evacuees to voluntarily manage the evacuation shelter without relying only on the government and volunteers. Currently, she is working to make sure communities can proliferate when people move from temporary housing to post-disaster public housing.

Finding a Role and Taking Action

Mashiki is where I was born and raised. In 1990, I founded a civic volunteer network because I wanted to show my two daughters how I was cultivating the hometown spirit. In 1992, I formed the Mashiki Machi Okoshi Juku, a community development volunteer organization. River cleanup was one of our activities, and we had more and more participants each year, which served as reassurance for us that the members of the community had become more deeply connected with each other.

Then came April 2016. The Kumamoto Earthquake completely destroyed my house, and I had no choice but to leave my familiar home behind and go live in the evacuation shelter. The shelter was this messy and unkempt place with futons left on the floor even during the day when nobody was sleeping. I thought that if things continued this way, people would get sick, so I asked the evacuees around me if they would like to help me clean up. My perspective was that I was asking for a favor and that this was not forced, so those who were willing and able would take up what they could. Through these conversations with the fellow evacuees, I found myself with more and more acquaintances within the shelter. We were able to create a comfortable environment by doing what each person was good at, and we valued everyone's dignity while preventing isolation at the same time.

After a month, more and more people were commuting to work or school from the shelter, leaving the elderly to stay behind during the day. By doing light tasks such as opening and closing the curtains and cleaning up while enjoying talking to each other, the older evacuees were able to stay in good health without any decline in motor functions.

We also shared our wisdom to prevent crime at the shelter. We had heard that there were cases at other evacuation shelters where complete strangers from outside of the community had slipped in among the press and volunteer activities. For the disaster survivors, the shelter is their home, even if temporary. So, we made nametags for people living in the shelters and made sure that those in charge of reception would know which evacuee was home or out at any time. This way, when a stranger tried to enter, someone would notice and be able to stop and ask why they were here.

Ms. Yoshimura (middle) smiles at a disaster survivor who came to receive relief items in the aftermath of the July 2020 flood.

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One day, a poster in child's handwriting was put up at the entrance of the shelter that read "Let's say Tadaima (I'm home) and Ittekkimasu (I'm leaving) to each other." The children must have been trying to improve life at the shelter in their own way. After this, more people were exchanging greetings in the shelter.

After four months of living together in a supportive environment, we could finally apply for temporary housing. I thought it was more important to continue our current community relationships than to have to build a new community from scratch in a new environment, so I requested that we be allowed to live in the same temporary housing complex. After negotiations with the municipal office, we did not get our wish. We moved out to different complexes, but the households that happened to be placed in the same complex were able to live next to each other.

Building Connections Continues

Once in the temporary housing complex, we realized it was dangerous for the children there because they were playing in the parking lot having no other place for them to pay within the complex. So, we voluntarily built a plaza on site. Temporary housing complexes should all come with plazas for their residents. Later, after leaving the temporary housing and moving into my own house, I started activities to expand community ties through weaving, and this was done at a gathering place I built on my own premise.

Then, in July 2020, torrential rain hit Kyushu. I created a civic volunteer center with my community development friends of 30 years. This time as a relief provider, I went and stayed in Hitoyoshi City, Kumamoto Prefecture, which was severely damaged by the floods, and provided assistance there for three months. Based on these experiences, I would like to share with you the kinds of attitude that I find important for aid workers.

1. Working together with the disaster survivors

As we engage in relief work, we must understand the community's characteristics and the ways of thinking among the residents grounded in their local culture. We should keep in mind that we will create a system of assistance provision together with the disaster survivors.

2. Valuing connections

If you observe the survivors for a week or so, you will know each person's personality and behavior. If you can ask for help directly from the survivors who seem to be able to help and explain explicitly to the survivors why you are providing certain kinds of relief, then it will help you establish relationships. In addition, disseminating information online can be very helpful in creating connections with supporters who are physically far away.

By connecting survivors with people who support and work with them, we can nurture their own strength to move forward toward self-reliance.

Interview **Shape of Assistance 4**

On Being the Liaison for Assistance Because Needy People Were Right in Front of You

Reconstruction Project Ozu Kasesuru Kumamoto

In Ozu Town, Kumamoto Prefecture, more than 5,000 houses were damaged by the Kumamoto Earthquake, and more than 13,000 people, or one third of the town's population, had to evacuate from their homes. While aftershocks continued, young people in Ozu founded Kasesuru* Kumamoto. We interviewed three members about the group's activities back then.

