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Report on the 24th Fukushima Dialogue “Creating the Future of Fukushima Together With The Next Generation”[★]

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Abstract – The 24th Fukushima Dialogue, a stakeholder meeting to discuss the future of the recovery phase in Fukushima Prefecture among the younger generation, was held in the town of Naraha in the Futaba district of the Fukushima Prefecture, in November 2022. Following a series of presentations, participants to the meeting aged 18 to 35 discussed the current challenges of the reconstruction activities in the Fukushima Prefecture and what is needed to improve the situation. The Dialogue revealed that the younger generation has difficulty in grasping what is meant by reconstruction and readily distinguishes between the “large” reconstruction of authorities and the “small” one of individuals. It also revealed that the Fukushima accident had a strong impact on the sense of belonging of its inhabitants to the region and that they now aspire to build a new identity by regaining control of their lives, even if it is sometimes a painful process. Finally, the Dialogue brought to light that the younger generation is willing and ready to engage in the decision-making process related to the recovery phase in the Fukushima Prefecture.

Keywords: Fukushima dialogue / Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident / stakeholder involvement / post nuclear accident recovery / decision-making process

1 Introduction

The 24th Fukushima Dialogue, organised by NPO Fukushima Dialogue (NPO Fukushima Dialogue, 2023) and supported by the Japan Health Physics Society (JHPS) and the Society of Risk Analysis Japan (SRAJ) aimed at discussing Fukushima’s reconstruction after the triple disaster of 2011, which is still on going. It was held at Naraha CANvas (Naraha

town, Futaba district, Fukushima Prefecture) on November 6, 2022, under the theme “Thinking about the future of Fukushima with the Next Generation”.

The theme of the Dialogue was selected based on the comment of a young participant in her 20s who argued at the previous Dialogue held in November 2021 that “The young generation cannot attend local government briefings held in the daytime during the weekdays. There is no place for them to express their opinions” (Ando *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, for the first time in the series of Dialogue meetings, including those organized in the initial phase by the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP), young participants aged between 18 and 35 were invited to express their views on the Fukushima situation (Locharde *et al.*, 2019).

After the nuclear accident, the population in the evacuated areas aged rapidly because most of young people did not return to their previous homes (Yasutaka *et al.*, 2020). Although

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many people had pointed out the need for measures to deal with the ageing population, it was questionable whether or not views of younger people were listened and reflected in the recovery process. The 24th Fukushima Dialogue was meant to create a space for them to gather and exchange their views. Moreover, it was a first opportunity within the Dialogue to listen to their opinions on the current situation.

2 Structure of the dialogue

In the morning session, one Fukushima resident and one student both in their 20s who frequently travel to the affected area to provide support to the residents gave a 20-minute presentation about their involvement. Nanami Akimoto was originally from Tomioka Town. Since returning to her hometown, she had become a storyteller and shared her memories of the accident with visitors of the place. Daiki Sasaki is a recent graduate student from University of Tsukuba and he is involved in Yamakiya district since 2016.

In addition to their presentations, there was a recorded presentation by Dr Thierry Schneider, Director of CEPN, France, on the ETHOS Project and the International CORE programme implemented in Belarus after the Chernobyl accident with the support of the Belarus government, the European Commission and other national and international organisations (Dubreuil *et al.*, 1999; Trafimchik, 2005). He presented how the local young generation became involved in the reconstruction activities thanks to these projects. Finally, Pr. Jacques Lochard of Nagasaki University, former ICRP Vice-Chair and member of NPO Fukushima Dialogue gave an online presentation from France, reflecting on the past activities of the Fukushima Dialogue and the lessons learned from the Chernobyl and Fukushima accidents. It had been 12 years since the Fukushima accident, and it was useful to inform the younger generation about what happened after the accident.

There were 10 participants in the afternoon session devoted to the structured part of the Dialogue facilitated by Ryoko Ando¹. Five were from Hamadori in Fukushima Prefecture (four from the ex-evacuation zone), and five were from outside the Prefecture. By gender, there were four men and six women. To recruit participants, the Fukushima Dialogue NPO organizers contacted several acquaintances involved in the reconstruction activities in Fukushima. After they recommended potential participant, each person was contacted and invited to participate in the Dialogue. Applications from the general public through social media were also encouraged and as a result, one participant joined the Dialogue through this channel. SRAJ and JHPS suggested participants for the

Dialogue and helped publicize the event. The detailed program is presented in Annex to this article.

