

ROAD TO RECOVERY

Earthquake Updates by JWCU
Japan Workers' Co-operative Union
August 10, 2012

17 months have passed since the disaster, and media rarely cover it any more. But we still have a long way to go.

We are still struggling with the old problems, such as cleaning up of debris, radioactive contamination and delayed reconstruction. The picture on the right (a former public gym in a disaster area) was taken in July 2012, NOT 2011. Over 340,000 people, including some of our members, are still living as evacuees.



Now we are also facing new challenges. A number of people in the disaster areas are losing concentration and energy without clear future prospect. Many of them have lost unemployment benefits without hope of finding a job.

Yes, we do have a lot of challenges, BUT we are moving forward, slowly but surely.

From the Frontline

As reported in our August 2011 issue, JWCU launched Tohoku Reconstruction Head Office on July 15th 2011. The first anniversary event was held on July 14th 2012 in Sendai City (Miyagi Prefecture), where about 100 people shared the experiences in the last 12 months and encouraged each other for the further reconstruction efforts.

The disaster and nuclear power plant accident have reminded us how much we rely on outside for our basic needs. Based on this painful lesson, our efforts in job creation and vocational training focus on self-sufficiency in food, energy and care (FEC) at a community level. The following are some of the examples.

Vocational Training Programs: New Initiatives & 2nd Round Training Course **<New Initiatives: Otsuchi Town in Iwate Prefecture>**

In Otsuchi Town, almost 10% of the residents were killed or are still missing due to the disaster last year. The mayor requested JWCU members to propose whatever the ideas we had to develop industries and human resources for the future. In response, our members proposed 2 vocational training programs, one in forestry and the other in care and farming.

Both of these projects were approved and started in early June.

Students in both programs were unemployed and became members of the cooperative when the program started. They receive about 160,000 yen per month plus various social insurances while taking the training. After 1 year of training (lecture and field work), graduates are expected to create jobs to reconstruct the community while leveraging the local resources.



<2nd Round Training Course: Kesenuma City in Miyagi Prefecture>

In Kesenuma City, the 2nd round of vocational training program started on June 25th. This time, 17 students take the course in the field of care.

The students of the 2nd round seem to be in more difficult situations than those in the 1st round as they went through a longer period without a job. The following are some of the students' comments on the 1st day.

- “I was in Fukushima when the disaster hit, and I could not get out of my house for over a year. I came back to my hometown Kesenuma but was too shocked to do anything after seeing all the changes. Finally I felt like doing something, and that was when I saw the flyer for this training program.”
- “All of our family members have lost income since the disaster, and we couldn't find any hope. But I am here thanks to the support by people across the country. Now, I want to live for someone else.”
- “I was touched when I saw someone from outside of the City (i.e. JWCU members) being so compassionate for Kesenuma. That's why I'm taking this course.”

Vocational Training Graduates are Now Getting Ready for Job Creation

Several vocational training programs in the disaster areas ended in the spring, and the graduates are now getting ready to start their own businesses.

<New Futures for the Class of 2011: Kesenuma City in Miyagi Prefecture>

As reported in our February issue, a vocational training program started in Kesenuma City in January. On May 23rd, all of the 18 students crossed the finish line and celebrated their accomplishments.



The graduates say, “It was really great meeting with all these people. I find myself becoming kinder to my family by studying welfare.” “Before the quake, I worked to make money. But now I have learned that work can be for other people and a community. My child said I have become gentler.”

One of them has been offered a job at the facility she interned during the training. Other facilities are also asking about the possibilities of hiring the graduates. 3 of the graduates are currently preparing to launch a new care agency.

<5 Teams to Create Jobs: Tome City in Miyagi Prefecture>

As reported in our October and December issues, a vocational training program was held in Tome City. It was originally supposed to end in March 2012, but the City has decided to continue its support for 1 more year. The members started renting a building (a former kindergarten) as its base.

The 18 graduates have formed 5 teams and are preparing for the new businesses: elder care, care for people with disabilities, farming and processing, handyman, and crafting. The handyman team has already provided such services as cleaning up gravesites and building shelves. The elder care team organized a “mini day care” in May, where they introduced the organization and provided exercise and games.



<Starting a New Business with Rich Local Resources: Ohfunato City in Iwate Prefecture>

As reported in our December issue, a vocational training program started in November 2011 in Ohfunato City. It ended at the end of March 2012, and the 6 of the 10 graduates immediately started preparation for a new business.

During the training program, the students learned through community assessments that the City has rich resources like fishery and farm products. The members rented about 5,000m² of farmland as a starting point to launch comprehensive business activities, combining farming, processing and distributing.

Listening to the Voices of Communities

It is our mission to create jobs based on the community’s needs. In order to do that, it is essential to listen to what people in the community have to say. Our members are trying to collect the voices of people in disaster areas through a number of initiatives.

