

THE FUKUSHIMA EVACUEES' RETURN

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INTRODUCTION

On 11 March 2011, Japan's Tohoku region was devastated by a triple disaster that had a "profound and transformative effect on Japanese society" (Hasegawa, 2013). The destruction caused by the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown exceeded the authorities' expectations and had caused one of the worst nuclear disasters in history (ibid): in total, 16,000 people died and hundreds of thousands were displaced. As of mid-2013, a large part of those evacuated are still unable to return to their homes.

This article interrogates why the Japanese government's decision to encourage return has not yielded the intended results and why migration has not been considered as an adaptation strategy. It therefore explores the present situation of the evacuees: while some have indeed returned to their communities as a result of the governmental support upon population's return, the majority have not. Fears over radiation levels and financial concerns are especially prevalent. In light of the alarming radiation levels detected in Fukushima and the surrounding prefectures, resettlement could have been considered a viable policy option for the Japanese government. Despite an initial effort to provide assistance to those who wanted to resettle, political discourse remained predominantly orientated towards an ambiguous policy of return. Most of the evacuees lost their livelihoods and were in very difficult financial situations: return would have been a realist possibility for them as long as the State would have financed the reconstruction. Along with the evacuees' perception of displacement, their current considerations on their future prospects as well as the policy responses formulated by the Japanese government, the financial implications of return versus resettlement are also key in the article: we will try to assess to what extent the

promised compensation contributed to evacuees favouring one strategy over the other. The paper focuses on the nuclear evacuation as it remains the most political and controversial consequence of the 3/11 catastrophe.

1. THE POLICY FOR RETURN

After the 3/11 disaster, a "return to normalcy" was at the center of the Japanese society's recovery objectives and priorities. However, this urge for normality resulted in the obliteration of the events and their consequences rather than in development of new coping strategies, based on the very acknowledgement of the events themselves. The policy of return can therefore be understood as an illustration of this desire to return to the previous status quo.

1.1. The tsunami evacuees: return and resettlement

Out of the 470,000 people displaced in the aftermath of the 3/11 disaster, about 150,000 people were taken off the list of evacuees in 2012 as they returned to their homeland or resettled elsewhere. Those who returned quickly were almost entirely tsunami evacuees who, despite facing many administrative and financial problems, received some support from the Japanese Government. Indeed, in 2012, Japanese authorities pursued the reconstruction efforts whose cost Reconstruction Agency Minister Takumi Nemoto was reappraised by "6 trillion to 25 trillion yen" (EUR 46 million to EUR 190 million) (Nemoto, 2013). At the end of 2012, the grand majority of infrastructures were rebuilt and rendered operational. Electricity, gas, water, phone lines, roads, harbours and railways were restored back to 96 per cent of their capacity on average (Reconstruction Agency, 2012).

However, such a percentage can be misleading: if it indicates that facilities were largely restored, it also tends to hide the remaining difficulties faced by the population as private structures, which were left to the evacuees to rebuild, did not have such high percentage of restoration. A reason for this lies in the administrative and financial problems that prevented evacuees from reconstructing the structures necessary to their reestablishment. The EUR 30,000-worth financial support and the EUR 146,000 worth low-interest housing loans were not enough to give the evacuees sufficient resources to undertake the reconstruction projects and compensate the financial losses they underwent - often jobless and facing a 'double loans' (situation of those paying loans both for their former house - destroyed by the catastrophe - and for their new one) (Hasegawa, 2013)

The resettlement policy faced additional challenges. The need for new land raised both financial and spaces challenges as evacuees were confronted with the difficulty of finding available space for reconstruction because of the geographical characteristics of the Japan, and the sacred character of ancestral lands¹. The little coordination between the state and the local authorities - in terms of the grant of financial support, for example - added obstacles to the implementation of the resettlement schemes.²

Because it creates new alternatives for the evacuees, the resettlement policy is not *per se* an instrument for maintaining the pre-disaster status quo. However, the desire to return to 'how things were before' was omnipresent in the way the policy was conducted. Indeed, in order not only to rebuild homes but also to rebuild the previous communities ties, the government laid down the condition that resettlement should be carried out collectively. To be resettled, each family was supposed to form a group of families (at least four) with whom they would collectively decide of the resettlement details. Only on this condition would they receive government assistance. If this policy was intended to respond to the population's desire to rebuild the community ties shattered by the 3/11 disaster (Hasegawa, 2013), it created more problems than it offered solutions, as it was often very difficult for evacuees to get in touch with friends and former neighbors who were spread around the region during the evacuation. Accordingly, the government's will to encourage the reconstruction of traditional community dynamics hindered the possibility for many evacuees to move forward.