To cover the operating costs of the event, in addition to allocating the NPO funds, donations were solicited from individuals on the webpage.

3 Summary of the 24th Dialogue

3.1 Presentations in the morning session

In the first presentation, Nanami Akimoto talked about how she came to rebuild her life in Tomioka after the accident. She was a junior high school student when the accident happened and she lived during several years as an evacuee. While handing down her experiences to others, she said that she would like to think about the future of Tomioka by learning more about the history and geography of the area. She was not sure what “reconstruction” meant, but she pointed out the importance of people being able to live their own life happily.

Jacques Lochard discussed the course of the Fukushima Dialogue from when ICRP hosted the meetings to today and the lessons learned from this experience. He underlined that residents in the affected areas felt a strong sense of loss of autonomy directly affecting their dignity. He explained how the co-expertise process recommended by ICRP helped to progressively empower them to restore control over their lives and regain their dignity (ICRP, 2020; Thu Zar *et al.*, 2022).

In his presentation of the ETHOS Project and the CORE programme, Thierry Schneider mentioned that in the affected areas by the Chernobyl accident, as in those of Fukushima, the presence of radioactivity had led to the exodus of the young generation, especially families with young children. He emphasized that beyond the presence of radiation, the economic turmoil in the urban areas in the 1990s, in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, also pushed the younger generation to re-evaluate life in rural areas, few years after the accident. He then presented the case of young people, among them young couples with children, who finally decided to stay in the affected rural areas and even of some who came to settle in these areas to make a living there.

The CORE programme made multiple efforts to accompany those people desiring to live or return in the contaminated areas by the Chernobyl accident in Belarus by involving them in activities aiming to revitalize local communities while ensuring at the same time a good level of radiological protection for the inhabitants.

Daiki Sasaki talked about how he became involved in the Yamakiya district after the accident, focusing on human relations in the local community. Although the population has been greatly reduced as a result of the evacuation order, the old and intense human relationships still exist in the place. These relationships essentially result in mutual support between residents, especially for agricultural work, but at the same time they are also experienced as a constraint for those involved. For a young man like Sasaki, who provides support activities from the outside of the affected areas, how to appropriately distance himself from the human relationships unique to rural areas became a very important factor in carrying out his activities. He also pointed out the dis-connection between what he called the “large reconstruction” (infrastructure development, etc, promoted by the government) and the “small reconstruction” (each small-

¹ This part of the Dialogue was based on a simplified version of a facilitating method aiming at promoting practices of dialogue between stakeholders (Brédif and de Montbel, 2019). A facilitator asks questions prepared in advance. In turn each participants give their views for a limited time. Interruptions are not allowed. Then after listening to his/her counterparts, each participant gives his/her view also in a limited time. The objective is to give the opportunity to everyone to deepen or even change his/her thinking in the light of the others. The main lessons are summarized by a rapporteur followed by a general discussion.

scale effort made by individuals). He underlined that there was so far no exchange between them, and he finally expressed the wish that much effort should be deployed in the future to support the “small reconstruction”.

3.2 The structured part of the Dialogue

The structured part of the Dialogue began with a self-introduction from each participant. Some participants were from the cities of Okuma and Tomioka, which were evacuated, and others had come to settle in Fukushima Prefecture to work or study at university. One participant had moved to Fukushima Prefecture to start farming and another one to support the locals. Finally, there was a participant from the city of Hamadori who worked in the Aizu region relatively untouched by the accident due to the remoteness of the FDNPP.

- The first question from the facilitator was: “What are, from your point of view, the good and bad aspects of the current situation in Fukushima Prefecture?”

Several participants mentioned that interacting with each other more widely was a positive approach, which created a sense of openness and stimulation in the communities that did not exist before the accident. People who came from the outside to be involved in the affected areas felt being welcomed by the communities. Good aspects also included the speed of the reconstruction, such as infrastructure and other visible developments, which were progressing faster than expected. Also, the large budget spent for the reconstruction allowed to establish various cultural and social events and other social activities that had not yet been seen in the Hamadori region before the accident.