< Interviews and Citizens’ Congress for Reconstruction: Otsuchi Town in Iwate Prefecture>

Along with the vocational training programs (see page 1), our members in Otsuchi Town also conducted interviews with the community residents in June and July. Several issues were raised, including elder care (e.g. growing demand, family care burden, staff shortage, needs for places to gather), child care (e.g. staff shortage, needs for emergency respite, needs for playgrounds, etc.) and inconvenience (e.g. housing, transportation, lack of information).

The members also launched “Citizens’ Congress for Reconstruction,” a place to discuss and work together to rebuild the community. The first meeting was on June 23rd, bringing together 34 people from various fields (e.g. schools, cultural organization, community

development, architecture and worker coops). They had a heated discussion on how to rebuild a community where children can come back and enjoy living. The results of the interviews mentioned above were also shared at the meeting.



Moreover, the members started producing newsletters for the people in Otsuchi to introduce the organization and to share information. Our goal is to work with the people in Otsuchi so that they can play the main roles in rebuilding their own community.

<Job Assistance Program: Minami-Soma City in Fukushima Prefecture>

In Minami-Soma City, about 20 km north of the Fukushima nuclear plant, JWCU members were commissioned by the Prefecture to provide a job assistance program from December 2011 to March 2012.

3 staff members visited each temporary house, introducing the program and inviting them to come to a job assistance center. Until February, however, few people actually visited the center. Why? Some say “I have an unemployment insurance benefit (or compensation from the nuclear power plant).” Others say “I have no future, so I might as well enjoy the moment.” But a number of people lost their unemployment insurance benefits in February, and they started making a long line to use job-search computers. Unfortunately, most of the available jobs were temporary (e.g. cleaning up the debris, driving a truck), and many people are still struggling to find a job.



While visiting temporary housing, our members also heard the residents’ various concerns, including “I have lost not only a job but also someone to talk to,” “I want to work but have no transportation,” and “I have no future prospects, which worries me.” The members listened to all kinds of their concerns and reported to the City Office when necessary.

The job assistance program ended in March, but the City is still facing a number of challenges. One of the members is currently leading the preparation for a new vocational program to start in December.

Dialogues with Mayors of the Disaster Areas

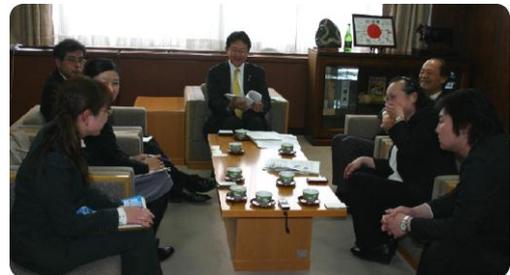
From April 3rd to 5th, JWCU executives and members visited mayors of the disaster areas to report our efforts in each area during 2011 as well as the future plans and visions. The comments of the mayors are as follows.

<Otsuchi Town in Iwate Prefecture> ... See pages 1 & 3 for details of the initiatives there.

“We have a lot of woods in the town. If the Town supports initiatives to cut these woods and use them to build facilities and houses, it will also promote employment. It is a wonderful idea to actively contribute to reconstruction rather than waiting for someone’s help.”

<Tome City in Miyagi Prefecture> ... See page 3 for details of the initiative there.

“Nowadays, there are so many things the public sector cannot take care of. We need someone who can find these untouched needs and start businesses to respond to them. We have various support systems, but few people would take advantage of them effectively. I would like to thank the worker coop members for building an environment where people think proactively rather than leaving their lives to someone else. ‘If there is no job, we can create our own jobs.’ That kind of thinking is very encouraging for the students.”



<Ohfunato City in Iwate Prefecture> ... See page 3 for details of the initiative there.

“The City has a reconstruction plan, in which the most important are housing and jobs. So, the efforts to create their own jobs are really appreciated and welcomed. We have no choice but to decline once we start thinking that employment is something other people will create for us.”

Forest for Everyone: JWCU Members to Build a Community Hub

A JWCU member organization Bihoro (in Onagawa Town, Miyagi Prefecture) is now hard at work to create “Forest for Everyone.”

Bihoro has been purchasing abandoned mountains and regenerating forests in the last few years, and it was also planning to build a new operational base while consolidating its various activities. Since the disaster, the members came to realize “Why not make this project not just for us but for the whole community?” and came up with the concept of “Forest for Everyone.”

The concept was approved at its general assembly on May 26th 2012, and a JWCU officer is now serving on Bihoro’s board to make this a collaborative effort. The members have also called for support from the mayor, assembly, chamber of commerce, tourist association and residents of the Town. In order to cover the estimated cost of 1 billion yen, the members will not only use quake-related subsidies but also raise their own funds, calling for cooperation and financial contributions from supporters within the community and across the country.