1. Interview with researcher Reiko Hasegawa, March 2013, IDDRI Paris

2. Ibid.

The analysis of how the reconstruction and resettlement policies have been carried out enables to identify the underlying attitudes around the 3/11 catastrophe. Earthquake and tsunami being natural catastrophes, the government-led response did not acknowledge any form of responsibility for their grave consequences. It paradoxically facilitated the government's response, considered as their normal duty to protect its population. Overcoming the tsunami evacuee crisis has been more about coping with financial and administrative problems than about facing criticisms of risk prevention and management, much more highly politically sensitive in the context of the nuclear disaster.

1.2. Nuclear evacuees: From forced displacement to forced returns

The difficulty of returning

Unlike some of the tsunami evacuees, practically none of the nuclear evacuees have been able to return. They represent 160,000 of the 300,000 people still evacuated in 2012 (Bøhmer, 2013), of whom 100,000 are found within the Fukushima Prefecture and 60,000 outside (Fukushima on the Globe, 2013). Most of the zone within a radius of 20 kilometres from the nuclear plant is still completely forbidden because of radioactive contamination and nuclear evacuees still faced arrest or fines if they tried to go back within the forbidden areas (McCurry, 2011). As of 2012, Fukushima locals have been allowed to visit their properties during the day but still cannot stay the night nor cultivate their land (Bøhmer, 2013). This impossibility contrasts with the evacuees' expectations as, one year after the disaster, a majority still wishes to return (Imai, 2012). Those who have returned are to a great extent the elderly since "they do not have that much time or energy left to rebuild" or resettle (Aizu-Wakamatsu, 2012). However, for the majority of the evacuees, returning remains difficult. Fear of the consequences of radioactivity was omnipresent in the evacuees' testimonies, which expressed high mistrust towards the Japanese government's declarations on the gravity of situation (Myles, 2013). In addition to reappraising the 'acceptable' rate from 1 to 20 millisieverts per year, the Government was accused by Greenpeace of lowering the actual figures in order to conceal the risks of radioactivity (ibid). The mistrust towards the government raised the concerns on the actual safety of going back home, an option that was gradually dismissed: between June 2011 and March 2012, the proportion of evacuees wishing to return dropped from 80 per cent to 60 per cent

(Hasegawa, 2013). However, this evolution was not taken into account by the government officials who deployed an active policy in order to push for return.

The pressure upon return

Financial pressures

In March 2012, the Japanese Government launched a plan to organize return to the evacuated areas according to their radioactivity level. Areas with less than 20mSv/year³ were considered as “areas for which evacuation orders are ready to be lifted” (Hasegawa, 2013). In the areas in which there was between 20mSv and 50mSv/year, evacuees were expected to be able to return within two to three years (Ibid). Finally, areas with more than 50mSv/year were considered to be inhabitable again after five years (Ibid). This plan was rolled out unilaterally by the Reconstruction Agency⁴ that, without consulting the population, made it the base for the continuation of financial support (Greenpeace, 2013): those who would not return to an area officially presented as ‘safe’ would be considered as voluntary departures and therefore would not be entitled to government assistance anymore. Therefore, from a situation of forced displacement, the victims of Fukushima increasingly suffered from forced return. An evacuee from Naraha expressed the frustrating situation of many of the displaced people: “The government forced us to evacuate in the first place. Now it’s trying to force us to return without much information.” (Hasegawa, 2013).

