Learning from Disaster: Miyakejima & New Orleans

On August 23, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and caused catastrophic damage to the city. More than 80% of the city flooded and more than 1,000 people died. On June 26, 2000, the volcano on Miyakejima (Miyake Island in Japan) erupted and forced island residents, all 3,800 of them, to evacuate. Four years and five months passed before they could return home.

Japan Society organized, with support from the Ford Foundation, exchange programs to both New Orleans and Tokyo for community leaders and local government officials involved in the evacuation and recovery process in both places. Yasushi Aoyama, a Professor at Meiji University and the Vice-Governor of the Tokyo when the volcano erupted on Miyakejima, led the project. He is the member of Japan Society’s U.S.-Japan Innovators Network, a multidisciplinary group of innovators from Japan and the U.S.

Program in New Orleans (April 28-May 3, 2008)

Prior to the trip to New Orleans, the team in Japan met several times to prepare for the trip. A total of 13 participants, including Sukeyasu Hirano, Mayor of Miyake Village, members of the Tokyo Consumer’s Co-Operative Union, the Tokyo Disaster Volunteer Network, and Miyakejima’s House of Wind, traveled to New Orleans as part of the exchange program.

The team’s general impression is that citizens groups and non-profit organizations played an important role in empowering the citizens of New Orleans, while official recovery efforts in housing, infrastructure redevelopment and health and hygiene, did not progress as fast as expected.

The group from Japan met with representatives from a number of organizations and local government officials, including a group which supports farmers markets and worked with local citizens, such as Vietnamese fishermen; a cultural and arts organization that, in addition to presenting arts and culture programs, works to revitalize its neighborhood; private developers who support community revitalization; principals at charter schools; an umbrella organizations that works to end homelessness; and members of the Vietnamese community working to improve their community. The strong leadership shown by the all these groups was impressive.

The Japanese heard people in NOLA say, “If the market is open, citizens can return home” and “If the school is open, parents will return with their children.” Compared to Miyakejima, New Orleans lacked financial resources and strong governmental leadership. When it came to the fiscal situation and education, New Orleans was ranked at the bottom even before Hurricane Katrina hit land. However, despite these circumstances, the Japanese were
impressed with how citizens came together and with their resilience in the moment of crisis.

Program in Tokyo (April 16-21, 2009)

A total of 15 leaders from citizen groups and the local government visited Japan. These Americans met with the visiting Japanese when they were in New Orleans in April/May 2008. In return, participants from Japan who went to New Orleans in 2008 helped organize the program in Tokyo. For most of the Americans, it was their first trip to Japan.

On April 17, the group visited Sumida Ward, a part of Tokyo that is below sea level. The group met with Mr. Noboru Yamazaki, the Sumida Ward Chief, to learn about disaster preparedness and flood control measures in Sumida Ward. The meeting was followed by a walk around Sumida Ward, the Arakawa Canal banks, and the narrow roads of the Mukojima neighborhood to learn about its rain-water harvesting effort. The American participants were intrigued with the hand water pumps that members of the community can use to harvest rain water. The system was set up as a counter-measure for torrential rains, but is also an effective water recycling program.

In the afternoon, a roundtable discussion on how to build cooperation between the public and private sectors during and after a disaster took place. For example, the evacuees from Miyakejima could not return to the island for four years and five months. The public and private sector, concerned about “deaths in isolation” that had taken place during previous disasters in Japan, successfully worked together to prevent this from happening this time around. The participants also discussed the timing of evacuation orders, methods for extending support to evacuees while making sure that they do not become too dependent on outside resources, and preparedness within civic organizations during disasters and recovery efforts. The Japanese participants were surprised when they found out that recovery efforts that are usually undertaken by the public sector in Japan were handled by non-profit organizations in the U.S.

In the evening, the group visited a bistro called “Okimikura” run by the Akagi family in Shinagawa ward. The Akagi family decided to remain in Tokyo after the islanders were allowed to return to the Miyakejima. About one thousand out of 3,800 evacuees have not returned to the island. Okimikura is a cozy bistro and participants enjoyed food from Miyakejima and shochu (Japanese spirits). The Akagi family decided to stay in Tokyo for financial reasons and for their children’s education. Both of their children now attend college and help their parents at the restaurant. They still live in public housing provided by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, but they would like to return to Miyakejima
On April 18, the group visited Shirahige Housing Project, the largest public housing development in Tokyo. Shirahige Housing Project, which stands like castle walls along the Sumida River, was built more than 30 years ago. The Project is made up of 18 apartment buildings and with more than 3,000 residents. The housing project itself is a designated disaster preparedness site and includes a park that can hold up to 100,000 people. Should a disaster occur, there is a 24-hour disaster prevention center managed by a private security company, which fortunately they have not had to use. The group had a chance to sit down with the Chairman of the Shirahige Resident Associations. There are 8 Resident Associations within the Housing Project. Since the Housing Project is for low-income households, when family incomes increase above a certain level, they are required to leave the housing project. One of the issues facing the Resident Associations is the number of aging residents, an issue Japan faces nationwide. The American participants were impressed with the way the Resident Associations organized themselves and developed a strong connection amongst themselves by actively supporting their fellow residents.

In the afternoon, the group participated in a public forum “Learning from Disaster: New Orleans and Miyakejima” and a reception at Meiji University. Even though the event was held on a weekend, the 200-seat hall sold out with mostly young people in attendance. The program included nine American presenters; Professor Aoyama served as the moderator. Each American speaker spoke on what they learned from their experience with Hurricane Katrina. Topics ranged from housing support for the elderly and the poor to sensitively addressing the psychological impact of the disaster on the community.

On April 19, the last day of the program, the group was divided into three groups for different site visits. One group visited the Sanya area of Tokyo to look firsthand at the work of Furusato-no-kai, an NPO that focuses on homeless issues. Another group visited a food Co-op and a farmer to look at food production, delivery methods, and related crisis management systems. The third group participated in a discussion on “Disaster Relief on Miyakejima – Important Factors in Supporting the Victims” with a group of young NPO leaders. After a farewell dinner, three of the Americans and two staff members took an eight-hour ferry ride to Miyakejima and spent a day and a half visiting schools, meeting with residents of the island, and speaking with NPO leaders and local government officials. Since
the Americans were the first official group to visit the island from another country, they were welcomed wherever they went.

Thanks to the participants from the United States and Japan, and the respective organizations they work for, the Sumida Ward office, Meiji University, student volunteers, and many other individuals, the two-year exchange program was successful and fulfilling. Through this experience, we learned how shared learning can help us think about issues related to disaster prevention and recovery in new and creative ways, how important the human factor if recovery is to truly be successful, and how critical it is to learn from past mistakes.

Participants will take their experience and the lessons learned to improve how they the approach disaster preparedness and recovery in their work, and Professor Aoyama will be writing a book in Japanese on the issue. Japan Society is now working on a book project on recovery with a group of specialists in this field. Japan Society hopes these projects will contribute to the discussion on how best to manage disaster recovery in both countries, and make a difference in how we respond to and manage disasters in the future.