The Forest will consist of (1) business hub (e.g. administrative office, job training sites for forestry and care services, welfare service agency, reforestation, training camp for sports teams) (2) renewable energy hub (e.g. production of pellet, bio-diesel fuel, wind-power energy),

and (3) community hub (e.g. community hall, farmer’s market, hot spring, gathering place for children, park).

Onagawa Town is losing people: its population declined from 18,000 before the quake to 10,000 in 2012. It may further decrease in half in the next 10 years. It is critical to rebuild a community in a sustainable way, and Bihoro will be playing a leading role in Onagawa.

Nationwide Support

Young Members in Kyushu Get Together to Support Tohoku

As reported in our February issue, young members of JWCU in Kagoshima Prefecture launched “Go Go Kagoshima Project” to grow rice and send it to Tohoku region last year. This year, the project was expanded to the whole Kyushu region (in southwestern part of Japan), with a slogan “Never Forget Tohoku, Learn from Tohoku!”

On April 14th, 6 members in Kyushu visited Kesenuma City (Miyagi Prefecture), where the members in Kagoshima visited last year, to help a congregate meal at a community center. Some members kept in touch with the people in the disaster area since the last visit, and one lady brought a new year’s card, sent by one of the members, to the meal site.



Back in Kyushu, these members are now hard at work to grow the products for Tohoku.

JWCU’s Original Rice Bowl to Cheer up Tohoku

On April 28th, JWCU members joined “Farm Aid Ginza” in Tokyo. This is a quarterly event to connect the urban and rural areas through exhibition and market, and it was our 2nd time to be part of it.

This time, our members made and sold our original “Tohoku Reconstruction Rice Bowl (see the picture)” to support Tohoku region. All of the rice-bowl toppings came from Tohoku region, including squids, scallops, sea weeds, eggs and greens. JWCU president also made his original curried rice. Rice bowl and curried rice was sold for 700 yen each, of which 100 yen was donated for reconstruction efforts. Nearly 130 people enjoyed the delicious meals while supporting Tohoku.



JWCU General Assembly (June 8-9, 2012)

JWCU's 33rd general assembly was held on June 8th and 9th in Kagoshima Prefecture, where members shared the achievements, discussed roles as worker cooperatives and reconsidered our missions through lessons from reconstruction efforts.

At the general assembly, the 10-year comprehensive strategy was presented and approved. The four pillars of the strategy are as follows:

- To clarify our social missions as associated workers' cooperatives
- To aim for the citizen-centered welfare society and the society where all people have opportunities to work
- To lobby for appropriate legal systems (including worker coop law) and public job assistance systems
- To aim for having over 200 billion yen annual turnover, 100,000 worker-members and business establishments in 1,000 municipalities by 2025



JWCU is deeply honored to receive many messages from our global friends and would like to thank all the organizations and people who sent us kind messages for our general assembly.

Global Coverage

The United Nations Introduces Worker Coop's Efforts in Tohoku

In commemoration of the International Women's Day (March 8th), the United Nations Information Centre in Japan introduced JWCU' job training efforts in Tohoku region as well as the reality faced by women in a post-disaster situation on its web site.

JWCU's executive director, (Ms.) Yoko Tanaka, was interviewed by the UN staff members, speaking about the time people needed to feel ready to start thinking about moving forward and how JWCU worked collaboratively with people in local communities to start vocational training programs as well as businesses.



A summarized article is also available in English: <http://unic.or.jp/unic/highlight/2611/>

Good Bye Nukes! Growing Voices against Nuclear Energy

Since the crisis at Fukushima nuclear power plant, the momentum for anti-nuclear power has been rising in Japan. On May 5th 2012, all the nuclear power plants in Japan were shut down, mainly for inspection. But the government has decided to reactivate one of the plants in July.



A number of anti-nuclear power demonstrations have been held: 5,500 people gathered on May 5th, and 170,000 people joined the rally on July 16th. In addition, anti-nuclear demonstrators gather outside of the prime minister's office every Friday evening. The protest has been growing, and the one on July 29th brought 200,000 people. They are not just environmental activists but mostly ordinary people who are concerned about their families and society.



(Mr.) Katsuto Uchihashi, the chair of Japan National Planning Committee for IYC (International Year of Co-operatives) 2012 is one of the core promoters of “10 Million People’s Action to Say Goodbye to Nuclear Power Plants (<http://sayonara-nukes.org/english/>)” which organizes various protests. JWCU members also join the demonstrations and rallies, including the ones on May 5th and July 16th, to support this movement. (Mr.) Toru Fujita, the vice president of JWCU who attended the rally on May 5th, says “Worker coops are there to create good jobs to build independent and sustainable communities while valuing lives. We are determined to build communities that are self sufficient in foods, energy and care without relying on nuclear power plants.”