Financial pressures for return can also be found within the compensation policy. Initially, each of the 160,000 Fukushima evacuees was promised EUR 350,000 in compensation for material damages, costs of evacuation and possible trauma (Le Figaro, 2011). Compensation was regarded as an essential mechanism to help people financially recover from the disaster and to invest in the reconstruction of the devastated areas. However, the compensation effort was quickly redirected from public to private entities, namely Tepco the main responsible party. A Greenpeace report, released in February 2013, pointed out that many firms who helped design and build the Fukushima reactors were not held legally responsible and were not required to pay compensation to the victims (Greenpeace, 2013). As a result, at the eve of 2012, only one thousand individuals had been

compensated – a little more than half a per cent of all evacuees (Le Figaro, 2011). Many evacuees blamed the long and complicated administrative procedure imposed by the operator of the power plant, Tepco, who provided a 156-page explicative document to help the evacuees fill out the necessary forms (Ibid). After public and government pressure, Tepco simplified the procedure and hired 7,600 people to work on analyzing individual files, promising to hold numerous information-sharing sessions and to open specific help desks for the evacuees (Ibid).

However, a schism emerged between the Government and Tepco on the nature and responsibility of compensation. Presented by the Government as the main responsible party for the nuclear catastrophe, Tepco refused to assume an expansive interpretation of the compensation policy as deplored lawyer Shigeo Takanashi: “Tepco believes that the responsibility for decontamination belongs to the State, not to the firm, which is questionable” (Le Figaro, 2011). But even at the individual level, Tepco demonstrated some reluctance to hand out compensation, as it mostly handed out “temporary compensation” which victims of the meltdown were expected to repay (Willacy, 2013). Yukiko Kameya, a 68-year old nuclear evacuee, currently living in a “tiny public housing apartment in Tokyo’s (...) urban sprawl” (Willacy, 2013), was initially given EUR 14,000 by Tepco, of which EUR 8,000 was deemed “temporary” (Ibid), an amount that the evacuee could have to reimburse once a final settlement was decided. Such uncertainty concerning financial resources represents a strong obstacle in the search for life alternatives.

The importance of the pressure for evacuees to return is relevant. In contrast to the earthquake and tsunami, the responsibility for the nuclear accident is partly attributable to the Japanese State and its ‘zero risk’ guarantees regarding nuclear power. The issue around the nuclear evacuees’ situation is therefore much more political than for tsunami evacuees. The “forced march” (Linton, 2012) towards status quo launched by the Government through its different post-disaster policies could be seen as a way to avoid the debate raised around Japan’s energy policy. Reducing the visible consequences of the nuclear accident by favoring evacuees’ return may have been a way to reduce the controversies on nuclear power. Nuclear safety being a condition for return, lowering radioactivity levels has become a huge challenge for the government to be able to carry out a return policy. Decontamination was to be the key policy for return and, as such, many efforts were put into it.

3. “mSv” stands for millisieverts, the unit used to measure the impact of radiation on human beings.

4. Interview with researcher Reiko Hasegawa, March 2013, IDDRI Paris

The decontamination policy

In 2012, decontamination was at the core of the Government's policy for return and was, as such, carried out doggedly. The objective was to reduce radioactivity to below 20 mSv/year by 2014 (Tabuchi, 2013) on a territory of about 13,000km (Linton, 2012). To achieve this goal, around EUR10 billion were mobilized on a period of three years (Linton, 2012). The Government presented this immense decontamination effort as the only solution Japan had in order to overcome the evacuees' crisis. Making the comparison with the Chernobyl nuclear accident, a representative of the Japan Atomic Energy Agency, Shinichi Nakayama, explained: "Conversely to the very vast USSR, Japan cannot afford to abandon a part of its territory" (Linton, 2012). Indeed, with a population density of 351 inhabitants/km², giving up even a small part of the territory would entail huge extra demographic pressures on the other regions. Decontaminating was therefore considered as necessary. Nonetheless, deep concerns have arisen about the current decontamination policy, particularly in relation to its environmental impact. In order to lower radioactivity, 15 to 31 million cubic metres of soil are to be scraped off the ground's top layer (The Guardian, 2012); trees and grass have been cut down (Linton, 2012); dead leaves and forests' natural compost have been removed (*World Nuclear News*, 2011); all of this being stocked in millions of plastic bags or dumped into rivers (Tabuchi, 2013). Although it is still too early to know exactly what will be the long-term environmental consequences of decontamination, some impacts have already been noted and are foreseeable (The Guardian, 2012). First, the removal of soil and trees increases the predisposition to floods in the region that would be devastated again in the case of a new tsunami. Second, in addition to this, the removal of dead leaves and natural compost will probably durably affect soil quality, which hinders the reestablishment of a 'normal' natural and agricultural activity. Third, the release of radioactivity in sea waters might durably affect marine life in the Pacific (*The Guardian*, 2012). The chemist Elizabeth Grossman early reported that nuclear molecules were found in higher and higher stages of the local food chain (*The Guardian*, 2012). In light of all this, radiation expert Tomoya Yamauchi criticized the decontamination policy as "absolutely irresponsible" (Tabuchi, 2013) as "Fukushima nuclear cleanup could create its own environmental disaster" (The Guardian, 2012). This "environmental disaster"

