

Japan



Women's group boosts social capital to build disaster-resilient community

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Connecting women
through crafts

Abstract

The Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami of March 2011 broke up communities, leaving many individuals isolated and vulnerable. To combat social fragmentation and encourage mutual aid, the present project, implemented in a northeast Japanese town, has created numerous small women's networks in order to produce safety nets in the daily lives of residents. This kind of “social capital”²⁶ approach which, many scholars say, is needed for creating disaster-resilient communities, has helped to turn local women into active agents of community disaster resilience.

²⁶ The World Bank, for instance, describes “social capital” as follows: “Social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions. Increasing evidence shows that social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable. Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together.”

The Initiative

The initiative is an implementation project that aims to build a more resilient local community. To build greater community resilience among those affected by the March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, it is crucial to combat social fragmentation and encourage mutual aid by creating numerous small networks that produce a safety net in local town residents' daily lives.

Indeed, many affected residents have been dispersed, and social ties are weakened or broken even though the local geographical context (districts and hamlets) is already densely networked and hierarchically organized. By creating small groups focused on common interests based on similar living conditions, the project aims to buttress pre-existing vertical social relationships with small, horizontal communities, preventing people from slipping through the cracks.

Initiated in September 2011, the project is still under way primarily in Minamisanriku Town (northeast Japan), Miyagi Prefecture, Tohoku Region. Minamisanriku Town was one of those worst affected by the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

The project is implemented by Women's Eye (WE), with support from the following stakeholders: local women; the Minamisanriku Town Disaster Support Center; volunteers; heads of local associations; heads of local community centers; the Miyagi Prefectural Government; and various specialists. The project targets some 5,000 women living in Minamisanriku Town, and is funded by the Miyagi Prefecture.

WE is a specified non-profit corporation that seeks to be a helping hand for women to become active players in rebuilding their own lives and communities. WE operates around Tome City, Kesenuma City and Minamisanriku Town, all in Miyagi Prefecture. WE, initially called RQ Women's Support Center (RQW), was established on 1 June 2011 by a group of volunteers who gathered after the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami to work for and give support to affected people in disaster-struck areas. RQW became a specified non-profit corporation and was renamed Women's Eye on 4 June 2013.

To create opportunities for dialogue, communication and social change among local women, Women's Eye promotes not only those women at the top but also those who can stand in-between to connect and encourage those around them. The focus, accordingly, is more on identifying and developing potential coordinators, organizers and mediators than on leaders.

Impact and Results

The following results have been achieved through this initiative:

- The project has given birth to numerous small thematic communities, promoting strong links and a sense of independence amongst members. For example, participating women have taken a lead in maintaining regular gatherings and planning new activities, displaying major shifts in both confidence and community engagement.
- The project has turned local women into major actors addressing issues in their area. And as the number of community organizers increases with the number of small communities created by the project, the latter improves women's conditions not just by developing key leaders but also by encouraging those who want to do something, however small, for their communities, to do it.
- As the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami broke up pre-existing communities, leaving many individuals isolated and vulnerable, the project has helped to reduce communication barriers

amongst women, whose attentiveness to daily life leaves them well equipped to identify and move quickly to help the socially vulnerable.

- Participating in the project activities has given them the opportunity to discuss their conditions and the issues facing them, their families and their communities with others in similar situations.

To sum up, the project has helped build resilience through increasing social capital, which many scholars argue is essential in a post-disaster context. This has been achieved through creating safety nets among residents dispersed by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, combating social fragmentation, and encouraging mutual aid. Information sharing about living conditions through the new networks has also led to many women becoming more active parties in their communities. In other words, many women whose social ties were weak (or weakened by the disasters) have taken on roles related to community organizing as a result of their participation in the project.



Members of a single mothers' group

The Good Practice

This project can be regarded as a good practice for the following reasons:

- It has empowered socially isolated women to become agents of community resilience.
- The project does not require a large amount of resources. It requires mainly a good understanding of the concept of “social capital”, the need to combat social fragmentation and encourage mutual aid.
- The project has leveraged available mechanisms in that the local women’s knowledge and pre-existing networks were indispensable for building the small communities.

Key success factors of this initiative include the following:

1. Focusing the women’s gatherings on activities that are both fun and useful; and
2. Creating an enjoyable, productive atmosphere attuned to the schedule, needs and feelings of each individual member. This is essential because of the heavy workloads faced by local women. But this is possible only in small-group settings.

To maintain the viability of such small thematic communities and their associated events, it was necessary for each member to take some responsibility for the group. By taking care of whatever is valued by each member, the group helps instil a sense of self-respect, which in turn leads to greater consideration toward other members.

Lesson(s) Learned

Some of the key lessons learned from the project include the following:

- In communities fragmented by disaster events, combating social fragmentation yields positive results in terms of both disaster resilience and quality of life.
- It is necessary to redefine “leadership”. Small communities do not need strong leadership but rather strong coordination and intra-connection. Furthermore, for them to become self-governing, there needs to be a sense of local ownership.

However, managing change is always an issue, so one challenge is how to adjust when participants bring new members into a group. Accordingly, the project has made it a policy to discuss how to create a welcoming atmosphere, bringing the issue out into the open.

Another challenge for Women's Eye as an organisation was that, due to the small scale of the activities, very few individuals would subscribe to them initially. A policy of ongoing consultations has helped to continually adjust the theme, timing, location, etc., of activities to create the best fit for the targeted women.

Women's Eye intends to continue expanding the project, incorporating the voices of more local women and increasing the number of local coordinators.

Potential for Replication

The project can be easily replicated. However, whatever the context, it is crucial to develop a relationship of trust with and among targeted women. This is something that fun events with relaxed membership criteria facilitate. Such events also function to connect local residents with visitors from outside.

Since the function of such thematic communities is to connect people, with each one forming a node in an expanding horizontal network, they form a viable strategy irrespective of cultural differences or the particularities of local issues. However, it is crucial that these communities be kept small in size, not least because small communities do not directly threaten established hierarchies and are, accordingly, unlikely to be subject to censure.

Lastly, as mentioned briefly in the Lessons Learned section above, this project, in which leadership roles and their contents vary from one community to another, highlights the necessity of a flexible notion of "leadership".

Acronyms & Abbreviations

RQW: RQ Women's Support Center

WE: Women's Eye

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