

# The Grassroots Academy in Iwate 2016

## International Grassroots Women's Academy in Tohoku 2016-2019

The International Grassroots Women's Academy in Tohoku serves as the meeting ground for the next generation of female leaders from three Tohoku prefectures (Miyagi, Iwate, Fukushima). It offers opportunities for participants to learn from each other and share different experiences that can inspire and empower them. The Academy started in March 2015 when the "International Grassroots Women's Academy in Tohoku" planning committee (Secretariat: NPO Women's Eye) and the Huairou Commission, an internationally-renowned NGO based in New York, collaborated to host a training workshop just prior to the UNISDR-led Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction held in Sendai. This pre-Conference event welcomed 15 grassroots women leaders from ten different countries in Asia and the Latin Americas for workshops and discussions with 40 young women leaders from disaster-affected Tohoku.



19 Participants (12 from Iwate, 3 from Miyagi, 4 from Fukushima) with 2 children,



### Objectives of the Academy

- Visit the sites of grassroots activities led by Tohoku-based participants
- Share experiences to deepen mutual understanding of the grassroots activities
- Create opportunities for the younger generation of women to hear the insights and to learn from the valuable experiences of pioneer female leaders

### Day 1 -- February 12, Friday Sumita Town, Iwate Prefecture

After the initial self-introductions and informal meet-and-greet over lunch, the official program, featuring the activities of three young women from Iwate, was held at the new municipal hall building of Sumita Town.

- ◆ Welcome and overview explanation of the 2-Day Program by Ms. Ishimoto, Executive-Director of Women's Eye
- ◆ Speech and explanation of corporate contributions to the Academy by Ms. Nakahara, PR Planner, Marketing Division, L'Occitane Japon.
- ◆ Featured Activities in Iwate, presented by three participants from Iwate Prefecture. Animated discussion with comments and questions.

### Ms. Noriko Yokozawa, Assit. Manager, Priorities and Planning Division, Sumita Town Office

Presentation on the events of March 11, 2011, the impact upon Sumita Town, and how the Town administration dealt with the aftermath, and notably, how they developed collaborative relationships with NPOs. The participants were impressed by Sumita's approach to reconstruction through community engagement, which has been recognized as one of the most progressive examples from the disaster-affected Tohoku region.

### Questions from the Floor

- Why is there such a relaxed atmosphere within the municipal government of Sumita, such that they invited cooperation from outside town hall staff and sought to use the power of community-based NPOs?

- What were the methods to involve people with diverse backgrounds, for example, through cross-sectorial exchange programs within the community?

### Answers

- There has been a tradition in Sumita for spontaneous social movements
- The municipal town government is aware of the need to involve the private sector
- Being a woman can sometimes be an advantage because we freely move in many sectors and are comfortable in diverse situations.
- Women's experiences give us the ability to quickly understand the concrete realities early on, and to therefore see the larger picture of community reconstruction. Women appreciate the different skills that others offer and so help to see them invested to the advantage of the community.
- It is important to find a happy middle ground between the new vision you wish to realize and the views of the senior generations.

### Ms. Atsuyo Sasaki

#### Community Support Coordinator, Sumita Town

With "Connecting Sumita" as our slogan, with four of my peers, we established a company named SUMICA that aims to re-vitalize the town with businesses related to the wellbeing, activities, and future of children. By planning and managing various events that connect young people and families, SUMICA creates opportunities for the children in the town to experience the authentic local "culture" and to become proud of being from Sumita. SUMICA has been appointed as



the manager and caretaker of a newly renovated 'community house.' Made from the five storehouses and main manor owned by a prominent family, these buildings have been renovated into a community café, a restaurant managed by women, lodging/accommodations, and a family-friendly play space for children. We will be welcoming your suggestion and opinion.

*Feedback from the audience*

- We need to make this facility attractive to 20 and 30-year old women so that they will want to continue living in Sumita.
- We are looking for further suggestion to make these facilities a place where mothers and families may wish to take their children.

*Question from the Floor*

- How do you cultivate empathy and understanding of your activities in such a traditionally conservative area?

*Answers*

- There is no easy solution. We have to keep creating opportunities to appeal to the older generations to foster understanding of the needs of the younger generation. In difficult times, I would use social media to contact Academy participants for support or ideas, and I am grateful to be connected with everyone. It has been very helpful.

**Ms. Rina Sasaki, NPO wiz (Iwate Youth)**

Members of the organization are all U-turners, which is used to describe people who left their hometowns for a time to go to school or work in another area of Japan, and then have returned home. We decided to come back and live in our hometowns after the Earthquake and Tsunami. We chose to promote Iwate through various networks developed by our (younger) generation. Adding to the on-going U-turn promotion projects, we would like to organize such projects as "Yome-turn" and "Muko-turn" in support of wives and husbands from elsewhere who marry into Iwate families and take up long-term residency in Iwate.