(Ibid) was even more controversial as it was not followed by the expected decrease in radioactive levels.

Although current decontaminating methods can be very effective in the short term (in some case, radioactivity was divided by five after a decontamination operation (Linton, 2012)), some note global ineffectiveness in the long term. With rainfalls, radioactivity comes back sometimes to reach even higher levels than before decontamination. Greenpeace nuclear expert Heinz Smital made statements on the impossibility to decontaminate efficiently: "It's not possible to decontaminate whole swathes of land, mountains, rivers and riverbanks. You can't get rid of that contamination" (Smital, 2013).

Despite the inefficiency of the decontamination policy – which has led the government to recognize that there was little hope of recuperating areas where radioactivity exceeds 50mSv/year (Linton, 2012) - few other alternatives have been explored. According to Kobe University professor Tomoya Yamauchi, the Japanese Government should have prioritized evacuation to frenzied decontamination: "For very affected cities, we can of course choose to destroy and rebuild everything, which is very complicated. But we can also evacuate, at least pregnant women and children" (Linton, 2012).

The Government's determination in decontaminating reveals the logic of its response to the 3/11 disaster, considering population displacement as a temporary "crisis" response rather than a viable long-term adaptation strategy. As such, the post-catastrophe policies tended to privilege return, contain population movement, and aim for status quo. However, 'going back to before' is not only not always the best solution to overcome a crisis, it is often impossible.

2. THE LIVING CONDITIONS OF THOSE DISPLACED

Face to the impossibility to return home, Fukushima evacuees were left with few alternatives: stay (where they were evacuated or in their contaminated homelands) or leave elsewhere 'voluntarily'. The latter option was the least implemented and most of them chose to stay, despite the difficulties it supposed.

2.1. Sheltering in precarious evacuation structures

Out of the 470,000 persons initially displaced, about 320,000 are still evacuated in temporary housing developments in the prefecture or in subsidized apartments where rent is free but

5. As of 2011. World Bank database. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.DNST> (consulted on August 19th 2013)

utilities are not⁶. Face to the impossibility to return home because of the many obstacles cited earlier, many feel “stuck between past and future” (Greenpeace, 2012). “I don’t have any sense of progress or goal. I’m just living day to day” said 63-years-old Itsuko Suzuki, an evacuee who has been living in a temporary house for two years (Bird, 2013). As of 2013, her situation is an illustration of the one lived by the evacuee who are also face deep uncertainties about their future. Recognizing the difficulties of immediate return, the Japanese Government planned to extend the period during which evacuees could remain in the temporary houses to an additional two years (until 2015) (Ibid).

Although living in temporary houses represented a considerable qualitative decrease in many evacuees’ standard of living, it was generally preferred to returning home. Chizu Matsumoto, a young mother living in temporary facilities because her house is so contaminated that the government did not plan to clean it up, highlights the relief that seeing her boys in good health and far from radioactivity is (Bird, 2013). Health preoccupations have generally overridden the evacuees’ urge to return. As result, many decided to stay away from their contaminated homes and keep living ‘temporarily’ in secured areas. This option was however not feasible for everyone and many kept on living in their contaminated homelands.

2.2. Staying in contaminated homes

Fukushima’s “last man” (Pagnotta, 2013)

After the 3/11 accident, the 20 km radius-zone around the nuclear power was entirely evacuated and entering it is still strictly forbidden. For some, evacuating was more complicated. In particular, among the farmers, the evacuation has left a long-term trauma because of the strong attachment they had to their land. Some even committed suicide when forced to destroy their contaminated harvests (Robin, 2012).