Co-Representative: **Mr. Satoshi Yoshida** (Nishikino Post Office Postmaster); Secretary General: **Mr. Takeshi Saito** (Former Ozu Local Vitalization Cooperator); Member: **Mr. Takumi Ijima** (Ozu Town Council of Social Welfare Staff)
*In the Kumamoto dialect, kasesuru is a verb that means to join in and help. They gave this name to the organization hoping they would casually lend a helping hand.

How Did You Get Involved?

SY: Before the Kumamoto Earthquake, there was a prefectural program to support civic activities, and the leaders of the organizations that were selected from Ozu Town formed a group on a social networking service. Less than a month later, the earthquake happened. In that group, we asked ourselves if there was anything we could do, and we thought that intermediary support would work well for us.

TS: I'd moved from the Kanto Region as a member of the Local Vitalization Cooperators, and less than a year later the earthquake struck. Reconstruction was added to the work of the Cooperators, and that was how I got connected with Kasesuru. How we work in this group is that people who agree with a particular proposed activity become responsible for taking it on and carrying it out. So, we are an organization where we are all loosely connected through various relationships.

TI: Indeed, the hurdles for participation are very low here. I was invited to take part in an activity because I worked for the local Council of Social Welfare, and the CSW was involved in the operation of disaster volunteer centers and evacuation shelters. My first impression was that people here were doing what they could without stretching themselves too thin.

SY: For me, since we were also disaster survivors ourselves, I had to be able to protect myself and my family first as we continued our work as Kasesuru. We are the type of organization that can make decisions quickly because we can draw on everyone's skills and everyone can express their opinion freely.

What Are the Strengths of Kasesuru Kumamoto?

TS: I have gone around many municipalities and seen many people who aspire to vitalize their communities, but if the aspiration remains at the individual level, then it remains a small flame of a small lit candle. For our organization, it was as if we could light this big flame instead because people with different expertise belonging to different occupations came together.

SY: Being able to add welfare to our activity areas has broadened the scope of our activities for sure. Another thing to mention is that we had members from the municipal government, elected officials, and the CSW, so we got a lot of important information. Also, we knew there were many things that could not be done within our affiliated organizations, so we would decide to do those things through Kasesuru.

TI: In that sense, it was significant that we could provide assistance that could not have been done through the CSW. Actually, due to geographical constraints, some residents of the neighboring Minami Aso Village had to move into temporary housing in Ozu. Because the municipality-based Community Support Center system could not function adequately in this case, we also reached out to the temporary housing residents within Minami Aso Village and connected the residents of the two municipalities through our activities.

TS: The other thing we could do was to candidly tell responders from outside the community about how the community really felt. I think it was necessary to have someone like us, who had the bird's eye view of things, to address issues that would have been difficult for Town Hall to say, like, "Have you considered what would happen to your aid when it comes time for people to move out of temporary housing?" or "Do you realize the local businesses will suffer if you give things away for free?" Hideki Kanada, who is the town Mayor now but a town council member then, worked with us at the time, and he would also say, "Aid that does not meet any identified needs would end up in mismatches. Aid workers need to work with their own organization and in cooperation with the government to discern activities."

SY: We wanted to reflect on our work starting from when the earthquake struck, so during fiscal year 2020, we created a document recording all our activities. This helped us sort through everything we have done as an organization and put them into perspective for ourselves once again. We have established ties in the community, so we would like to build on this by bringing in younger people and continuing to create unexpected positive changes in our community.

Messages for Those Who Will Be Involved in Intermediary Support in the Future

TI: As a welfare worker, I hear heart wrenching stories all the time. So, being able to creatively engage in disaster relief and reconstruction work was something I personally enjoyed. Also, I have now made business connections with the members.

SY: Taking stock of your skills and making connections with people starting in non-disaster times will help you when disaster strikes. I say this as someone who could not be farther away from doing volunteer work myself. When the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake struck, I lived in Tokyo but could not fathom volunteering then. But I was able to get myself moving this time because the disaster happened in this town, and the people I got to know through the post office, where I work, were the ones in need. If you can think about what you can do for those in need who are right in front of your own eyes, then I believe the axis for your own actions would naturally emerge.

"Meeting For All" where members gather to solve problems
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