However, beside these positive aspects, participants also mentioned difficulties and even negative aspects, which they say, should be corrected or significantly improved. The participants mentioned among other things that the relationships between people inside and outside the affected areas were becoming more complicated. For example, outsiders interested in Fukushima were often attracted because Fukushima had become a special place characterized by many technical, social and economic challenges for its reconstruction. On the other hand, for those who had lived there before the accident, it was not a special place but simply the place they used to live in. As a result of the predominance of the outsiders’ perspective, many participants from the affected areas were hesitant to return because they felt that they had to do something unique and even amazing to contribute to the reconstruction if they wanted to return. They also shared the desire to make life in the affected areas less unique, saying that they wanted to live a “normal life” and wanted to make it a place where people could live an ordinary life.

Another mentioned aspect was the fact that during the years which followed the earthquake, the tsunami and the nuclear accident, the government initiated a set of measures to support the affected areas such as the reconstruction of infrastructures, the establishment of new industries, the subsidy of local activities including agriculture, and fishing, as well as various events, etc. (Fukushima Prefecture, 2022). People are aware that the region would not stand without such

exceptional support. However a participant who came to Fukushima to help the inhabitants of the affected areas underlined that it will be necessary for the next step to regain the normalcy that is to say that the locals can operate autonomously their activities, without ignoring the consequences of the accident. He stressed that outside supporters should first help affected people to move towards regaining autonomy.

In addition, it was pointed out that such long-term support for the affected area had undermined relations between Hamadori and the other areas in the Prefecture, which were largely spared from the consequences of the accident.

Participants also emphasized that the great attention paid to the affected areas and their inhabitants has led to “discrimination” against them. Some participants shared their testimonies of such experiences outside and within the Prefecture. In particular, they talked about the consequences of the special treatment they suffered as children coming from the affected area. The participants, now in their 20s, were in middle or high school at the time of the accident. While they wanted to be involved in the process of rebuilding their hometown from an early age, being treated in a special way disrupted their self-awareness and identity. Their position of evacuees often offered a more favorable position to them than others for their participation to the recovery activities, as the adults who engaged in these activities treated them carefully, sometimes too much to avoid making them feel uncomfortable because of their particular position. As a result, they often regarded themselves as “special person” compared to people from other areas, even within Fukushima Prefecture. This sense adhered to their self-consciousness so stickily that they came to feel discomfort about not being treated as a “special person”. But at the same time, they resented themselves for demanding “special treatment” and felt ashamed.

Other participants questioned whether a reconstruction approach that ignores the region’s unique history is the right way to go, even if it is inevitable that the region will not return to its original state. Finally, some pointed out that the definition of “reconstruction” differs from person to person, making it difficult to discuss the topic.

For newcomers who did not know the situation before the accident, the affected area had become a new frontier where they could do things that they could not do in other areas. And for them it would not have made any sense if things had gone back to how they were before the accident.

A participant pointed out that the dignity of residents, discussed in the morning, is undermined if they cannot control their individual lives as well as the future of their local communities. For example, it was pointed out that the future of the affected areas near the FDNPP was directly linked to the government’s policy of decommissioning nuclear reactors, but that local residents were little or not involved at all in the decision-making process. Another participant asked how many local people were involved in the government’s reconstruction policies.

In summary, the answers to the first question and the discussions they generated revealed both the positive and negative aspects of the recovery process.

- The second question of the structured Dialogue was: “What do you wish to do in the future?”

In response to Sasaki's presentation in the morning, in which he spoke of government led "large" reconstruction and "small" reconstruction involving proactive efforts by individual residents, it was interesting to note that many participants expressed clear and precise ideas about the "small" reconstruction in which they had participated. On the other hand, most participants were hesitant to broach the subject of the "large" reconstruction. Several participants mentioned that, 12 years after the accident, they were still reluctant to talk about certain topics, depending on their situation in their communities and whether or not they had returned.

Regarding the many dialogues organized by authorities in the affected areas, some participants, while recognizing their importance, mentioned their concern that they could be "used" by both national and local officials who claim to listen to the resident's voices, to in fact justify and defend their reconstruction actions. They pointed out that in the affected areas the views and expectations of the residents were hardly reflected in the reconstruction policies. Opposed to this point of view, a participant argued that dialoguing between stakeholders is a very useful process for finding answers to complex problems that cannot be solved easily even if this process can sometimes be painful for the people involved who are brought into question. Finally, the participants underlined that these dialogues did not contribute to determining the future orientation of the territories affected and that this was a factor of frustration for the younger generation.