For many farmers who were evacuated, it was morally impossible to abandon their animals. However, no evacuation program was organized for animals, who were slaughtered or abandoned. Facing this situation, one farmer, Naoto Matsumura, decided to stay in the forbidden 20km-radius zone and took care of these animals. According to Antonio Pagnotta, Naoto Matsumura lives his struggle as a demonstration against Tepco and the Government (Pagnotta, 2013). Naoto Matsumura, 55, was in his farm on the 11 March 2011 and has

been exposed to the extremely high radiation levels since then. After being forced to leave by Japanese soldiers, he was rejected by his family because of their fear of him being contaminated. When he was turned out a second time by the over-crowded refugee camp, he decided to go back into the forbidden zone, where he used to live (Arte Journal, 2013). As the only current inhabitant of the prohibited zone, Naoto Matsumura survives thanks to the food and water that admiring compatriots send, as they see him like a ‘hero’: “Naoto Matsumura is an original person and what he is doing is admirable” declared one of his former neighbours (Ibid).

Maintaining Fukushima’s agriculture

Naoto Matsumura’s situation is not unique, and a significant portion of the Japanese population is also living in high radioactivity levels without receiving such publicity. In the regions where radioactivity has spread, many farmers are still living and cultivating. A farmer from Nihonmatsu, interviewed in the documentary *Japan: dirty land* (Robin, 2012), explained: “Japanese people have always cultivated in this region and they have got roots in here since many generations. This is why I cannot abandon my land”.

A 20-year-old female farmer from Nihonmatsu, added: “We need at least thirty years to decontaminate our land. If we leave, we will not be able to convey the story of this land to young people that build the future.” (ibid)

A reason farmers continue to cultivate is that they are backed by Japanese State, which hands out financial compensations provided Fukushima farmers continue to produce. According to the State, there is no immediate danger for cultivating the land and no problem for eating food of the region of Fukushima. Kiyoshi Fujimoto, representative of the Agriculture Minister, said that the radioactivity of the land of Nihonmatsu is “abnormally high, but considering the characteristics of the absorption of caesium by plants, cultivation is not a major problem” (Arte Journal, 2013). In spite of the reassurance of the State, some farmers organized in order to decontaminate the zone. For instance, some started growing colza, famous for its capacity to absorb radioactivity. Some cooperatives were created where customers can verify themselves the level of radioactivity in the products. Despite these reassurance actions, various scandals have alerted consumers, and it became very difficult to sell products from Fukushima. Shinichi Ouchi, a farmer from Nihonmatsu, explained that since the accident, farmers have lost 60 per cent of their business. According to him, “All the product from Fukushima cannot be sold.

6. Interview with researcher Reiko Hasegawa, March 2013, IDDRI Paris

The biggest difficulty is the damage done by the rumours: even though the radiation level is very low, products are not sold” (Belogolova, 2013). Japanese citizens mistrust information given by the State and they organize collectives to measure food safety. As Mitsuhiro Fukao, an economics professor at Keio University in Tokyo, says: “Many Japanese feel they’ve been lied to by their government” (Glionna, 2012). Thus the only possibility for farmers in Fukushima region to continue to their livelihood is to receive compensation from the State. A significant portion of their production is thrown away as it does not reach/contain the acceptable level of radioactivity. Therefore, although radioactivity in the Fukushima region is “abnormally high” (Arte Journal, 2013), financial assistance from the state tended to encourage the farmer’s immobility.

Discriminations towards the ‘contaminated people’

Another factor discouraging the mobility of Fukushima residents lies in the discriminations they face in the rest of Japanese society. Researcher Reiko Hasegawa also explains that there is a strong discrimination against people that come from Fukushima.⁷ They have no possibility to marry a person that comes from another region, for the assumption that they have bad health: a survey published in February 2013 by the World Health Organization (Larramée de Tannenber, 2013) said that the risk of developing a thyroid cancer for girls from Fukushima Prefecture is 70 per cent higher than the risk for Japanese population on average. In September 2012, the chairman of Ecosystem Conservation Society Japan Hobun Ikeya, who campaigned against nuclear power, said in a public meeting, that “People from Fukushima should not marry because the deformity rate of their babies will skyrocket” (Haworth, 2013).