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*How and with whom we interact?*

- We say "NO" to projects with the word "marriage" and that take getting married to be the primary objective.
- We know the community and the context of our activities is important.
- We want to create a better atmosphere for divorced people to also attend.
- We try to create events that are accessible for people who are not as good at one-on-one communication.

*They say some U-turners are experiencing difficulty in finding a place in the community. How about the two of you?*

**Rina** Within the reconstruction community, there is an openness to people from the outside and we find that it is easier to do things when there is energy outside the community as well.

**Atsuyo** I am trying to create a work environment and atmosphere where all U-turners can genuinely feel that it was a good decision to move back home.

**Comments from the Lecturers**

**Professor Jackie Steele** It is important to imagine spaces of solidarity where you can collaborate with others who may have different values and perspectives.

**Mr. Makoto Tajima** Social capital is important. It is not just about providing a space for people. The space is just the site of the creative activities you expect to realize for your futures.

**Dr. Lucy Jones** I am so impressed to be given this opportunity to listen to the many positive approaches you have taken even after such a dreadful disaster. I can feel the strong ties and connections between people and therein lies the real strength for reconstruction.

**Day 2 -- Feb.13, Saturday  
Hakoneyama Terrace, Rikuzentakata**

**Morning Program  
Concurrent Stations for Self-Introduction and Teach-in Activities**

We set up 5 different stations or booths where participants could introduce their activities and projects to others. Participants rotated to learn about the activities of interest, and all had the opportunity to present their grassroots projects. Following the third round of stations, we gathered for discussion, exchange and collective idea sharing.



*Feedback*

- We need projects to attract real people.
- Challenges of discussing heavy topics with young women from Fukushima.
- Are we doing community development or human resource development?
- How to create practical connections for the community?
- Gender awareness in different generations has a significant impact.

- What is needed to have children, to raise children?
- Emergency medical system right after the disaster? Was it enough?



### Lunch Time

Surprise birthday cake for Dr. Lucy Jones whose birthday was March 13!

### Afternoon Program 1

#### The State of Disaster Prevention around the World

Lecture by Mr. Makoto Tajima on Japanese and global movements for disaster risk reduction. Presenting an overview of developments since the last 2015 UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction and the adoption of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, this lecture allowed us to verify the meaning and become more confident in using terms like “resilience” and “build back better” that are often used by specialists.



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### Afternoon Program 2

#### Discussion with Dr. Lucy Jones

Dr. Jones is a known US seismologist and currently the Science Advisor for Risk Reduction in the Natural Hazards Mission of the US Geological Survey. Despite mathematics not being seen as a suitable career for girls when she was young, Dr. Jones talked about her life as a pioneer female scientist and the importance of having a supportive father, encouraging teachers in Taiwan. She met and married her husband, a man with very progressive values on gender equality and family roles. In 1992, right after the earthquake in Los Angeles, Dr. Jones conducted post-quake interviews on TV, holding her sleeping child. Both her and husband were working and there are few baby-sitters for this kind of emergency. This interview scene made her famous nation-wide. She has eventually shifted more of her work towards civic education to promote disaster risk reduction, which is often disregarded as relevant in the scientific community. She has given lectures and explained unpredictable earthquakes, and helped to translate scientific jargon into plain language to make the information accessible to fellow citizens. She talked about the importance of really knowing yourself and what you want to do, and the need to be confident and live your life according to your own beliefs and values. Making good friends are also important, and identifying the peer group you can respect is a way to find support when things are difficult. She shared some family photo and admitted



that it was the first she had talked about her private life in public.

The participants from Fukushima shared their anxiety resulting from conflicts among scientists. Dr. Jones commented that people in Fukushima are now coping with the most difficult facet of that nuclear disaster: the uncertainty. The participants exchanged ideas on how to utilize scientific data, and how to further promote risk reduction education programs. They discussed the importance of promoting scientific literacy and education. Dr. Jones shared her next plans to promote community resilience in Southern California following her retirement from USGS.

The program ended with mutual promises and commitments to further strengthen exchanges and sharing in the lead up to the International Academy to be held in Los Angeles. The next domestic Academy will be scheduled in Fukushima in August 2016 and then a leadership training course will be held in Seattle in February 2017, followed by Academies in Miyagi, Iwate, and the International Academy in Los Angeles in 2018.



#### The Grassroots Academy in Iwate 2016

Organizer: NPO Women's Eye

Granting Agency: Fish Family Foundation; Miyagi Prefecture Subsidy for Support to Local Reconstruction

Collaboration: United States Geological Survey; L'Occitane Japon; Dr. Jackie F. Steele (Associate Professor, Institute of Social Science, University of Tokyo); Iwate Cooperation Centre for Reconstruction; Soshia Mitsunaga (Interpreter)