During the discussion it was recalled that historically speaking, Futaba District has been repeatedly influenced by external forces. Thus, after the modernization of Japan, it became a power supply area for the Tokyo metropolitan area and it was under the control of the central government until the time of the accident. Some of the participants suggested that there is a need for locals to build and develop their communities from scratch to prevent history from repeating itself.

It was also underlined that the problems faced by the Hamadori region before the accident and aggravated by it, such as the exodus of young generations and the ageing of the society resulting in a declining population, were also challenges for the whole Japanese society. Thus, for those interested in social issues, the areas affected by the Fukushima nuclear disaster had become a place of reflection and work on these issues.

Some participants pointed out that this place had also become a place for self-fulfilment. Some people came there attracted by the particular conditions they could find. Finally, it was also mentioned that the affected areas should not only be considered for reflecting on radiological and social issues, but also to talk about ordinary and trivial things like in other parts of Japan.

4 Some lessons from the Dialogue: redefining hometowns for better reconstruction

All the participants in the Dialogue highlighted the profound transformations undergone by the areas affected by the nuclear accident, particularly in terms of demography

but also in terms of physiognomy. The structure of the population, as well as the rural and urban landscapes, have changed forever. Many inhabitants have decided not to return home and to start a new life elsewhere, but if by chance they admit coming from one of the disaster areas, they are then almost systematically confronted with the sympathy, even pity, of their interlocutors who only underline the strangeness of their situation and that of their native region within the Japanese society. This state of affairs is a source of great sadness for the former inhabitants of these areas. As for those who returned to live there when the evacuation orders were finally lifted, they face a series of challenges and dilemmas, which makes their life complicated and often psychologically difficult.

The dialogue underlined that despite all the efforts already made by the public authorities, given the difficulties highlighted by the participants, the reconstruction process should evolve in the future, in particular so that the residents can make known how they imagine the evolution of their daily life in the affected areas and in particular in the cities. From this perspective, the stories heard during the Dialogue highlighted that residents face three important dilemmas about the future of their hometowns.

First, the infrastructure put in place by the government as part of the reconstruction projects had radically changed the landscape of their hometowns. As many infrastructures have been built, living conditions have concretely been improved for the population, but they have also profoundly changed the appearance of their places of residence. In this regard, the Dialogue highlighted the mixed feelings of the participants towards the changes that are induced by the accident, including the dismantling of the nuclear power plants. For young people who grew up in the municipalities of the Futaba district, the nuclear power plants were part of the landscape and their daily life. Even if these changes are the consequences of the accident that does not change the fact that they radically modify the landscape of their place of living forever and that this makes them sad. To redefine what their hometown should be, residents must inevitably embrace changes, however, this is not an easy process to do it.

Second, the government has allocated a large budget for the reconstruction and many projects have been undertaken one after another, including the infrastructure development mentioned above. Although participants made it clear that it was desirable that many reconstruction projects be launched, they also argued that it was difficult for them to keep up with the pace of the reconstruction process because they had no vision of what the city would look like once the reconstruction is completed. Redefining the aspect of a city is a process that requires giving the concerned people time to discuss among themselves and find compromises. In fact, such a process did not take place and the participants expressed the fear that the reconstruction would not result in the city that they envisioned. Indeed, not only have the government's reconstruction projects continued unabated one after another without taking into account the opinions of the residents, but for the participants to the dialogue, the approach adopted by the authorities has also prevented people from motivating themselves to do it.

Finally, the Dialogue highlighted the gap in perception between residents of affected areas and people from outside. Participants highlighted their unpleasant experiences of being

seen as victims of the disaster. For example, some participants heard that their hometown was no longer habitable. Although being affected is obviously not an enviable situation, they did not consider that they would remain victims forever. A participant remarked that she had a very bad experience of Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) employees having to apologize every time they showed up. Although the accident triggered a wave of criticism against TEPCO, she felt embarrassed because she had good relationships with several employees before the accident and she also feels thankful for all the efforts made by the TEPCO people to regain control of the power plants. She finally said that these apologies did not enhance the image of the affected areas and that it makes her feeling sad.