Representing the fear of nuclear power, former Fukushima residents that live in other areas of Japan are discriminated in their everyday life. Children at school, for instance, are seen as dangerous by other children (Wallace, 2011). According to The Los Angeles Times (2012), “Apartment dwellers have complained of cooking smells or noises that were unusual only in that they were produced by former Fukushima residents” (Hays, 2013). We can also mention the case of a transportation company in Iwaki (located in Fukushima prefecture) that was asked by its clients “not to use trucks with Iwaki license plates” (Hays, 2013). Discrimination for work application is also frequent as some people

have even been asked to give a medical certificate indicating their caesium levels (the caesium rate indicates the presence of radioactivity) (Wallace, 2011).

New divisions among the society

As researcher Reiko Hasegawa highlighted,⁸ fear of contamination created may divisions within the Japanese society. Among families, separations between married couples became frequent as the result of strong disagreements about the dangers of radioactivity. The divorce rate has increased and this phenomenon led to a new expression in Japanese language: “genpatsu rikon”, meaning “atomic divorce”. Noriko Kubota, a professor of clinical psychology at Iwaki Meisei University, also noticed that families are abnormally stressed and that “suicides, alcoholism, gambling and domestic violence across the area” have increased (Haworth, 2013). The “disaster honeymoon period” (Ibid) – i.e. the great cooperation set up just after the accident – ended and people are facing long-term trauma.

Parents feel guilty to stay in Fukushima⁹ because they know that radioactivity would have a bad effect

on their children’s health. In an article published in *The Guardian* (Haworth, 2013), an interview of a Japanese couple illustrated the dilemma faced by Fukushima parents. Kenji Nomura, living with his wife Aiko in Fukushima Prefecture with their daughters, explained their situation: “We would rather move away from here altogether, but we can’t afford it” because “I would have to give up my job” and “it is hard to find a new work in the current economy” (Haworth, 2013). Furthermore, it is socially hard to leave one’s job as the colleagues consider it as “desertion” (Ibid).

Family pressures are indeed generally coupled with social pressures. As Aiko Nomura explains, families feel guilty when abandoning their region when there is a strong need of rebuilding it (Ibid). They feel responsible for the disaster, since they voted for the nuclear plant to be created and they feel that they are part of the nuclear disaster (Ibid). In addition, several campaigns came to urge Fukushima residents not to leave the region with slogans such as “Without the revitalization of Fukushima, there is no revitalization of Japan” and “Don’t give up Fukushima!” (Hasegawa, 2013). This campaigning is relevant of a more global atmosphere in which reluctance to live in the contaminated areas was quickly described as anti-patriotism or treason.

7. Interview with Reiko Hasegawa, March 2013, IDDRI, Paris

8. Interview with Reiko Hasegawa, March 2013, IDDRI Paris.

9. Ibid

Therefore, because of the insufficiencies of the state responses to the 3/11 catastrophe (in terms of return, immobility or departure) displaced the issue from the institutional level to the individual level, thus creating social conflict and divisions.

CONCLUSION

In 2013, the nuclear evacuees' situation can still be characterized by Reiko Hasegawa's assessment: "evacuees continue to suffer from uncertainties about their immediate future and the affected communities are at risk of disintegration. Reconstruction is still a distant process for the nuclear evacuees" (Hasegawa, 2013). The difficult and perhaps counter-productive decontamination efforts have not reassured the evacuees or the general population that the radiated areas are safer than they were two years ago. Financial compensation remains insufficient

and the conditions imposed by the government to favour return are not working as planned.

Tepeco's reluctance to fully engage in the reconstruction process contributed to complicating the evacuees' short and long term adaptation strategies. A particular understanding of the term "responsibility" led to the State shouldering the vast majority of reconstruction financing. The nuclear meltdowns were, in part, an industrial disaster and a consequence of the "zero risk" myth that had bypassed basic safety concerns. As a result, the company should have been held accountable proportionally to their responsibility in advocating the "zero risk" myth. As observed in the Greenpeace report, the Japanese government is leading the reconstruction effort with little assistance from the nuclear industry. Nevertheless, the policy of return is largely failing in large part due to its rigidity and the government's negligence in considering migration a viable adaptation strategy. ■

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