

Social Standards Requiring Reconsideration

The Degree of Restoration of Daily Life of People with Disabilities Will Show the Real Strength of Japan

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If only they didn't have disabilities...

The Great East Japan Earthquake struck elderly and disabled people alike without mercy. Many were crushed sitting in a collapsing house, and still many more were swept away in the tsunami waves or caught in the fire, unable to run away. Not a few with mental or autistic disorder must have been losing consciousness, merely trembling. If only they didn't have disorders... I cannot help imagining. Numerical analysis is yet to be carried out, but it is not hard to imagine that existence or nonexistence of disabilities directly translated into the difference between life and death. Many must have lost lives or are still unaccounted for because of the disabilities.

Difficulties for the persons with disabilities come in large quantities not only at the very moment of the disaster. New hardship awaits immediately thereafter, typically such as the power outage, disrupted water supply, and fuel shortage following the disaster. The life supporting devices, including the artificial respiration device, oxygen breathing apparatus, dialysis equipment, and suction machine (for suctioning sputum and spittle), all rely on electricity. Artificial dialysis requires a large amount of clean water. Outage of power and water can immediately mean outage of life. Electric wheelchairs and electric beds for prevention of pressure sore and for changing positions will be of no use without electricity.

The new hardship also includes life in evacuation. In particular, the life at evacuation centers are said to cause suffering. It may be all right immediately after the earthquake, but as the days pass by, persons with disabilities find it uneasy to stay on. People with autistic disorder, psychiatric disability, or cognitive disorder, as well as infants, cannot deal well with sudden and drastic changes in the environment. Many end up with weird language and behavior, which frequently results in troubles with the unimpaired. Some with palsy in limbs are unable to use non barrier-free toilets. The evacuation centers are a tough place for those with acoustic disturbance who cannot hear the signal telling arrival of relief supply, or for those with visual impairments who cannot move smoothly

in a crowded space.

Just as at the time of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, not a few left the evacuation centers involuntarily. Some are said to have gone back to their own half-collapsed houses. Others, they say, are wandering around without any destination. Departure from the evacuation centers also mean departure from relief supplies and information. " A society that shuts out a number of its members is an impoverished society " is a phrase from the United Nations resolution in commemoration of the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981). The unprecedented disaster has stretched the regional societies to the extreme feebleness and fragileness. Unfortunately, persons with disabilities have been monstrously "shut out". The enormous impact of the disaster coupled with the accident at the Fukushima I Nuclear Plant for which there is no clear roadmap to end the crisis, has made such "shutout" everlasting. Even at present, there must be measures that can be taken immediately to improve the life in evacuation. Prompt implementation of such measures is strongly urged.

Implement restoration and social security measures in integrated manner

The central concerns in supports are now shifting from the life saving and rescue operations at the initial stage to livelihood support of evacuees, and, at the same time, to restoration and reconstruction. Some emphasize that the reconstruction should not simply aim at restoring what was there: what is required is the flexible way of thinking for neogenesis and creation. In any case, structuring on a grand scale will begin in this vast area. In doing so, what is important is how to interpret the disaster. The huge earthquake was a natural phenomenon. So was the gigantic tsunami. Both were certainly natural disasters that could not be avoided. However, the resulting damages may not necessarily be so. A large portion of the damages was man-made. In the grand structuring in coming days, it is essential to ensure that such man-made disasters are done away with. The man-made disasters. They overlap the negative aspects that the nation's social policy has embraced. Then, their removal is essential not only for policies for reconstruction of the damaged regions and for provisions against the seismic activity that does not seem to be waning. It must be the basis for drastic turnaround of the nation's social policy, including changes in the energy policy. The issues of marginal settlements and collapsing medical systems are getting more and more serious in the earthquake-hit regions. These issues must also be addressed as part of the policy.

Let me elaborate on the matter in conjunction with our proposal from the standpoint of those working for people with disabilities. Let me tell the conclusion first--it is essential to bring the social standard, or social focus, back to human beings. During the past half century, the society changed overly rapidly so that growth, efficiency, and profitability are valued. The society, including regions, was remodeled based on these values. So was the structure of human mind. This is not comfortable to disabled and elderly people, who do not go well with efficiency and speed. Sooner or later, the laws and budgets (including supplementary budgets) for reconstruction measures will be established, and the reconstruction plan will be formulated accordingly. The largest issue is what to take up as the basis of the policy. As a barometer, please always bear in mind the idea that is generally accepted in developed countries: a society accessible to persons with disabilities is one accessible to all.

As the first step toward the ideal, what we would like the administration to do is to avoid viewing the reconstruction measures and social security policy as something mutually exclusive. The policy attitude should be that the prioritized allocation of social security budgets to the devastated regions forms the basis of reconstruction measures. Such a policy should be an invaluable message in visualizing the newborn Tohoku Area. We would like to work with local people to reconstruct the Tohoku Area that is attractive to persons with disabilities as well, no matter how long it takes. Hopefully, in the future, the "3.11" will be remembered as the turning point for the Japanese society as a whole toward the human-oriented one.

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