Even if the opinions shared in the Dialogue must be taken with caution insofar as they represent only a very small part of those of the inhabitants of the affected municipalities as a whole, it is undeniable that the evolution of the physiognomies of the cities, as well as the new human relationships that have emerged, raise many questions that need to be considered within the recovery process but this is not so easy to do it. For a better reconstruction, it might be necessary to understand the dilemmas that people are experiencing in trying to redefine what their cities should be and to think about actions to deal with them.

5 Concluding remarks

Twelve years have passed since the nuclear accident, and most elementary school students at the time are now university students or working adults. The older generation often says, “We want the young people to come back,” but rarely questions their expectations. In this perspective, the 24th Fukushima Dialogue was an opportunity to open the discussion and provide some answers. People of the next generation who gathered for the 24th Dialogue presented their experiences and shared their thoughts and wishes. Their testimonies suggest that there is no single answer for the reconstruction of the affected areas after the accident. Despite large progresses in the reconstruction process, unresolved difficulties and challenges were rising, and there is certainly room for further reflection, discussions and improvements.

Interestingly, the Dialogue revealed that the current situation of young people in Fukushima Prefecture is very similar to that in Belarus after the Chernobyl accident. Some remained in the affected areas and others settled there because they were attracted by these areas. For young people, radiation is not always an issue of the utmost importance. They are simply interested in improving their lives and taking new initiatives, and they basically want to lead a peaceful life on their own. Compared to their elders, whose decisions are likely influenced by complicated past human experiences and relationships, the younger generation has fewer ties to past decisions. For this reason, they are more sensitive to the current reconstruction situation and, to some extent, are more open to the evolution of the life in the affected areas.

The dialogue discussion highlighted some of the conflicts that people in the affected areas are facing as part of the remaining consequences of the nuclear accident as well as of the unforeseen effects of the reconstruction process. These

conflicts are directly linked to their concerns about the residual radiological situation and the difficulty in regaining control over their own daily lives. While having a strong passion and drive to open up the future, they are aware they must keep vigilant and they are also frustrated not to be fully involved in the decision-making process in the areas that have become the evacuation areas. They feel vividly that they lost the unique identity they had before the accident. The nuclear accident had a strong impact on the sense of belonging of its inhabitants to the region, and the Dialogue showed that they aspired to build a new identity by regaining control of their lives, although this is often a painful process.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest in relation to the article.

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Authors contributions

R. Ando: conceptualisation; Y. Koyama, T. Kobayashi, D. Sasaki, N. Akimoto, T. Schneider, J. Lochard and Y. Kanai: advice and internal reviewing.

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Appendix A Programme of the 24th Fukushima Dialogue

9:30-9:40 Opening remarks: Ryoko Ando (Chair, NPO Fukushima Dialogue) 10 min

9:40-10:05 Nanami Akimoto's experience: Nanami Akimoto (Tomioka Town) 20 min + 5 min

10:05-10:30 Reflection on Fukushima reconstruction process from the history of the Dialogue: Jacques Lochard (Former ICRP Vice-Chair, NPO Fukushima Dialogue) 20 min + 5 min

10:30-10:45 Break

10:45-11:10 The role of the younger generation in the core programme after the Chernobyl accident: Thierry Schneider [recorded] (CEPN) 20 min Q&A: Jacques Lochard 5 min

11:10-11:35 Involvement with Yamakiya: Daiki Sasaki (University of Tsukuba) 20 min + 5 min

11:35-12:35 Lunch break (60 min)

12:35-12:45 Explanation of dialogue rules (10 min)

12:45-14:15 Dialogue I facilitator: Ryoko Ando (90 min)

Nanami Akimoto, Daiki Sasaki, Tatsuma Hirose, Ryo Endo, Sora Koizumi, Kie Matsukawa, Tsubasa Yoshioka, Mao Saito, Nana Susa, Kohei Iseki

14:15-14:45 Break (30 min)

14:45-15:00 Voices from online (15 min)

15:00-16:00 Dialogue II (60 min)

16:00-16:15 Break (15 min)

16:15-16:30 Summary : Yohei Koyama (NPO Fukushima Dialogue) + Tomoyuki Kobayashi (Fukushima Medical University) (15 min)

16:30-16:45 General discussion - questions from online

16:45-17:00 Closing remarks: Genkatsu Kanno (Vice Chair, NPO Fukushima Dialogue) 15 min