Human Security after the Great East Japan earthquake: local communities’ organization and their interaction with relief suppliers

Paulo V.Q. SOUSA, Oscar A. GÓMEZ

Graduate School of Environmental Studies, Tohoku University

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ABSTRACT. This paper reviews the interactions between affected coastal communities and volunteer organizations 4 months after the Great East Japan Earthquake using human security as a tool for analysis. We use the set of six guiding questions for a human security analysis proposed by Gomez’s (2011), namely: ‘What are the threats?’, ‘Security of which values?’, ‘Whose security?’, ‘What are the means to provide security?’, ‘Who is the provider of security?’, and ‘How much security?’. The realized threat of the earthquake and of the ensuing tsunami makes it clear that survival is the value to be protected; yet, in the case of such unimaginable destruction, who are the displaced people whose security needed to be secured? How do insecure people get access to protection? Through the following pages, we describe the cases of communities on different conditions of insecurity in the municipalities of Natori, Minamisanriku, Kesennuma, and Ishinomaki, in order to shed light on the means, providers and calculations (‘How much security.’) that were vital for their survival. Throughout the paper, we identify the way communities organize and protect themselves, as well as the means they used to effectively voice their needs to possible security providers. As a conclusion, we show that in order to guarantee the survival and minimum living standards of the victims until a sense of normalcy has been achieved (through either the return to own houses or the moving into government provided provisional housing), it is essential that the many actors providing security, whether they are the government, volunteer organizations, private companies or the organized communities themselves, achieve a high level of communication among themselves and provide, as much as possible, an environment where community empowerment takes place. We also show that from the point of view of the disaster victims, i.e people-centeredness, receiving the necessary security is more important than who the provider of security actually is.

This research, which is still work in progress, is based on interviews conducted with evacuees living in emergency evacuation centers and members of organizations that provided some kind of relief and support.

\[\text{Corresponding author. E-mail: } \text{fy10024@kankyo.tohoku.ac.jp}\]